

A Peek behind the Scenes

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Guests

Matilda Siebrecht (DE) and Phoebe Baker (UK)

Introduction

To celebrate both the European Archaeology Days and the release of our 20th episode, #FinallyFriday went live to record a special behind-the-scenes chat with our hosts. **Matilda Siebrecht** is currently doing her PhD at the University of Groningen, using microwear analysis to investigate the manufacture and use of Paleo-Inuit bone and ivory tools from Arctic Canada. **Phoebe Baker** is currently completing her masters in Early Prehistory and Human Origins at the University of York, focusing on the use of adhesives in prehistoric clothing. The EXARC Show podcast series has covered a wide range of different archaeological topics since starting back in 2020, from ancient tattooing to museum interpretation and everything in between. In this episode, Phoebe and Matilda talk about their time hosting the series so far, discussing past episodes and sharing anecdotes from their experience and their own research. Tune in to hear the stories behind the show!

Transcript

Hello and welcome to EXARC, the society for archaeological open-air museums, experimental archaeology, ancient technology and interpretation.

Phoebe: Hello to all of you watching. Me and Matilda are the two hosts of a podcast run by EXARC. And we've just hit our 20th episode of this wonderful podcast called #FinallyFriday.

Matilda: So yes, each month we have two guests on who are specialized in a particular topic. We've had a wide range of topics, which I think we're gonna talk about in a little more detail today. If anyone's interested in listening into that podcast, after you've been watching this live event, you can join it by looking at exarc.net/podcast. Maybe we should introduce ourselves a little bit first. So Phoebe, who are you? What do you do? Why are you involved in EXARC?

Phoebe: Yeah, I'm Phoebe, Matilda's co-host. I am currently studying a master's at the university of York doing Early Prehistory and Human Origins, but I have done an undergrad in archaeology and my current research is using experimental archaeology to look at the question of whether Neanderthals wore clothing and more specifically at the moment whether they wore footwear. So last year I did a bunch of experiments looking at whether or not they could have used birch bark tar as a kind of early fabric glue in making clothes and this year I'm hoping to extend that research into looking at footwear. That's a little bit about me. What about you Matilda?

Matilda: Yeah, so I'm Matilda and I am currently doing my PhD in archaeology at the university of Groningen in the Netherlands, looking at also a lot of experimental work - that's why we're both here, I guess - I look at microwear analysis. So looking at how objects in the past were made or used, and my focus at the moment is on paleo-Inuit tools from the Canadian Arctic, so sort of pre-Inuit, you would say, and the tools are made of bone and antler and ivory. I'm at the moment actually focusing on sewing technology. So I guess also, you know, clothing and all sorts of things in a way. So it all links up together. I started working on this podcast over a year ago now because the coronavirus pandemic was in sort of full flow and we decided, as EXARC, that we wanted to still have something for our community because in-person conferences were having to be cancelled and we wanted to do something that people could still join and could still listen into and feel like they still had a bit of a part of what EXARC was doing. So we decided to do this podcast, and originally when we started, we had half an hour of pre-recorded discussion and then half an hour of live question and answer time, which would be on the first Friday of the month, which is why it's called #FinallyFriday. And at some point I went on maternity leave and Phoebe took over as co-host and now we are co-hosts. So yeah, so I was looking back through our catalogue of 20 episodes. The first one we did was called 'History in Bite-size Chunks' and our guests were Maeve L'Estrange and Farrell Monaco, and it was all about bread, basically, and bread baking. I think it was a really fun episode to start with because it is about archaeology and it is about experimentation, but it's also about bread, which is kind of fun to do. And I think that that's one of the nice things about experimental archaeology, right, is that you can research something like bread. I think I remember Farrell talking about bread at Pompei or something that has actually been burnt. But then apart from that, there's very rarely like food in the archaeological record that, I guess, the preservation's good enough. So that's one of the nice things, that you can look at those things, which aren't necessarily preserved.

Phoebe: Definitely, that's kind of how I'm doing all of my research at the moment with the Neanderthal shoes and clothing. There's just none of that left. It's only through the lens of experimental archaeology that we are really able to start getting a kind of intimate grasp on what that might have looked like. I listened to this podcast in the week leading up to this and the person who was doing it on Irish bread had just said there was basically nothing... it's definitely what I have seen in my own research as well.

Matilda: Which must be so, on the one hand, really exciting because you're like, oh my gosh, I'm the first person to start doing this sort of research. But then on the other hand it must be kind of disheartening, because where do you even start? How did you start your project? As an archaeologist you're looking at stuff in the ground. What if it's not in the ground?

