

Experimental Archaeology: Making, Understanding, Story-telling

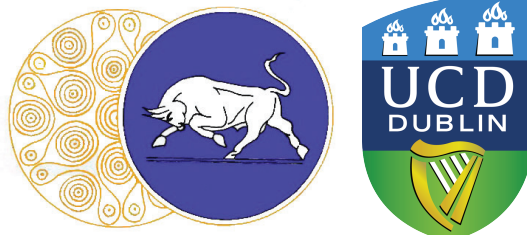
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Introduction

Defining Experimental Archaeology: Making, Understanding, Storytelling?

Aidan O’Sullivan and Christina Souyoudzoglou-Haywood

Experimental archaeology can be defined as the reconstruction of past buildings, technologies, things, and environmental contexts, based on archaeological evidence, and their use, testing, recording, and experience. Through these we are better able to understand the character and role of materiality and material culture in peoples’ lives. However, it has not always been defined thus, and what people have thought of as the objectives and practice of experimental archaeology has been varied across time and usually connected with the author’s personal stances on archaeology as a discipline generally. Most historiographical reviews of experimental archaeology have tended to be chronological, outlining the activities of antiquarians, then focusing on its revival in the 1960s and 1970s, especially, before moving through its different theoretical approaches since, from processual to post-processual archaeology, as if one succeeded the other in value. Our perspective is that experimental archaeology is a broad approach, varying from closely recorded scientific experiments in laboratories, to actualistic, practical-oriented experiments in the open-air, to experiential investigations of buildings and crafts. All, we suggest, are valid approaches to seeking a better understanding of the past.

However, since its revival in the 1960s and 1970s, it is fair to say that experimental archaeology has traditionally been associated with a positivist, scientific approach, involving the testing of hypotheses and the rigorous gathering of data to investigate specific topics. By focusing on practical problems for which one could propose solutions and gather quantifiable, material data on house architecture, technology, agriculture, amongst other things, scholars thought that they could establish how things might have been done in the past (e.g. Ascher 1961; Coles 1979; Reynolds 1999). It has also been suggested that experimental archaeological replications could provide useful analogies to interpret the archaeological record (Mathieu 2002). Despite significant developments in archaeological theory over the decades, it is still an approach that lies at the heart of the discipline, whether that be in controlled laboratory situation or in actual experiments carried out in the open air (e.g. Outram 2008).

However, in recent years, a surprising amount of time after the emergence of post-processual theoretical approaches in archaeology generally, many authors have argued that experimental archaeology might also involve innovative, experiential interrogations of past lifeways and material culture, so as to explore and understand how people interacted with each other and the world. Cunningham *et al.* (2008) enquired whether experimental archaeology should only be used in a scientific sense, and if this did not risk ignoring some aspects of people’s lives in the past. They asked if the scientific approach was even appropriate for investigating all aspects of the past, and if we might also think about the phenomenology of objects, the ‘feel of things’, the experience of buildings. Similarly, Gheorgiu and Children (2011), in their introduction to *Experiments in Past Materialities*, suggested that an overly scientist approach risked losing a sense of past lives, and proposed that by using interdisciplinary approaches we could reconsider the subjective role of the researcher, and that cognitive, phenomenological, embodied approaches could lead experimental archaeology to more sensitive understandings of past humankind.

This perspective is also evident in Bodil Petersson’s and Lars Erik Narmo’s (2011) introductory essay, ‘A journey in time’ in their edited book *Experimental Archaeology: Between Enlightenment and Experience*. They suggested that experimental archaeology was a subject stuck with scientific ideals emanating from positivist traditions from the 1960s and 1970s. They proposed that we can have an experimental archaeology that is both ‘knowledge-focused’ and ‘experience-oriented’, and that we can give more weight to experience, sensory and emotional aspects, with strong emphasis on education and communication. Foulds (2013, 7) argues that a diversity of approaches can help archaeologists to ‘link objective and humanistic approaches to understanding the material record’, as part of the archaeological discipline. Most recently, Carolyn Graves-Brown (2015) in an excellent introduction to her edited book, *Egyptology in the Present: Experiential and Experimental Methods in Archaeology* has suggested that experimental and the experiential approaches, while being distinctively different, are part of a continuum and one should not be privileged over the other, and

indeed 'living in the past' should not be denigrated either.

These are principles with which, as editors of this book, we agree. Moreover experimental archaeology also has significant potential for public engagement in museums, as it literally engages all the senses in the demonstrations of crafts and technologies (see Comis 2010).

This publication contains the proceedings of a two-day workshop on experimental archaeology which took place in Athens in October 2017 at the initiative of the Irish Institute of Hellenic Studies at Athens (IIHSA: www.iihsa.gr). The idea came about in recognition, on the one hand, of the ground-breaking role played in recent years by the UCD Centre for Experimental Archaeology and Material Culture, UCD School of Archaeology, in connection with the advances in experimental archaeology as outlined above, and the significant contributions that researchers and museum practitioners working in Greece have made in the field over the last decades, on the other.

