Experimental Archaeology: an ethnography of its perceived value and impact in archaeological research

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(Signature) ..........................................................................................................................
Abstract

… like all good experiments, they have raised as many questions as they have answered. (Odell & Cowan 1987, 457)

Archaeologists rely on a variety of methods to study and interpret the past, one of which is experimental archaeology; this involves the replication of artefacts or past processes in order to test falsifiable hypotheses or to gather data systematically. This thesis presents examples of perceptions concerning experimental archaeology and its history, its validity, and how it is (or should be) by gathering data through interviews, surveys, participant observation of experiments and conferences, and by gathering ideas expressed in published works, particularly those that are 'about' experimental archaeology and that deal with its role in academic archaeology. A trend emerges in which experimental archaeology is viewed by those that practice it as being sidelined in academic research.

These beliefs and statements are then compared to data gathered on publication rates; a chronology of experimental archaeology is given, and differing beliefs are compared and contrasted. The goal is to identify how experimental archaeology is being perceived, how this is affected by how it is presented, and how changes in its presentation can help increase its acceptance amongst archaeologists. A highly critical approach has been taken in the hope of combining empirical observation with qualitative data; the aim being to provide a holistic study of experimental archaeology that draws primarily from how it is practised in UK and the US, but is supplemented by information from continental Europe.

The main areas that affect how it is perceived are its relations to experiential archaeology and non-academic institutions and individuals. A final look at the role of the method in academic archaeology shows that it is integrated into research on a broad scale, but rarely discussed in depth by researchers that do not practise the method. Experimental archaeology is a method that can have unique implications in research, particularly because of its relation to experiential archaeology. This and the other issues that affect how it is perceived are addressed.
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