The content is published under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0).

Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

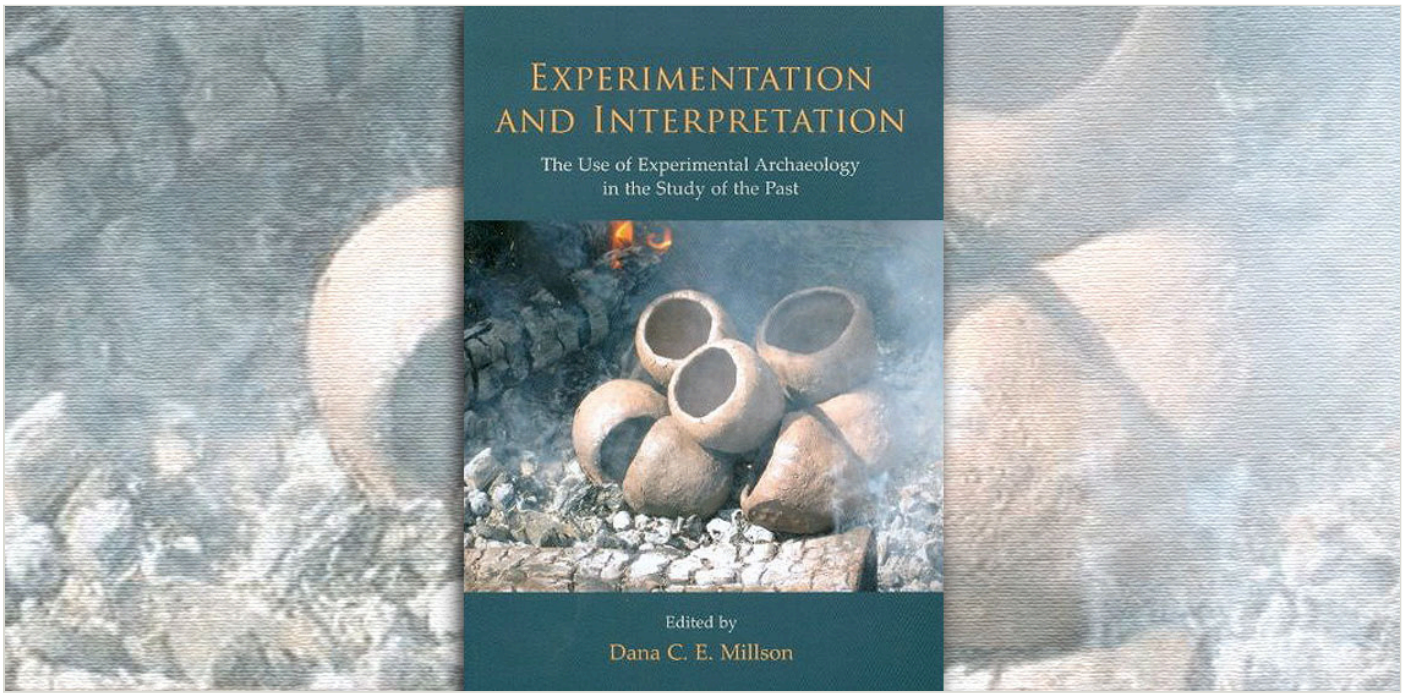
Book Review: Experimentation and Interpretation, The Use of Experimental Archaeology in the Study of the Past by Dana C. E. Millson

Persistent Identifier: https://exarc.net/ark:/88735/10105

EXARC Journal Issue 2013/2 | **Publication Date:** 2013-06-15

Author(s): HollyMae Steane Price [1] ✉

[1] Independent researcher, 6/1 Ewart Lane , Gadigal Country, Dulwich Hill NSW 2203, Australia.



What role does experimental archaeology have in the wider discourse? According to the papers in this book, all of which were presented at the Theoretical Archaeological Group (TAG) conference in Southampton in 2008, a large one. This book covers experimental

processes from the dating of bricks through the development of beakers to demonstrations of brewing techniques, and investigates past and present peoples and ideas, from Neolithic archaeoacoustics, through the relevance of experimentation within archaeology to the implementation of luminescence dating in the investigation of Medieval buildings.

> “Whether the reader is looking for a brief introduction into experimental archaeology, an in depth discussion on beakers, bricks or brewing, or an overview of some of the projects undertaken in the recent past, this book is well worth a space on the bookcase!

Millson's introduction to this collection of papers briefly outlines the history, definition and role of experimental archaeology. Although experimental archaeology was utilised by Pitt-Rivers during the antiquarian years, it was not considered a major component of archaeology until the New Archaeology movement in the 1960s. In Millson's view, since that time experimentation in archaeology has tried, failed and more recently (as evidenced by the existence of this book) succeeded in becoming a major part of archaeological investigation and a scientific step between an original hypothesis and a final conclusion.

