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Reviewed Article:

Experience and Discovery: Engaging the Public in Research. A Survey on Experimental Archaeology Contemporary Practice and Meaning – Preliminary Results

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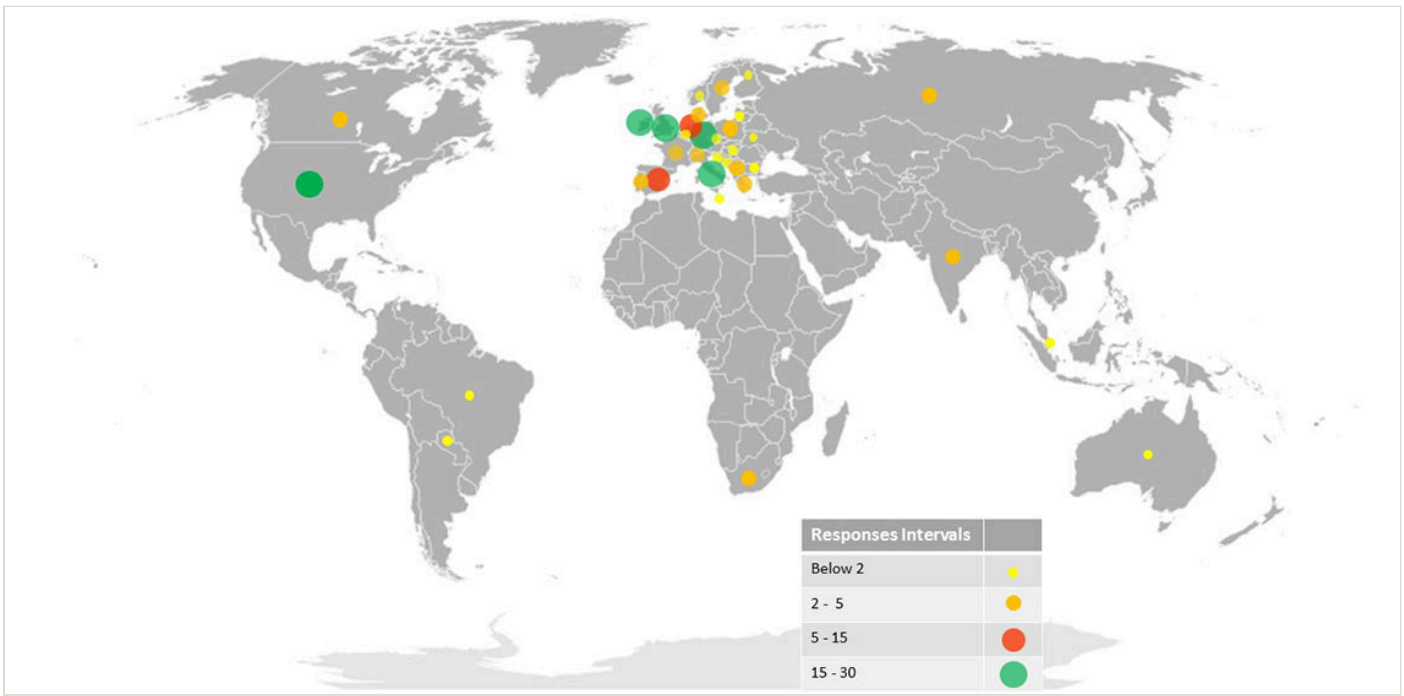

The traditional way of engaging the public with the past has changed: now, through experimental archaeology, we can have a direct, physical contact with the "past". But, as

researchers know, the means used to engage the public are the fruits of an active process of investigation, especially in experimental archaeology. Could it be possible to enable visitors to actively engage in the questioning of the past, to let them experience the discovery process? In this paper, which illustrates the work-in-progress of my PhD (Exploring the uses of Experimental Archaeology at European AOAMs, IRC GOIPG/2017, UCD, Dublin IE), the preliminary results of a qualitative inquiry on experimental archaeology best practices will be illustrated. The study is observing the experimental archaeology phenomenon from a social science perspective highlighting the interactions existing among three major categories (AOAMs, Academic Institutions, and Independent Activities). In detail, the survey was designed to produce data on the meaning constellations under the umbrella term "experimental archaeology", to explore research potential in the dynamic among the categories under scrutiny, and to provide a baseline for the mapping of job market interactions.

