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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Conference Review: SAA General Session, Experimental Archaeology 2018

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The Society for American Archaeology is, perhaps with the exception of the World Archaeology Congress, the largest meeting of archaeologists in the world. The 2018 annual meeting was held in Washington DC and was attended by approximately 5000 archaeologists. Delegates were primarily from the States, but there was also a good international showing with attendees coming from around the world.

> One of the most energetic debates of the last two decades has been the tension between maintaining an empirical (hypothesis driven) practice while accommodating and/or reconciling the human experience, especially in matters of ancient craft. This theme emerged several times at DC in a variety of guises, and while it was never fully resolved at an overarching methodological level it is apparent that the debate will continue, while being refined in practice.

As is usual for an SAA meeting, experimental archaeology was in evidence in a number of papers and across a range of sessions. The general session on experimental archaeology was convened by the SAA and chaired by Yvette Marks (University of Sheffield). The session comprised 15 papers that clearly demonstrated the diversity of current approaches to a range of materials and artefacts. As the session was convened as a general session by SAA, it served as a convenient census to appraise current directions in Experimental Archaeology and in turn, to some extent, the health of the discipline.
Papers spanned a wide-range of approaches ranging from strictly empirical hypothesis testing (Bebber and Wilson) to the phenomenological, where the human experience of experiment was reconciled with material investigation. This continuum was nothing new and has been a characteristic of SAAs since Denver 2002, and indeed experimental conferences more generally. The need to reconcile human experience with experiment was very clearly made in the final paper by Stull; he explored the craft of eating, understood as the relationship between culinary tradition, culinary tools and recipes. Stull's phenomenological approach showed very clearly that without including humans at the heart of experiment, hypotheses cannot be tested in relation to human skill, cultural habits and materials. If the meeting in DC was different in any way, then perhaps it was the wide acceptance of different approaches to experiment. No speaker saw their role as to endorse any particular approach at the expense of others, and audience members were comfortable with the range of approaches taken. The session was also notable for including a range of materials, including some excellent sessions on organic materials, as well as some outstanding papers that endorsed analytical approaches.
Technological processes were a common subject of investigation. Kamper presented a masterclass in characterising hide and tanning processes. This is a much under-researched area and the work done at the University of Exeter is clearly important. The authors' contribution (Marks and Doonan continued the technological theme with a focus on reconstructing the early copper smelting processes that characterise practice in the Aegean Early Bronze Age.
Papers by Murray et al., MacDonald et al. and Ruhl et al., all included elements of scientific analysis. Portable XRF (pXRF) played an important role, to the point where more emphasis was put on the analysis than on any experimental method. It is important to note that pXRF

was not the only analytical tool employed, but its availability has certainly opened up the field of analysis within the domain of experiment.

The range of materials discussed in the session shows the extent to which experiment has penetrated material culture studies generally. Pyrotechnologies, with their complex dynamics, have always lent themselves to experiment, but at SAA 2018 they were not the dominant focus. Materials investigated in this session included; plaster/lime, copper-base metals, pigments, lithics, ceramics, food, wood, bone and leather. Kamper's paper has already been mentioned in regards to the need for a more nuanced understanding of leathers, and her analytical approach, coupled with a categorical scheme for classification, should have wide impact in the study of preserved organics. The comparisons of different materials used for artefacts featured strongly with a peculiar, if not interesting paper by Bebber and Wilson, who asked (and tested) why projectile points were not made from ceramic. This was a challenging paper, as it was based on an absence in the archaeological record. While the answer was fairly predictable, it seemed to verge on a counter-factual historical approach at times, and if this indicates future directions in experimental archaeology then it is sure to stimulate much debate. The Sterner et al. paper continued the comparative material focus and demonstrated the productive nature of this line of research. In their investigation into the different materials used for projectile points, they did not only consider and test primary function, but also production and material provenance. They emphasised how a fully rounded consideration of materials, practice, and function is needed for a complete understanding of production and use. It highlighted an emerging eagerness for some archaeologists to question some very basic assumptions that underpin disciplinary narratives, by subjecting them to experimental scrutiny in a very detailed manner.