Phoebe: The idea for my projects in particular just came randomly as I was doing a lot of DIY over the summer beforehand, because it would be in the lockdown and a lot of people who didn't have things like sewing machines, on YouTube, they suggested maybe you could use glue. From that use in the modern world, sparked the idea of, could I maybe see this in the archaeological record? We know that they did have the tar. So I think those tiny, little glimmers... and like I think there was an oat cake that they'd found in Ireland. So it seems that really tiny glimmers that you can kind of latch onto and go from there. I think overall it's more exciting, but it is quite daunting.

Matilda: Well, that leads very nicely into episode two, which was Tanning, Tools and Talking with Theresa Kamper and Ian Dennis. And they were talking a lot about the fact that you can be an academic researcher and you can do archaeology, but you actually also need to be in contact quite a lot of the time with professional craftspeople or with people who have that actual experience, because like you just said, you had that experience from modern sewing and then thought, well, why wouldn't they have done that in the past? And I think quite a lot of our episodes have shown that as well, have shown people sort of taking something that they just do in everyday life and going, well hang on, what's to say that people living thousands of years wouldn't have done that, which I think is quite a lovely thing. Gosh, I can remember that episode... we had to re-record the whole episode because the audio quality was so bad. Luckily our guests were so lovely and I find all of our guests have just been so patient and understanding. It was definitely one of those occasions where we were already having issues. We listened back to the stuff and it's just so bad, the quality of the microphone. So I messaged them both to be like, 'hey, would you mind recording it again?' and bless them they did. So yeah, the episode that's been published on the EXARC page, exarc.net, is actually the second full recording. Surprisingly a lot of the content remained similar. There was a bit of variation, which was also nice. What's been your most technologically stressful episode so far?

Phoebe: Probably my episode that I did about glass. We had a similar thing where we needed quite a lot of it re-recorded but it ended up sounding really good, I think. Yeah, it's mostly the recording episodes. Although I did have another episode, that we had about half an hour of just not being able to hear me or one other person. And it turned out that we both accidentally put our, what should have been the microphone, as our headphones. It's always something really simple like that, that's the most frustrating!

Matilda: The worst mistake I made was because most of our speakers have been in sort of time zones that are easy enough to work out, like either the speakers are in a similar time zone or it's only a couple of hours in between and the episode, Same Questions, Different Places, the one talking about experimental archaeology in different parts of the world. So Shanti was from India and João was from Brazil and it's like a 10 hour time difference or something and I mixed up the time difference and I got it completely wrong. So we were waiting to record and João hadn't turned up yet and I sent him an email 'are you okay?' He was like, 'yeah, I'm just going for lunch and then I'll be there'. So that was completely my fault. I told him like two hours later than he needed. It's interesting doing this podcast made me realize a lot more when I listen to other things how much effort must have gone into it. So the episode 3 was Sounding out the Past, which I thought was a really cool episode, about music in the past, which is something similar to what we were talking about before in terms of it's very intangible and it's not something that can be found. Simon had created some musical reenactment type thing with replica instruments and Lara had created some soundscapes.

Phoebe: Some of them were absolutely beautiful. And also I had no idea how many different ways you could play one thing. There's one sound clip that Simon plays and it's one flute that they'd found and he'd made a reconstruction and he literally could play it like eight different ways. I'd never

even thought about the possibility of doing that.

Matilda: I think that something like music, it's really then obvious that what we're doing is fully interpretation. But I think that a lot of people forget that actually pretty much everything else is also just interpretation. So the next episode was the sewing episode Sew Much to Do Sew Little Time and sew is spelled s e w, with Alex Makin and Ronja Lau and this one, actually, that was similar to..., so in the first episode as well, Farrell and Maeve had heard of each other, but had never actually met. And there was another one, quite a few other ones, actually, afterwards where the guests would be like, 'oh yeah, I've always wanted a chat with you fellow guest', but just never had the opportunity or they've read each other's stuff and everything. And actually in this one, Alex and Ronja were working together on a project, a completely unrelated project as well. So they already knew each other quite well. So it was one of those episodes where I didn't say anything, basically. I had to keep coming in and being like, 'yeah, guys, we're running outta time'. Have you had many sort of interactions between your guests that have been particularly cohesive or that have been like a real click or anything like that?

Phoebe: Two of my episodes have been ones that are projects, so this is the Neolithic House and Home episode and the A Growing Community episode. Both of those were based on projects that have already been ongoing. So both of the guests in those episodes already knew each other, which is actually such a nice vibe for the episode, because they were just absolutely bouncing off each other, like knowing exactly what to ask. And even in A Growing Community, even though they were on the same project I remember Pete say, he had about four different questions, one after the other for Claus that he said, 'I've always been meaning to ask these'. It was so nice sitting there just watching this happen.

