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Tales of Tools and Trees: Phylogenetic analysis and explanation in evolutionary archaeology

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Abstract

In this paper, I study the application of phylogenetic analysis in evolutionary archaeology. I show how transfer of this apparently general analytic tool is affected by salient differences in disciplinary context. One is that archaeologists, unlike many biologists, do not regard cladistics as a tool for classification, but are primarily interested in explanation. The other is that explanation is traditionally sought in terms of individual-level rather than population-level mechanisms. The latter disciplinary difference creates an ambiguity in the application and interpretation of phylogenetic analyses. Moreover, I argue that, while archaeologists have claimed that “ cladistics is useful for reconstructing artefact phylogenies” (O’ Brien et al. 2001), these reconstructions only contribute minimally to the explanatory research agenda of evolutionary archaeology.

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