Alongside materials research, micrographic characterisation featured prominently and emphasised the strongly empirical tradition that continues to structure experimental archaeology. This was evident in papers by Wallduck et al. (3D Microscopy), Murray et al. (3D Microscopy), Marks et al. (Microscopy), Bravo et al. (XRF, XRD, Optical Microscopy, SEM- EDS, FTIR, Raman, Thin Sections, Magnetic Paleodirections), Akoshima et al. (Microscopy), MacDonald et al. (SEM-EDS, HRtem-crystallography, XRD, FTIR, SQUID Magnetometry), Kamper (Microscopy), Martisius et al. (Microscopy and 3D Surface Texture Analysis) and Bodenstein et al. (3D photogrammetry). While a diverse range of papers, it was clear that experiment is beginning to form a part of the mainstay of archaeological projects. Although this is currently limited to research projects, it is encouraging to see members of the audience note this and begin to ask why other (e.g. commercial) projects remain reticent to engage in experiment. Certainly the remit of commercial work rarely extends to experiment, but to begin to question this is to begin a process that challenges existing practices and may start to instigate change. It was excellent to see the incorporation of other, more revolutionary types of analysis paired with more standard methods, showing the development and breadth of Experimental Archaeology today. For example; isotope analysis (Ruhl), pXRF (Stroth et al.,

Bravo et al., Skowronek et al.), SQUID magnetometry (MacDonald et al.) and microwear (Sterner et al., Bebber et al.). These multidisciplinary research projects show just how far Experimental Archaeology has developed over the past decades and how we can scrutinise hypotheses from multiple angles, to better understand technology, material choice, and human engagement.

In many ways the DC session can be said to unremarkable, but it was full of diverse papers which were broadly welcomed by an accepting yet critical audience. This is, in many ways, remarkable. One of the most energetic debates of the last two decades has been the tension between maintaining an empirical (hypothesis driven) practice while accommodating and/or reconciling the human experience, especially in matters of ancient craft. This theme emerged several times at DC in a variety of guises, and while it was never fully resolved at an overarching methodological level it is apparent that the debate will continue, while being refined in practice. It seems the more valid and informative the insights that emerge from these practices, the more tolerance is shared among the community. The DC session didn't indicate any new directions for Experimental Archaeology and it is interesting to think where these might lie. If the session was to indicate anything, it was that Experimental Archaeology is perhaps the only area of wider disciplinary practice that is comfortable tackling the full repertoire of Ancient and Historic materials from a variety of methodological positions, while employing robust analytical procedures. I could not help but think that John Coles would have thoroughly enjoyed the session and given it his nodding approval.

Society for American Archaeology, 83rd Annual Meeting, Washington DC

General Session: Experimental Archaeology
Date: Thursday, April 12, 2018
Time: 1:00 PM–4:45 PM.
Chair: Yvette Marks

Participants:

1. Michelle Bebber and Michael Wilson
   Why Wasn't the Ceramic Arrowhead Invented?
2. Rosalind Wallduck and Silvia M. Bello
   Cut Marks and Decaying Bodies: An Experimental Study.
3. John Murray, Jacob Harris, Simen Oestmo and Curtis Marean
   Using Surface Roughness to Identify Heat Treatment in Lithic Technology.
4. Luke Stroth, Rebekah Truhan and Jacob Foubert
   A Change of Hearth: Stages of Production in Hot-Rock Technology at a Late Woodland Rockshelter Program of the 83rd Annual Meeting 85.
5. Yvette Marks and Roger Doonan

Copper Smelting in the Early Aegean Bronze Age Aegean.

6. Hilda Lozano Bravo, Jose Luis Ruvalcaba, Ana Maria Soler and Luis Barba
   Floors, an Archaeological Material: The Case of the Plaza de la Pirámide del Sol, Teotihuacan, Mexico.
7. Kaoru Akoshima
   Lithic Micro-wear Traces at Morphological Junctions: Function vs. Typology Reconsidered in Terms of Technological Organizations.
8. Brandi Lee MacDonald, David Stalla, Xiaoqing He and Tommi White
   Microanalytical Insights into Pigment Selection and Preparation in British Columbian Rock Art.
9. Katherine Sterner, Robert Ahlrichs, Dan Wendt and Larry Furo
   Testing Adaptive Efficiency: A Comparison of the Durability of Stone and Copper Projectile Points.
10. Nicole Bodenstein
    Comparing a NextEngine 3D Scanner with Casting Mediums for Making Positives of Cord-Impressed Pottery.
11. Russell Skowronek, Brandi Reger, James Hinthorne and Juan Gonzalez
    pXRF Identification of Prehistoric Lithic Artifact Material, Resource Clusters along the Lower Rio Grande.
12. Theresa Emmerich Kamper
    Hide Processing in Prehistory: An Experimental Approach to Prehistoric Tanning Technologies.
13. Naomi L. Martisius, Isabelle Sidéra, Teresa E. Steele, Shannon P. McPherron and Ellen Schulz-Kornas
    A New Methodology for Understanding How Bone Wears, Using 3D Surface Texture Analysis.
14. Donna Ruhl
    Isotopes & Curation: New Lessons Learned from Legacy Waterlogged Wooden Artifacts.
15. Scott Stull
    Experimental Archaeology of Medieval Food as Participant Observation.

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