Introduction

The traditional way of engaging the public with the past has changed. Archaeological and historical heritage is not exiled anymore to an inaccessible showcase. Now it is possible to have a direct, physical contact with the "past" through a wide number of activities and locations, among which Archaeological Open-Air Museums (AOAMs) are the most utilized. But, as researchers are aware, the means used to engage the public are the fruit of an active process of investigation, especially in experimental archaeology. The re-constructions of the "past" are experimental trials, physical investigations about it, not the past itself[1] . This use of the reconstructed "past" has its drawbacks, especially in the commodification of heritage by ideological or political propaganda (Paardekooper, 2012, pp.41-44; Comis, 2006; Schmidt, 1999). And, most importantly, what do we imply when we use the two words "experimental archaeology"?

In previous research on this topic (Comis, 2003), a proper "constellation" of meanings was observed through a survey designed with a social science methodology. It was also observed that the term was used in three main areas: research, education, and tourism, with a significant overlap of themes and interests, even if all the activities associated with experimental archaeology shared the same source: the outcomes of archaeological research. The methodological and theoretical positions in the academic field are several, with no shared overview (compare, for example he approaches in

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covered and can be illustrated to the public.

O'Sullivan et al., 2014; Wyatt, 2016 and Torres Navas and Baena Preysler, 2014). But is it useful to linger on the methodological debate in the academic context while the visitors are already in contact with ideological reconstructions of the past? Could it be possible to enable visitors to actively engage in the questioning of the past to provide them with the tools for developing their own perceptions of the past?

The potential outcomes of this engagement have already been traced in the creation of a virtuous cycle that could provide, on one hand, the visitors with a constantly renovating experience, and, on the other, a positive return on research about the past, healing the fracture between research and public outreach while possibly overcoming some of the drawbacks of careless heritage communication (Comis, 2006; 2010). In this research, experimental archaeology practice is considered, as evidenced by previous analysis, primarily as a social dynamic interaction, a phenomenon which deserves to be analysed at many levels.

To explore the potential of the virtuous cycle outlined above, it is essential to understand how research is perceived in the contemporary practice of experimental archaeology.

This study, which is part of my PhD thesis, owes much to the first systematic AOAMs' survey by Roeland Paardekooper (2012), and extends to include two other subjects in the dynamic involved in "experimental archaeology activities", i.e. the academic context, where research usually starts, and independent activities. The threefold dynamic relationship (AOAMs, Academia, and Independent Activities) was investigated to assess its internal structure and content with the aim of detecting the meeting points, the frictions, and the overall interaction model through a qualitative questionnaire. As well as providing preliminary data to map the dynamic, it was hoped that the results could also provide internal triangulation of the issue under scrutiny. The main purposes were that of understanding the perceptions of experimental archaeology activities and research, to evaluate the potential in relationship and communication among the subjects and the extent of channels of mutual communication.

Instead of providing a pre-assembled definition for experimental archaeology and then testing it against the respondents' perception, open ended questions provided them with space to express themselves. Text analysis will be performed to outline a frame of reference of the perceived meanings and the relevant correlations of semantic areas.

The social science approach on the contemporary academic context of experimental archaeology is fresh. The preliminary results provide a mapping of the contemporary situation, both to retrieve data on the "history" of the subject in the academic world and to understand the job market dynamic.

The term “independent activities” refers to the subjects involved in “experimental archaeology activities” who gravitate around the institutional poles of AOAMs and Academia. This definition was kept very broad to include the entire range of commitment, from the occasional volunteer to the freelance professional. As well as contributing in mapping the realities involved in this dynamic, this inquiry had the scope to determine the Human Resources (HR) characteristics and their contractual position. The focusing on HR was felt important as it could help in tracing best practices not only in the “research performance” through experimental archaeology, but also from a job market perspective.

In this paper, only preliminary results will be illustrated and shared. The survey campaign was designed to extend for three months between June and September 2018, through an online questionnaire distributed primarily to EXARC members[2] and then extended on social media. The campaign used email distribution for EXARC members and a non-traceable link in the Facebook platform. The design of the questionnaire fulfilled the new GDPR regulations and implied a full informed consent privacy statement in case the respondents were eager to take part in the following stages of this research. All traceable data have been pseudo-anonymised to ensure anonymity for privacy protection.

Methodology

The theoretical framework under which this research is currently underway belongs to Critical Social Science principles (Neuman, 2011, pp.108-114; Salmons, 2016, pp.21) and uses mainly qualitative methods.

The questionnaire was designed to be as short and simple as possible, following general guidelines used in the social sciences and in marketing research (Thwaites Bee and Murdoch-Eaton, 2016; Salmons, 2016). Five steps were taken: survey design, testing, final adjustments and planning, data collection, and data analysis. Data analysis is currently in progress.

