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## Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

# Discussion: Experimental versus Experiential Archaeology

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**Author(s):** Edwin Deady <sup>1</sup>, E. Giovanna Fregni <sup>2</sup> ✉, Alexander Stewart <sup>3</sup>, Tine Schenck <sup>4</sup>, Chris Thomas <sup>5</sup>, Kate Verkooijen <sup>6</sup>, Sonja Natus <sup>7</sup>, Merryn Dineley <sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), United Kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), Norway.

<sup>5</sup> Independent researcher, address withheld by the editors (GDPR), United Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> University of Exeter, Archaeology, Laver Building, North Park Road, Exeter, EX4 4QE, United Kingdom.

<sup>7</sup> Independent researcher, Staufenberg, Hessen, Germany.

<sup>8</sup> Independent researcher, Banks Burray, Orkney, KW17 2ST, United Kingdom.



This is an extract from a lengthy and lively Facebook discussion in the Experimental Archaeology group, illustrating the main points as it took place between 16 August 2014 and 22 August 2014. The full discussion can be found at:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/experimentalarchaeology>

### Edwin Deady (August 16, 2014)

I have seen discussions distinguishing between experimental and experiential archaeology, I wonder if such a distinction is valid. For example it says that Butser Ancient Farm is mainly an example of experiential archaeology. Experimental is supposed to be scientifically rigorous while experiential is as described where participants repeat as closely as possible the actions of the past but perhaps lack detailed records.

It seems that an experiment requires information as a base that is actually often unavailable and can only be gained by 'experiential' archaeology. People trying the tools, going on the journeys etc. This being so it seems odd to criticise the experiential or to label efforts as such in derogatory terms when an experiment is impossible without. To add to the confusion we have the suppositions of historians which are made without reference to the practical at all. For example, "It was impossible to put on a mailshirt without help," is a statement made by someone who has obviously never seen dozens of reenactors shrugging their solo way into their mail.

### Giovanna Fregni (August 16, 2014)

The main difference is that experimental archaeology is designed to answer specific questions.

### Alexander Stewart (August 16, 2014)

The labels are useful for orientation but I think the actual practise of experimental archaeology is more of a cycle, a bit like science - idea, research, experiment, experience, consider experience and experimental result, repeat experiment, and so on. They will of course overlap in method, because both require some idea of archaeological remains before and after the process itself.

### Tine Schenck (August 16, 2014)

I define experimental as a research methodology set out under certain terms to ask archaeologically relevant questions that will be accepted by the academic community, whereas I see all those experiments that have a personal motivation as experiential.

Example of the first: Experiment with replication of an archaeological slag type by applying a certain archaeologically relevant smelting method.

Example of the second: I wonder if this can be done. That does not mean that experimental experiments are always in good form, or that experiential experiments are valueless.

However, there is a certain practice that must be in place to produce viable research, and this is where I separate the two.

'Experiments' set up to draw the public hardly ever meet these standards, as their main motivation is to get audience, not answer a specific, archaeologically relevant, question. There are cross-overs between all these blurry categories, though, as for instance the Seastallion of Glendalough trial voyage, which had facets of everything, and which had separate experiments with different experimental plans and standards under one.

### Chris Thomas (August 18, 2014)

I do not believe in this twofold classification, firstly because I would say there is a sliding scale between the two end points, and any attempt to mark a division point into the two classifications is purely subjective, and moreover is liable to be used more a divisive than a unifying factor. Secondly, I do not believe that the many unknowns which are unfortunate facts of times long past really allow the degree of control that allow the sort of definitive and repeatable results required for a truly scientific study by experimental means. This does not mean that I consider the attempt without value, but I believe that we should be aware of the limitations of such, and be honest about them.

### Alexander Stewart (August 18, 2014)

I see both experimental and experiential as overlapping somewhat, but the point is that you can consider them as orientations, rather than specific points in space. That way you end up with different outcomes even if starting from the same point.

### Edwin Deady (August 18, 2014)

So, can you have valid experimental archaeology without the experiential? Or, the other way round? If you can't then are they in fact on the same continuum?

### Tine Schenck (August 19, 2014)

There are experiential parts in what we call field experiments, but there are hardly any in lab experiments where we do in fact isolate variables. There are rarely any research methodology parts in sewing a costume for the costume's sake, even if the craftsperson tries something new.

I don't think of it as a continuum but a) research method, usually in an academic context, and b) experience based activities. (You can hardly have any scientific research without experience, if we are going to do an extreme microanalysis here. That is what the hypothetic-deductive method helps put into a framework.) Making things does not make the two the same. Except for manufacture experiments, making stuff is usually only part of the preparation, in line with literature studies, artefact studies, health and safety, pre-experiments and general logistics.

### Kate Verkooijen (August 19, 2014)

Becoming better producer make you better experimental archaeologist. All the experimental archaeologists I know (and I know quite a few) know that, if their results are to have any value at all, they should and must work to get better at doing whatever the process is that they want to study before starting to apply an experimental methodology to a specific archaeologically rooted research question. And all of them are on an active experiential journey to achieve that. They know all about the experiential perspective because they actively live it and they also know that not doing so leads to less valuable, even invalid, results. Experimental archaeologists then take what they have learned experientially and apply it in a formalised way to address specific archaeological research questions which are raised by archaeological artefacts.