The first paper in this book investigates methods of prehistoric hazelnut and acorn storage. Author Penny Cunningham considers ethnographic storage practices and compares her findings to Mesolithic pits, or caches, which contain macro-evidence of nut remains. Prior investigation into prehistoric food storage suggests that Mesolithic peoples did not store food in pits; previous experiments however, only considered the storage of grain rather than other staple food sources such as hazelnuts and acorns. The results from Cunningham's experiments on storing these foodstuffs for a period of 18 to 24 weeks suggest that we have been overlooking a major storage method that may have been utilised during Mesolithic and Neolithic periods by nomadic groups of people.

The second paper, written by Jodi Reeves Flores, considers creating a 'history of experimental archaeology'. The author's concerns are that due to a past discontent with experimental archaeology, a defensive stand has been taken by modern experimental archaeologists that could lead to a 'clique' mentality within the field. A self-perpetuating sense of the 'other' by these archaeologists could then lead to a great deal of difficulty when attempting to integrate experiments in archaeological research. By tracing the history of experimental archaeology from its roots to its modern form, Reeves Flores hopes to excavate a niche for experimentation as a 'methodology' rather than it being seen as a 'sub-discipline'. This paper is an account of the past and present of experimental archaeology and is a speculation on its future.

Claire Marshall, author of the book’s third paper, discusses ideas surrounding archaeoacoustics and experimentation's role in unravelling the secrets of the past through

'approximation' rather than through the usual 'inference' that is often found in non-experimental archaeological discourse. By investigating research previously conducted on Neolithic 'archaeoacoustics and reconstructive organology (sounding devices from animal remains)' (p 47), Marshall discusses new ways to explore the past by attempting to move away from traditional and cultural limitations. Her experiments were undertaken at a Neolithic site on Anglesey and Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in the Kilmartin Valley Complex and the conclusions from these experiments provide a new way to view and interact with prehistoric archaeological sites.

In the fourth paper Stephanie Koerner investigates the application of experimentation within archaeology. Koerner embarks on an in-depth discussion on complexity and the clashes between experimentation and the 'new' and 'post-processual' theories. This paper examines the relevance of experimental archaeology not only by looking at the past of experimentation but also by employing a philosophical outlook to the nature of understanding and how this can assist in the interpretation of archaeological sites. By investigating these fields Koerner reaches a very in depth (too in depth to summarise coherently here) conclusion regarding archaeology, experimentation, philosophy and the understanding of past societies.

An experimental account of 'fermentable malt sugars' is covered by the fifth paper in this book. Previous experimentations undertaken by Merryn Dineley, which have now become demonstrations, have explored possible Neolithic brewing techniques using evidence from British Prehistory. These experiments, as well as unearthing possible prehistoric brewing techniques, also prove how important a role experimentation can play in disseminating an understanding of the past to the general public. Dineley's discussion on experimentation as demonstration suggests what a useful resource experimentation is when combined with public archaeology and public engagement projects.

Paper six in this book covers 'experiments in Beaker construction techniques' that have been undertaken by Harriet Hammersmith. By constructing nine different vessels using varying construction methods to determine which method would most likely have been used to create similar beaker in prehistory, Hammersmith has produced beakers of differing design, which were decorated by different means. In creating these beakers, Hammersmith has reached conclusions on the past production of these vessels by combining visual evidence with a working knowledge of pottery.

The final paper presented in this collection covers the experimental dating of bricks from different parts of a Medieval and Tudor manorial complex. By considering the importance of science and experimentation within the archaeological field author Thomas Gurling has utilised optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) to develop an archaeological model for the Layer Marney Towers manorial complex in Essex. Gurling's paper argues that the importance of such scientific methods in the deeper understanding of buildings archaeology is often

ignored, and concludes that this method allows a better chronological knowledge of the development of such sites.

This book, as a whole, details many exciting projects that have been undertaken in experimental archaeology. Important aspects of experimentation in archaeology have been detailed in two of the included papers, which allow any reader with a non-experimental background to gain an understanding of the discipline. The papers that detail particular experimental archaeology projects are all fascinating and provide a step-by-step account of their development. Whether the reader is looking for a brief introduction into experimental archaeology, an in depth discussion on beakers, bricks or brewing, or an overview of some of the projects undertaken in the recent past, this book is well worth a space on the bookcase!

Book information:

Dana C. E. MILLSON (ed), 2010, *Experimentation and Interpretation, The Use of Experimental Archaeology in the Study of the Past*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, ISBN: 978-1842173992.

Keywords experimental archaeology
review
book

Country United Kingdom

Share This Page

Corresponding Author

HollyMae Steane Price
Independent researcher
6/1 Ewart Lane
Gadigal Country
Dulwich Hill NSW 2203
Australia
E-mail Contact