The survey used a mixed methodology structure (both qualitative and quantitative) and used internal data triangulation (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, pp.41-42) through the selection of three different categories on the same topic as a sampling strategy. This can be described as a stratified non-random sampling: only a portion of subgroups (strata) was used and the selection was determined by the respondents’ intention (also called “quota sampling”) (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, pp.76).

In the first stage, research questions and derivative research questions were considered and shaped to be adaptable and understandable for the forecast respondents. Open-ended questions were kept to a minimum and the closed ended questions were mainly Likert-type scale (3 grades, Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, pp.103). The questionnaire was therefore designed to return elicited data and the researcher put in the “gardener” metaphor (Salmons, 2016, pp.7-8).

A draft of the questionnaire was tested with an internal pilot. The questionnaire was officially presented at the end of May 2018.

The follow-up method was set on a fortnightly schedule. The first group of respondents were contacted through direct email. Two weeks after, the questionnaire was shared on social media. After another two weeks, an email was sent to publicly available contact emails from universities and research institutions in which experimental archaeology is either taught or used as a research tool. A final reminder was sent before the closing date.

The online software (*SmartSurvey*) used to design, distribute, and analyse the questionnaire was selected on the basis of its application of the GDPR and on budget considerations. Constant monitoring was possible on both the distribution of the questionnaire and on the number of responses. A summary of preliminary results appears below.

Master data: distribution and categories

The questionnaire collected 183 complete responses and 101 incomplete ones. This report will illustrate only an overview of complete responses. The size of the sample was not intended to reach statistical validity, but qualitative indications and trends.

The survey was aimed in gathering responses primarily from the European area, but data were collected also from other countries. As it can be seen from the geographical distribution of responses (See Figure 1), only few countries returned more than 15 replies, and others only very few. This uneven distribution is illustrating not the lack of the realities under scrutiny but merely a scarce reaction to the questionnaire.

The most attested category is the independent activities (See Figure 2). This category has never been mapped in detail in experimental archaeology. Again, the abundance of respondents belonging to academic institutions and independent activities against the scarcity of respondents belonging to museum institutions should not be considered statistically relevant: museum institutions responses do not in fact represent individual positions.

A summary of each category will be given below.

Museums Institutions

Responses from AOAMs were 34 in total. Despite the small sample, an interesting overview of their characteristics emerged from the results. More than 30% were founded by governmental bodies. The subsequent founders' entities were, in order: non-profit organizations, local associations, and private companies. Few examples of joint foundations were given in the comments. These AOAMs were founded in a time span from the beginning of the last century to the current year. Of the sample under scrutiny, the majority represents

the archaeological heritage to a radius of only 50 km around the museum. This aspect focuses on the original and unique contribution of these institutions in representing a specific geographical reality of their past, already defined as “Genius Loci” (Comis, 2009). A consistent percentage illustrates a wider area, up to 200/300 km radius from the museum, which gives them a more regional or, in some cases, national importance. Only two AOAMs specified that they rely also on heritage coming from other countries.

Most of the respondents in this category affirm that their activities can be referred to as “experimental archaeology activities”. Only two declare that it is not so, a few are neutral and those who felt the need to clarify their position specified that they carry out educational activities, which, in their opinion, cannot be specifically referred to experimental archaeology activities. An important part of the forthcoming analysis will seek to clarify what the respondents mean by “experimental archaeology activities”.

When we move forward to analyse who on the AOAM’s premises carries out experimental archaeology activities (See Figure 3), the HR segmentation shows the majority as part of the internal staff of the museum. The services provided by external professionals are rather contained and volunteers are more attested. Of the “other” human resources engaged in experimental archaeology activities within AOAMs, it was interesting to see that in 4 cases (6% of the total) it was felt necessary to specify that experimental archaeology activities were performed by academics or directly with archaeological academic institutes.

Almost 60% of the museum’s respondents affirmed that research is performed in their institution, almost 18% disagreed with this, and a little more than 11% remained neutral. Of the remaining 11%, some pointed out that research is devoted to archaeological excavation, that the chance exists for external researchers, that research is already part of the offer to the visitors, or that time is lacking to promote this activity.

When asked about the presence of research within the statutory aims of the institutions, 20 museum respondents affirmed that there is (58%). Only 5 disagreed (15%) and 9 remained neutral (26%).

AOAMs respondents claimed excavation reports were the source most frequently used for their own reconstructions, followed by published research, and generally accepted theories. Some felt it was important to specify that their own trial and error were essential in reconstructing the represented archaeological heritage.