Matilda: And that was also with the most recent episode Under the Skin, the tattooing episode. They were working together on this tattooing project, funded by the Exarc Award. And so I looked back at the transcript afterwards. I was like, wait, I don't say anything throughout the whole episode. And to be honest, those are the best episodes, right?

Phoebe: Yes, they are.

Matilda: That you don't have to say anything, which is quite nice. So the next one was Open to Interpretation with Angela Pfenninger and Peter Inker about what does interpretation mean and, how do we represent that? It's one of those issues that if you have something written down or if you have it in a display case, or if you have something like that it's very difficult to show the nuance of that really. And actually that's gonna be in the August episode, we're looking at the visualization of the past. I'm curious what your thoughts are on that in terms of how can we communicate that aspect of archaeology, do you think?

Phoebe: For me, especially as a kid realizing how much I loved archaeology, it was always those kind of open-air museums and the more interactive museums that I felt was so inspiring. So I think it's a really important discussion to be having about how to represent objects. You opened the episode, I think, asking them how they defined interpretation, which was such an interesting question. They both commented about the fact that although they're working in interpretation, they don't get asked it very often. It was really interesting to hear what their kind of different definitions was and how that fed into how they represented their own objects in their museums that they worked in.

Matilda: So the next one was called Pottery in Motion, which was with our very own Caroline Jeffra, who is the behind the scenes person running the Discord and the recording and all of that kind of stuff and Richard Thér. I quite like in this podcast we've had some very technology-focused events. So we had bread, we had pottery, we had one about tattooing, for example, we had one about boat building, horses, like very specific things. And then we've had much more general things like sustainability and the engagement and interpretation. So this was one of those ones where it was very specific about pottery in the past. This pottery episode, I have no idea about pottery. So when you're listening to these episodes, like that one for me, it was really like I was a listener, basically. I did also have to like chip in with questions and moderate and everything, obviously, but still it's kind of fun being the host sometimes, I think, because you get to experience it firsthand as a listener as well. Did you have a kind of favourite episode where you were really like, oh wow, I knew nothing about this?

Phoebe: Quite a few times. I've chosen to focus very much on the Paleolithic and I think I've done episodes on starting your own journal, on glass and agriculture. And these are just things that I just have not touched on in any of my research. So I think particularly the glass one, the kind of techniques they were talking about to make all this glass was like, wow, I have literally never even heard of half of these things. And it was the same for agriculture. It's so interesting hearing these things that you've got no idea about, and they are fascinating subjects. You can really see why people are so excited to talk about these kind of things.

Matilda: And I guess so many of them as well, I mean, I feel like some stuff like pottery, glass, agriculture are fairly big topics. Quite a lot of people do that. But for example, you did the episode on Raising Hair, right, with Janet Stevens and Dorothee Olthof, which is such a niche subject, that was such an interesting conversation as well.

Phoebe: I loved that episode. Because my own research has been kind of focused on the clothing and I think hair and clothing, and they're all part of this kind of self identity. I'm still thinking about some of the things that we discussed in that episode and how I could try and tie them into my own research. I really, really enjoyed listening to them chatting about hair.

Matilda: Who were they again? Maybe you can explain? So Dorothee is a prehistoric technician, right?

Phoebe: Yes. Dorothee Olthof is from the Netherlands and she's done quite a lot of research in the Mesolithic and later Stone Age, looking at both clothing and hair. So she's kind of reconstructed clothing and hair. She also specializes in education and helping the public understand these kind of things. And she's also done Roman and medieval hairdressing. And then Janet Stevens is a lovely lady, she has had no professional training in archaeology, instead training as a hairdresser, which I thought was really cool. It's kind of one of the first people that I'd met on the show that had come into archaeology from that kind of route. She was in a museum and saw these hairstyles on Roman busts and had used her own knowledge of hair through her hair dressing to decipher how they'd made these really intricate hairstyles and ended up publishing in antiquity about maybe they had kind of sewn their hair together. I thought that was really cool to come from such a nontraditional route.

Matilda: Which just goes to show as well, right? The other day I was sharing like the different kinds of archaeology that you can have and someone was like, 'oh, I would love to get into experimental archaeology'. And I said to them: literally anything can be experimental archaeology! Like the most recent episode Under the Skin about tattooing, with Aaron Deter-Wolf, who is a archaeologist who happens to be really interested in tattooing and then Maya Sialuk Jacobson is a professional tattoo