### Alexander Stewart (August 19, 2014)

Not doing stuff the best way, producing dodgy artefacts can also be useful in the right circumstances. In the medieval period for instance, there's plenty of shoddy work been found, that is likely a result of poor practise or something going wrong in the manufacturing process. As it happens a lot of such problems are obvious when you examine the artefact so hardly needs experiments to see how to reproduce such errors, but if you did it would be an example of experiments where you deliberately don't do things as well as you could, or you simply practise as normal but make a note of all the variables such as mould material, dryness, temperature, metal temperature et cetera, which will give you a bad result that can then be compared to the original find.

### Tine Schenck (August 19, 2014)

It is, however, important to note that the end goal for an archaeological research experiment rarely is to recreate master crafts. More often than not, it has to do with uses of artefacts or structures, and their discard, to highlight such things as subsistence and economy, or other social aspects. This is why I distinguish between the archaeologically strictly relevant research method (the result will fit into an established picture) and activities done out of a personal motivation by a craftsperson.



## Sonja Natus (August 20, 2014)

An experiential approach can lead to a change of paradigm and it can be the base for a whole new set of questions as you also already said. It cannot replace measured experiment, but it can help to design better experiments which lead to different results. ... They should not stand without controlled experiment. Just sometimes when I read archaeologists conclusions after their experiments, the knowledge of how to craft and handle certain items makes me shake my head at the absurdity in the chain of thought. The frameworks Tine mentions can lead people down the wrong path in themselves at times.

## Kate Verkooijen (August 21, 2014)

Firstly, let's just accept that there is such a thing as 'Experimental Archaeology' and the people who do it are called 'Experimental Archaeologists'. Let's also accept that some of those people will be paid academics, but some, probably many, will be not. 1. What are the kinds of questions that they are interested in? 2. Where do those questions come from? 3. What do they do want to use the answers for? There will obviously be some overlap between Experimenters and Experientialists here. Where I see the difference is that with Experimental people, they are interested in: 1) the failures as much as the successes, 2) the processes which led to the traces found in the ground of buildings, industrial processes, etc. as much as the craft skills, tools and craftspeople who built and used those structures or made those artefacts and 3) how the results of their investigations (whether you want to call those scientifically based or not - there's certainly room for much debate on this, but that's really a different topic altogether) how these results tie back into the much wider theoretical and interpretative archaeological debates. In fact, the main motivation for Experimental Archaeology as an approach is to use the results as comparative evidence to support, refute or augment those wider theoretical and interpretative debates. Of course, that doesn't mean that the individuals doing the work are not also gaining craft skills and learning to appreciate that their preconceptions may have been way off the mark. Gaining and refining those skills are important because no-one wants an experiment to fail simply because the person doing the work is incompetent at the task in hand. But the theoretical/interpretative focus also means that sometimes, and maybe even most of the time we are interested in studying failure rather than success. The formal experimental methods are used to allow for variables to be changed in a controlled way.

Question 2) As far as the processes of how the remains of structures present in the ground go. To take just one high-profile example. It's expensive, time consuming and in many ways disheartening to build an full scale Iron Age roundhouse for the express purpose of burning it down to record what happens and to return later to excavate it and compare the results with actual archaeological remains. There may well be some experiential people who actually do that scale of thing, but I suspect not many do it as the instigators or founders, though they

may well be participants in the actual process. Anyway, that's where I think some (maybe all) of the differences between the two approaches lie.

### Merryn Dineley (August 21, 2014)

I think that experiential is subjective, to do with one's own experience. Experimental work should be objective, with a scientific methodology, and the experiment must be repeatable.

### Kate Verkooijen (August 21, 2014)

What we have been trying to do is define what we mean by Experimental practice, what we haven't been doing so much is defining what is meant by Experiential practice. Perhaps if we did we might get closer to seeing a way through this debate. Merryn offers us a short definition above, that it is the subjective content of our own experiences. I think perhaps we could flesh this out a bit more. I'm probably going to do a bad job at it, but here goes. We all experience the world and deal with the world subjectively, i.e. we use the evidence of our senses to think about, investigate, learn and discover things about the natural world. So far so obvious. When we learn a craft skill, we make full use of these senses to get better at, attempt to understand what's happening and how to make certain things happen, how to make certain things not happen, and develop the motor skills to perform complex and fiddly tasks. We also consult others who already possess the skills we want to achieve and learn from them, or we try and learn ourselves from books, et cetera. This is a long process; we can never learn all there is to learn about working with a physical skill set. Old craftspeople always say that in truth they are still learning as their experience and range of skills expands.