A different pattern is shown regarding the replicas present in the AOAMs: published research is used more than excavation reports, but generally accepted theories are less important than for reconstructions. Some museum respondents felt, in this case too, that it was needed to specify that their own research was a resource for their replicas, as well as the use of traditional crafts and written sources.

The HR involved in building reconstructions and making replicas exhibited in the AOAMs rely, for most of the respondents, on their own staff (28 occurrences). External researchers, volunteers, and external suppliers follow down the line. Within the latter group, some museum respondents specified the presence of specialized craftspeople, archaeo-technicians, engineers, and builders.

When asked about the potential of their museum in a wider research perspective, 20 respondents (60%) affirmed that their AOAM could contribute, but a great number (12, representing the 37% of the total) remained neutral on the theme. Those who agreed with this potential, left open-ended comments which will be analysed in depth.

When asked if their institution was in contact with researchers, over 88% of the respondents affirmed that this is the case. Only one respondent specified that it is an intermittent contact. The open-ended specifications in this case will return interesting scenarios for this relationship.

When asked if the research carried out in their premises was published, 55% of the respondents were positive about it, 26% instead disagreed with this statement. Neutrality here was quite high (18%) and none of the respondents made any comments about this situation.

When asked if their research was presented in public or specific conferences, the figures change slightly by showing 67% did present, 17% did not, and 14% remained neutral on the topic. As above, no specifications were given regarding the presentation of their research.

This situation changes abruptly when the respondents are asked if their research is part of the offer to the visitor: over 85% agreed on this, only 11% disagreed, and neutrality was very low at 2%.

Academic/Research Institutions

The respondents belonging to academic or research institutions (See Figure 4) were mainly academic faculty members and postgraduate students (PhDs included). A relatively small fraction of this category was represented by occasional teaching staff, associate researchers, post-doctoral researchers, independent researchers, and undergraduate students.

Most of the respondents stated that there is a taught module in experimental archaeology within their institution, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In almost half of the entries, though, it was stated that experimental archaeology is mainly used in internal research. Only very few of the respondents declared that experimental archaeology is used for adult education activities.

The teaching of experimental archaeology, for the respondents that provided data, began as early as 1972 up to the current academic year of 2018. When asked if their institution carries out research through experimental archaeology, 44% agreed, over 15% disagreed, and those who were neutral were a little more than 11%. The remnants specified different interesting insights, ranging from the use of experiential archaeology to computer simulations. These statements will be analysed in a later phase of the study but are crucial in assessing their position on what experimental archaeology is in academic research compared with the examples provided in open-ended questions.

The use of experimental archaeology as internal research procedure started as far back as 1922, with the dates changing considerably in comparison to those provided for teaching. Experimental archaeology research activities in the academic category are carried out in most of the respondent's feedback with external HR, mainly experimental archaeologists and other academic staff. A great deal of volunteers' participation is attested, followed by external contractors. Only few respondents stated that the activities are carried out internally with no aid from other HR. In the specifications given in the open-ended comments, it suffices here to note the presence of professional craftspeople.

When asked if their research activities would benefit AOAMs, most of the respondents were positive (almost 70%). Only five disagreed with this potential, and the rest were neutral.

Going deeper in exploring the potential in collaboration between academic/research institutions and AOAMs, the respondents were asked to assess the reasons why their institution would be interested in doing so by attributing a value to the importance of four entries. The results show a great interest in promoting research primarily then in educating the public and in promoting archaeology. The less appreciated reason is shown to be the public outreach activities of the institution. The open-ended comments given by the respondents are particularly interesting and will be analysed later. Here, it suffices to say that the respondents' comment focus on the main issue of how public outreach and research are overlapping in poorly defined areas within the field of experimental archaeology.

Most of the academic category respondents claimed not to be in contact in any way with AOAMs (reaching almost 60%). Of these, a little less than half are considering the potential contact. Those directly or indirectly in contact with AOAMs are 36% of all the respondents.

Independent Activities

This category returned most responses (80 total). Despite being almost a proper figure to set quantitative analysis, since the broad definition of the independent activities was set to map their characteristics, such an analysis is not useful in this report. Most respondents represent recently founded activities (0-7 years' experience), but the experience span can reach up to 35-40 years in some cases.

A relevant number of respondents declared to be freelance professionals, followed by non-profit associations, and volunteers. Only very few declared themselves to be employed by institutions or companies and doing occasional work experiences (fig. 5). Of the open-ended specifications, some of the respondents, in equal numbers, specified that they performed craft activities, or they were independent researchers.

