

**“Doing Pre-Industrial History of Technology”  
An Open Session Proposal for the SHOT Annual Meeting, St. Louis, October 2018**

**Organizer: Phillip Reid, PhD**

Organizer contact information:  
305 N 23<sup>rd</sup> St  
Wilmington NC 28405  
[phillipfrankreid@gmail.com](mailto:phillipfrankreid@gmail.com)  
<http://www.phillipfrankreid.com>  
(910) 352-3171

The literature of the history of technology is overwhelmingly concentrated in the period 1850—present. It is as though by some tacit agreement, “technology” begins with metal-machine industrialization, mass production, and mass marketing; while the study of human contrivances, and the concepts and skills behind and around them, prior to the rise of those more recent phenomena is left to anthropology, archaeology, and material culture studies. I am convinced, however, that the questions, perspective, and techniques commonly used in the history of technology can be profitably employed in the study of pre-industrial technology—which should, in fact, be considered technology, just as much as an airplane or a nuclear reactor.

I am also convinced that the lack of attention that pre-industrial technology has received in the history of technology reflects a wider cultural bias of the post-1850 western world: that the world before industrialization was, for all intents and purposes, pre-technological. Our exaggerated perception of the overall pace of technological change, pointed out by David Edgerton in *The Shock of the Old*, added to the important differences that do exist between our technology and that of our early modern ancestors, makes it difficult for us to empathetically evaluate older technology and its relationship to the society and culture that created and used it.

I work on the ordinary merchant ship of the British Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from a history of technology perspective. I explore how and why this technology worked for the people who used it, how it reflected their understanding of their world, and their prejudices and aptitudes, and how it was adapted in response to growth and change, while retaining strong continuities. In this latter respect, the technology resembles ours more than we tend to think, as Edgerton argues.

I would like to propose a session of presentations focused on applying history-of-technology perspectives to pre-industrial technologies and their societies. Particularly instructive would be papers exploring tradition and innovation in artisanal craft; the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts for the diffusion or failure of a given technology; and ways of understanding the commercial fortunes of a technology in the absence of known inventors and mass advertising.

Bringing the history of technology to bear on these matters will, I am sure, help us put our more recent technological history into a less-presentist perspective—one that might allow us to see our own relationship to technology in sharper relief.