Experiential relates to this type of Experience. All skills are honed and developed. People often say that what they know, they have learnt by experience. That experience also comes by trying out things which are new to us and it is this trying things out to see what happens that is colloquially known as doing things by experiment. It can be seen as subjective because often these trials and experiments do not follow a path formal in the scientific sense, instead it is most often a case of having a go at something and adapting what you do until you get the result that you want or you're satisfied with. In that sense we are all Experiential practitioners. If we just flip that a moment and go back to those 'bad' experiments. Much of what is seen and defined as 'Experimental Archaeology' by those doing it and others who observe what happens, is really people gaining the experience to a) learn how to formulate and execute practical experiments - i.e. they are learning about the process of experimenting itself, or b) learning how to be better and more successful at the craftskill they attempting, and usually it's both at the same time. These activities should properly be called 'Pre-experiments'. What is the use of 'Preexperiments'? It is to allow the participants to gain the experience that is necessary before they can move on to what might be called the experiment proper - in that sense they are 'experiential'. This does not mean that bad and failed experiments equate to

the same thing as the results produced by skilled craftspeople. To make that link is to confuse 'experiential' as an adjective with 'Experiential Practice' as a noun. They are explicitly not the same thing and no-one claims they are. Let's propose that there is (somewhere) an 'ideal' Experimental Archaeologist. What would such a beast look like? Firstly, I'm going to assume that he (or she) is working with material culture and wants/plans to use craft skills to investigate certain archaeological problems/questions which arise from there. What actual craft doesn't matter, it's the process and approach which is relevant here, but it does have to do with being able to 'do' a particular craft to get the results you require. Our putative ideal Experimental Archaeologist would be highly skilled at the craft which they are dealing with. On this level, they are no different from a skilled craftworker with long years of experience who can pretty much do anything in his craft. Let's assume they have the same levels of skill (remember we are talking about an ideal here). They can both be called/labelled the same thing 'A Skilled Craftworker and Experiential Practitioner'. Both are interested in archaeological material and can reproduce artefacts to a high level. Both are asked to do this for museums and make a bit of their living out of doing such work. It's at this point that the question we are seeking to answer comes in.

What is it that means that one of these Skilled Craftspeople can go on to call himself (or herself) an 'Experimental Archaeologist' while saying that the other one cannot, even if s/he wants to? So what does our 'Experimental Archaeologist' (let's call him Eric) do which is IN ADDITION TO what the other skilled Craftsperson does (let's call him George)? Let's lay out a few assumptions. Eric and George both have the same level of educational qualification, social background and political persuasion. They are both men (though for the sake of this argument they could equally be women). Those assumptions mean that we do not need to take into account various attitudes which might get in the way of seeing what we actually want to see. Much of the time, Eric and George continue to do the same things with their craftwork.

When Eric wants to do an Archaeological Experiment though, he has to conform to the academic formal methods accepted for that discipline. He must design a suitable experiment which will answer the question being posed. In that proposal he must lay out all his assumptions about the material. This is so that when the work is published those reading know what he was thinking when he sat down to design the experiment, and that he wasn't just having a go at something to see if it worked. He will also have to think carefully about what things might be variables within the experiment and formally lay those out in the plan. What material is appropriate? Is the weather a factor? Will using this equipment or that equipment make a difference to the result? Are the people doing the practical work skilled enough at what they are attempting? He has to think about all this things and formally write down his choices and why he made them. This is so that at the end of the experiment, if things go wrong, he can go back and consider whether any of the variables was the cause, or whether it was something else he hadn't thought of. If you do not write things down in this

way, it is often difficult to remember what you did and what your prior assumptions were. Also you need to communicate those assumptions and choices to the readers of the academic journal, otherwise they would be quite justified in saying that you have not been specific about what you did, so they cannot properly evaluate the results. They may also want to try and repeat the experiment to see if they get the same results. Then Eric has to sit down and write up the experiment, his results and the implications of those results for the wider archaeological debate in the formally proscribed manner required by the academic journals. If he does not his work will not be published and he will get no academic recognition for it. George sometimes also does work on the same questions, but crucially, he does not formally write down his prior assumptions, he does not formally show that he has considered the variables which might influence his results, he does not provide a formal hypothesis, he does not write up his results in a formal way and show the archaeological implications of those result for the question in .hand. Neither does he want to do any of those things, he just wants to get down and make the stuff or have a go at making the stuff. This means that Eric's non-experimental archaeological colleagues cannot assimilate George's work into their research. They do not know what his assumptions were so they cannot tell whether the results or insights than George produces can be applied validly to their research question. That is why they often seem offhand when talking to craftspeople they meet who offer them their experience; they cannot fit it into what they do for the above reasons. Eric, of course, being a skilled craftsperson fully appreciates George's craftwork, but he cannot cite it alongside his own work because those assumptions et cetera are not explicit. George sometimes feels peeved about that lack of recognition, even though he does not want to do the formal work which is necessary to get it. If he decided that actually now he would be prepared to do the required formal work, then he would get the recognition he wants, even if he is not working in academic environment - and many Experimental Archaeologists are not. But until then George remains a 'Skilled Craftsperson and Experiential Practitioner', while Eric has added 'Experimental Archaeologist' to his list of labels.

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## **| Corresponding Author**

**E. Giovanna Fregni**

University of Sheffield

Sheffield S10 2TN

United Kingdom

**E-mail Contact**