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Book Review: Playing with the Time. Experimental Archaeology and the Study of the Past by Rodrigo Alonso, David Canales and Javier Baena (Eds.)

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Book Review: *Playing with the Time. Experimental Archaeology and the Study of the Past* by Rodrigo Alonso, David Canales and Javier Baena (Eds.)



| Rena Maguire (UK)

Increasingly, there is an appreciation of using experimental work to reconstruct how people squared up to the challenges of life in the past. It is a field of archaeology which has caught the public imagination, so this collection of conference papers, ‘Playing with the Time’, edited by Alonso, Canale and Baena, has considerable potential to reach a wider market than just academics.

Spanish archaeology has adopted experimental archaeology with verve, with the ‘Experimenta’ group, founded in 2005, promoting the dissemination of knowledge gained through experiments via conferences, journals and books. The introduction demonstrates that the most popular themes at past conferences were lithics, traceology and pottery, with the Palaeolithic and Neolithic being best represented (Alonso, Canales and Baena, pp.12-13). It is therefore useful that this book is divided into research ‘zones’, cutting to the chase for those with specific interests.

The Palaeolithic technology cluster starts with Garcia Medrano’s chapter on the reconstruction of the Acheulean axes of Boxgrove, Sussex, which sets the bar extremely high. However, each proceeding paper is of equally high standard. The cluster of papers on Mesolithic and Neolithic technology includes the reconstruction of prehistoric adhesives (Fernandez-Marchena et al., pp.73-81).

The section on use-wear analysis is compulsory reading, as micro-wear analysis is a staple tool in any artefact analyst’s scientific arsenal. From pottery to archery wrist-guards, there is a feast of ideas and information here. Osteoarchaeologists and biologists are not excluded, with a section on cut marks and diet. Methodologies range from the ultra-high-tech use of confocal laser profilometers (Fuentes-Sanchez et al, pp.171-177), through to examinations of fatty acid retention by ceramics (Santolalla et al., pp.177-183).

The section dealing with rock art, music and display escorts the reader into the creative and aesthetic issues which often accompany past technologies. This is where experimentation explores enchantment, from the effects of light on rock art (Castellejo et al., pp.203-209) to the tone of Iron Age bells (Monells et al., pp.233-231). Such household magics of light, sound and fire allow for a seamless transition into an analyses of utensils made from fire and earth – ceramics and metals. Practical work on firing pits is well explained, although Vidal’s examination of identifying right or left-handedness in pottery decoration (pp.261-269) is particularly thought-provoking. Metalwork is not as strongly represented as metallurgists may wish. Particularly delightful in the agriculture section is the paper by Indelicato and her team, examining the archaeology of wine in Sicily (pp.321-329).

Lopez-Castilla summarises the heart of the text succinctly, that experimental archaeology creates an empathy with the past therefore re-humanising it. It is remarkable how many of the papers are by groups, reinforcing shared experience, and working together. Perhaps that is the secret behind the rise in popularity of experimental archaeology, it makes the past a warmer, recognisable place, inhabited by real people finding solutions to problems.

Book information

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