A striking 82% of the respondents affirmed that their activities can be defined as experimental archaeology. Only 7% were neutral on the topic and only 5% disagreed about it. In the open comments, a very interesting observation was made: “the definition of experimental archaeology makes no sense”. Even though this questionnaire did not report any definition on what experimental archaeology is, and was, as a matter of fact, an inquiry to understand the different meanings under the umbrella term, this comment highlights the difficulty in assessing a commonly accepted view of the topic, also in the independent activities involved in the dynamic under scrutiny. The text entries given under the request of the latest examples in this perspective will help in mapping the meaning constellation that this category perceives as “experimental archaeology activities”.

When asked to state what sources they based their activities on, a very narrow set of choices was given, to push for having an insight on their personal views and to understand the trends contained in them. This strategy was successful, and almost half of the respondents specified in the comments either that they used all the mentioned sources (excavation reports, published research and accepted theories) or they specified the use of their own or other people’s experiments, experience, skills, debates, etc. An analysis of this section will be performed to trace the dynamic aspect of experimental archaeology sources which are not communicated in standardized academic or public communications.

The adding of other activities defined as “ancient technology demonstrations” was purposely used to stimulate reflection on the difference between experimental archaeology and ancient technology practice. This difference is useful to identify the distinction between research driven activities and demonstration activities. In other words, in experimental archaeology activities there is a gap in knowledge that is addressed. In demonstration activities the gap has already been partially covered and can be illustrated to the public.

The highest agreement of all the results came from this question: 91% of the respondents declared that their activities can be defined as ancient technology demonstrations. Only 5% disagreed on this statement and only 4% remained neutral on the topic. No doubts, in this case, no open comments left for debate or clarifications. The text entries on their most recent examples on ancient technology demonstrations will shed an interesting light on the understanding of the relationship existing between ancient technology demonstrations for the public and experimental archaeology.

When asked about where they carried out their activities, again a very limited choice was given with the same purposes of detecting emerging trends intentionally left out of the choices. 26% of the respondents work primarily in AOAMs, 23% in traditional museums, and 15% on archaeological sites. Of the considerable remnant 36% who specified the locations, here it is important to mention private grounds or properties, universities, schools, re-enactment events, and "all of the above".

When asked if their activities could contribute to a wider research perspective, a high percentage (81%) agreed. Only 6% disagreed and a significant 12% remained neutral. No comments were left on this question. Those who agreed were asked to give examples of how the contribution to a wider research perspective could be achieved. The text analysis will study the potential trends towards a communication channel with research institutions. 79% of the respondents declared they are in contact with researchers, 8% disagreed, and 6% remained neutral on the topic. Of the remnant, those who commented in the open-ended field left interesting personal perspective on the contact with researchers (*"I have pretty much given up"*).

Less than half the respondents declared they had published their own research. 35% of them clearly stated they did not. Neutrality in this topic reaches 10%, and the open comment for the remnants are interesting in giving a sad overview on this issue ("not in my name"). The situation changes slightly when asked if they shared their research activities in conferences (67% did). But the clear statement they did not is quite high (16%). As for the question above, the comments state again the uncertainty regarding this topic. Independent activities are part of the offer to the visitor of AOAMs in 65% of the cases, while in 12% of the cases they are not. The comments in the open section will be analysed in the following stage of the study to understand the potential in this relationship.

Further research

Some 124 (68%) respondents declared interest in participating in the following stages of this study and provided access to further contact. A significant 21% refused to take part in the study. Among those who wanted to express their opinion, some pointed out the need of agreements with their institutions. Some, candidly commented "perhaps". The complete analysis of the qualitative data gathered by this short but fruitful survey will outline a potential model to advance the standards and to develop the potential of best practices within the experimental archaeology dynamic.

Meanwhile, the author wishes to thank all the respondents for their insightful contribution. Their support, critique, comments, and clarity of vision surely made the difference in trying to map the relationship dynamic of experimental archaeology contemporary practice.