On the first day of the workshop, the papers were presented at the premises of the Irish Institute, 51A Notara St., Athens. The accompanying practical demonstrations took place on the following day, hosted by the Museum of Cycladic Art, and organised by the third partner of the workshop, Dr Nikolas Papadimitriou, the then Curator of the museum, with a long involvement in ancient craft experimentation, and demonstrations at the museum. The large audience which attended both events included university students, researchers and academics, demonstrating the importance now attached to experimental archaeology as an approach to the discipline of archaeology of equal value to other approaches.

The majority of the contributions in this volume are case studies in the context of the ancient Mediterranean world and particularly Greece, but two have a north European focus (O'Sullivan and O'Neill, O'Neill), and one (Molloy) has a more cross-cultural outlook. A number of the papers focus on technological reconstructions and problem-solving experiments addressing past manufacturing techniques and the *chaîne opératoire*, and therefore adopt a 'knowledge-focused' approach starting from one object (but with wider implications), such as a small ornament (a gold bead: Konstantinidi-Sybridi *et al.*) or a tool (a type of sword: Maragoudaki), or a category of objects (the moulds for the casting of non-ferrous metal objects: O'Neill). O'Sullivan and O'Neill account for the reconstruction of an early medieval Irish roundhouse based on quite specific archaeological and environmental evidence, and discuss how this has enabled insights into the building, use and destruction of such houses in the past. A more

general perspective is adopted for the examination of wall-painting techniques (Vlavgilakis), and the ancient craftsmanship techniques and smithing activities relating to bronze-working (Molloy). The experiments on Neolithic textiles (Sarri and Mokdad) have the additional objective of exploring the possible creative dialogue between different crafts (pottery making and weaving) and between art and craft. Two articles explore different manufacturing processes for ceramic production from Cretan contexts. The first tests the building and operation of a Minoan pottery kiln (Day and Kobik) and focuses on manufacturing aspects with insights about the experiences of the craftsmen, while the second (Morris *at al.*), explores the modelling of figurines and the social messages that are conveyed through object creation. Some of the challenges faced during the construction of the Minoan kiln in Ireland rather than in its original location, but also the consideration by O'Neill of the importance of the depositional environment in the survival of clay moulds, are reminders that environmental dynamics and climate conditions, and not just the social context, technical know-how and availability of materials, play a part in influencing manufacturing choices and innovations.

Audience reaction during experimental sessions for the public are considered in one paper (Sarri and Mokdad), but in practice it was possible for all those who organized practical sessions in day two of the workshop to take advantage of this. To those present at these sessions, both as contributors and as observers, the demonstrations offered an array of experiences gained through the senses, such as the smell of burning metal and wood-chippings, and the sounds of sawing, metal beating and the working loom (Figures 1-4). Most of the demonstrations on the day were carried out by experienced craftsmen with interest in ancient technology, which is the closest we can get to the embodiment of ancient craftsmen. The limitations for the rest of us in achieving the highly specialized knowledge and skill required for some of these crafts is recognised in Molloy's contribution whose objectives were 'not to achieve any degree of ancient knowledge but to physically learn through the simulation of some of ancient craft people's actions'.

In recent years, ideas about craft, making and 'maker culture' have been widespread not only amongst craft communities, but also in academia in the humanities, social sciences and computer sciences. One of the interesting themes to emerge in the Athens workshop was the important role of modern experienced craftspeople in the investigation and understanding of past technologies. On the one hand, craftspeople bring an immense amount of practical, embodied knowledge and sense of 'can do' to the making of things, challenging the interpretations of archaeologists who may be adept

Images from day two of the Workshop (Museum of Cycladic Art).
Practical demonstrations accompanying the papers



Figure 1. Participants observing one of the demonstrations.



Figure 2. Ulrikka Mokdad demonstrating the weaving of Neolithic patterns, with Kalliopi Sarri.



Figure 3. Epaminontas Venieris explaining the manufacture of Cycladic marble figurines, with Brendan O'Neill experimenting.



Figure 4. Akis Goumas creating gold granules for the decoration of the Mycenaean bead.

at excavating soils, understanding typologies, or using a camera, but may have little or no real craft skills. On the other hand, modern craftspeople are themselves embedded in modern society, with its values, ideas about status and role, a real need for financial payment and occasionally a sense of the urgency of deadlines, so modern craftspeople are not time travellers to the past any more than archaeologists are. We should therefore beware of an overly practical, 'common sense' approach to interpreting past societies, because often there is not a sense of things that is 'common' to us and to people in the past.

The papers in this volume undeniably show then that experimental archaeology can be about making, understanding, and storytelling (O'Sullivan, *et al.*, 2014; Sorensen and O'Sullivan 2014). It can be about making things from the past, gaining understanding of the making process itself, and telling stories about people and things through the knowledge gathered.

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