artist who at some point got interested in archaeological tattooing and specifically because she is Inuk and there's the whole sort of Inuit tattoo revitalization and so she kind of got into all of the history and the heritage of tattooing. So again, if you're interested in something, you just kind of go through and find a way to make it scientific and ask a question about it. I'm trying to think of our other episodes. I think you had the boat building one, All in the Same Boat, with Triona Sørensen and John Cooper. They're both archaeologists, but that was also really interesting because they were talking about the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum and how they were using people who were not archaeologists but were professional boat builders, to construct these historic vessels because an archaeologist wouldn't have a clue if you don't have experience with that. Although they also pointed out that actually... it was a really interesting discussion because then we were talking about, is it maybe better to not have a professional boat builder make it, because they will have all that influence of modern boat building, how like, of course society has developed now, and we're not the same. Have you had an episode where you were really... not necessarily not thinking you'd be interested but just like going into it as a standard episode and then afterwards being like, wow, my life has changed. The sustainability one, Sustainability Then and Now, that one for me, I was just there the whole time going, 'this is so cool' and making notes. I'm still in contact with Kirsten Dzwiza, who was one of the people and we chat about various things all the time. And actually that was also a cool episode because they had never met before and they actually collaborated on a project afterwards.

Phoebe: It's funny that you mentioned the sustainability episode because that was the first one that I had been invited to go behind the scenes on the Discord to see how everything worked. And it was also the first time that I'd actually listened to a #FinallyFriday, because I just wasn't aware that it was a podcast up until that point. And I literally remember being there, they were talking about things like getting the UN involved in their research. I remember sitting there like, whoa, this is incredible. I can't believe these people are doing such amazing things and that absolutely blew my mind, that episode. But I think of my own episodes that I've hosted, I think probably the A Growing Community episode, which was the A Year in the Field Project, with Claus Kropp and Pete Watson. They had some really good discussions about how agriculture around the world changes. They have got a bunch of different agriculture organizations, so they're both experimental archaeology focused and open-air museums or working museums from all around the world. So I think they have one in India, in Europe, I think almost all of the continents, they have communities connected to the project. The main premise of the project is that they all grow the same crop for one year to compare and connect how the crop changes throughout the world. So this year it was the wheat and I believe next year they've announced it's gonna be flax, although I could be wrong. But I remember going into that kind of being excited and then coming out of it being like, wow, this is incredible because they just had such a good conversation about collaboration and how important it was to collaborate with everyone.

Matilda: I really enjoyed the Games of our Past, which looked at how you use computer games or digital games in studying archaeology, but also how you can study the archaeology of computer games and digital games and all of this kind of thing. That one really blew my mind in terms of it's so outside what I would do, not even anything I would think of and the fact that someone's doing it as their job. So that was with Justyna Neuvonen and Aris Politopoulos. Actually, I'm curious, how many times have you had to re-record saying someone's name?

Phoebe: Quite a few times. I try to make sure beforehand how you say them, but English is my only language. Although I think that I've not had quite as many difficult surnames as you've had, but there has been a few times where I'm like, oh dear, I've just absolutely butchered that by accident.

Matilda: Considering how many of our guests have been non-native speakers... I would say the majority probably up until now have been non-native speakers, maybe. The level of English is just incredible. Can you imagine having to do a podcast about your research area and in that level of detail and discussion and everything?

I was thinking we might start wrapping it up in a bit. In terms of the podcast going forward, Phoebe, are there any particular topics that you would be really interested to cover?

Phoebe: I'm really hoping that we can cover a topic on ancient adhesives. That's kind of my thing at the moment, I'm really enjoying researching them. So to be able to get people also involved who are doing that would be really cool.

Matilda: I worked with, well, I was in the same building as Paul Kozowyk...

Phoebe: Oh, I've read so many of his papers.

Matilda: He's a really nice guy!

Phoebe: It would be an absolute dream to get him on the podcast.

Matilda: I think that would be great. And they're an EXARC member as well. By the way, for those listening in you don't have to be an EXARC member to be a guest on the podcast. It's recommended because this is for our community, but we do have non EXARC members on, because we like to share. If you have any recommendations for episodes or any ideas, something you have desperately been wanting to hear about, please do let us know and we can see if we can find any cool guests about that. I think my one would be sewing, we've done skin working already. We had Teresa Kamper about leather and that was kind of similar. We had the sewing episode, but something else about that, maybe specifically clothing.

Phoebe: Yes, that would be amazing.

Matilda: If you are interested in potentially joining EXARC as a member, I can say that they are very affordable, in terms of like as a student trying to join. So as an archaeological association, I would recommend it. You get a lot for your buck. Oh, someone's just suggesting more episodes on open-air museums, which I think would be a good idea as well, in the future. So yes thank you for listening in everyone!

Phoebe: Thank you very much!

Join us next month and learn more all about the world of experimental archaeology, ancient technology, archaeological open-air museums and interpretation. Don't forget to follow the show through exarc.net and our associated social media channels. See you soon!