1 For brevity, I will not deal in this paper on the theoretical issues underlying this affirmation.

Keywords methodology
experimental archaeology
public
archaeological open-air museum
university

Country Ireland

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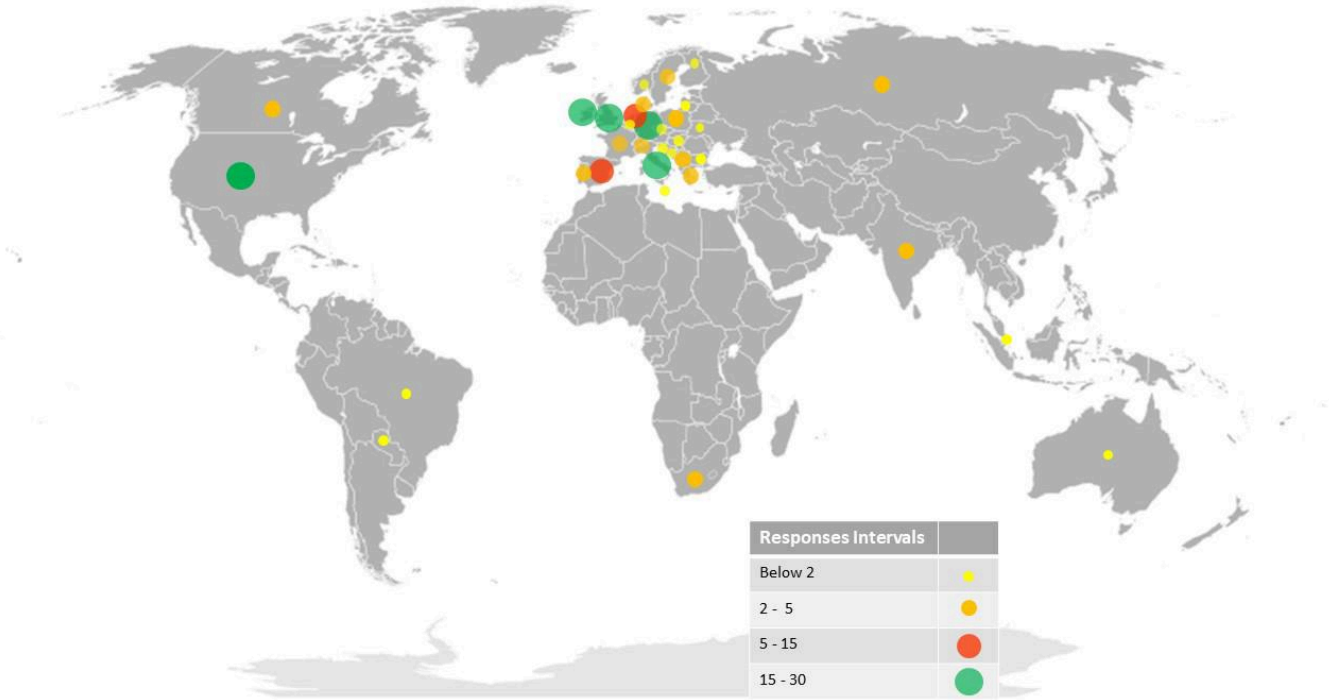

FIG 1. SURVEY ON EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY BEST PRACTICES 2018 – PRELIMINARY RESULTS. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES.

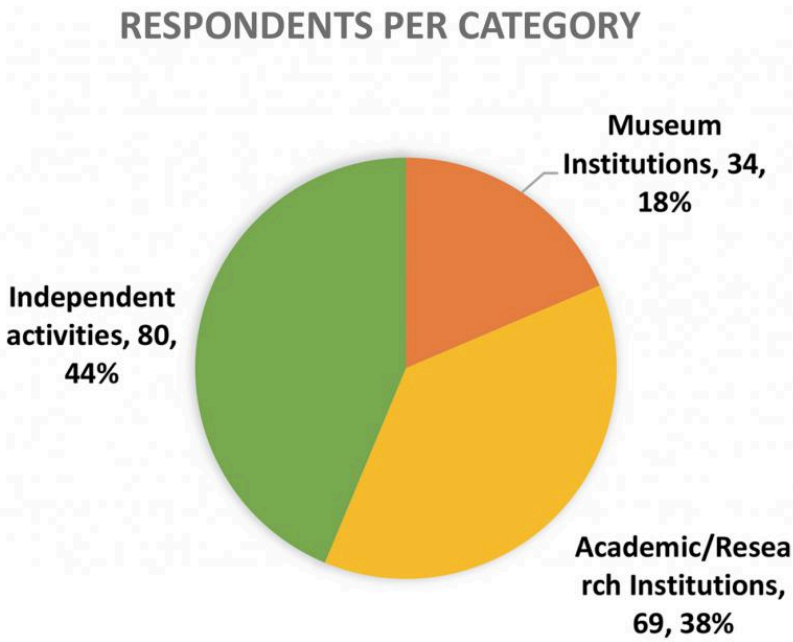

FIG 2. SURVEY ON EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY BEST PRACTICES 2018 – PRELIMINARY RESULTS. RESPONDENTS PER CATEGORY.

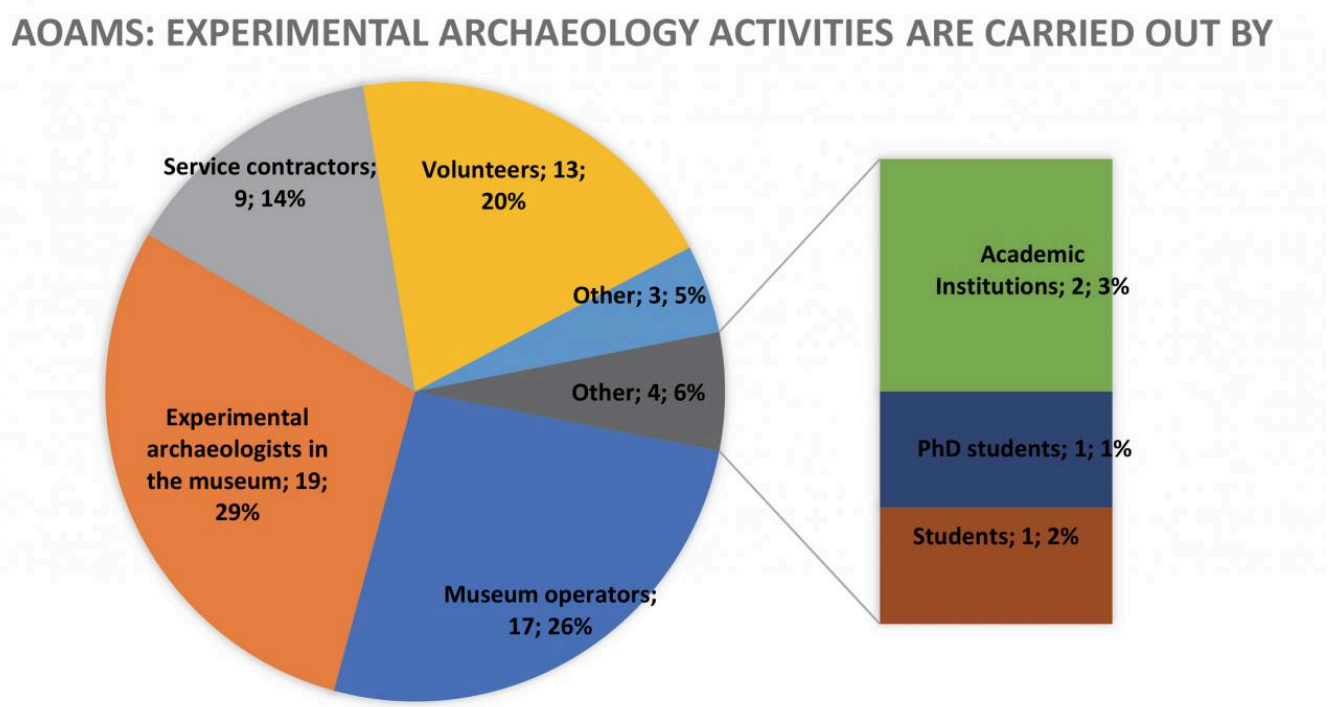

FIG 3. SURVEY ON EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY BEST PRACTICES 2018 – PRELIMINARY RESULTS. AOAMS: EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY ACTIVITIES HR SEGMENTATION.

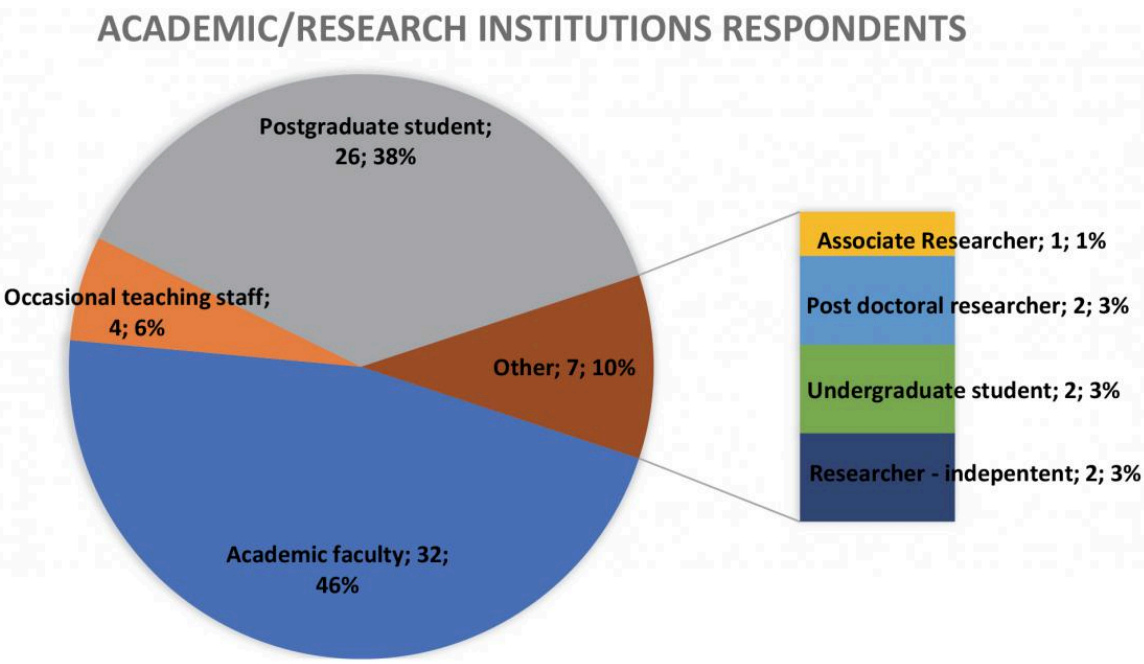

FIG 4. SURVEY ON EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY BEST PRACTICES 2018 – PRELIMINARY RESULTS. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS: TYPE OF RESPONDENTS.

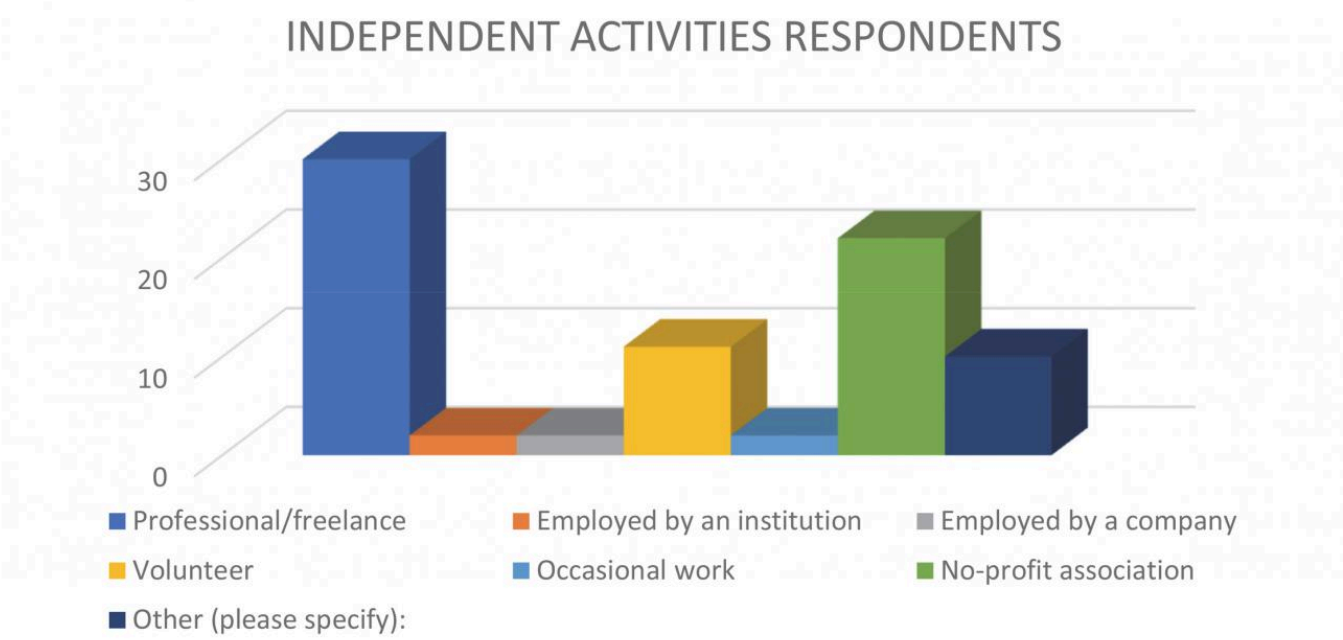

FIG 5. SURVEY ON EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGY BEST PRACTICES 2018 – PRELIMINARY RESULTS. INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES: TYPE OF RESPONDENTS.