

10 years

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FORUM:

CHATTING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

With the tenth anniversary of the journal we wanted to take a deep breath and look into the future.

This forum consists of short pieces from colleagues around the world that discuss general and specific issues regarding public archaeology in the coming years. We asked for an open format, trying to grasp a fresher approach than the one usual academic writing permits.

As with other forums in the journal, we will keep it open from now on in case any of you want to participate too. It is a good occasion to debate the current and coming role of public archaeology and we hope this selection of papers helps to foster it.

We originally invited 50 people to participate. However, these difficult times made it difficult for some to do so. Nevertheless, we have a good set of contributions that will be of interest to you all.

Enjoy it (and participate if you feel you have something else to say).



Laugh now,
but one day
we'll be
in charge.

banes

FORUM: Chatting about the future of public archaeology

ARCHAEOLOGY FOR THE PUBLIC IN GREECE MINUS/PLUS TEN

Stelios LEKAKIS

Minus 10

It must have been around ten years ago, when I was invited to present the -shaky but promising- progress of my PhD thesis at the University of Athens, on social and economic trends in heritage management, discussing island cultural resources and the role of the interested communities. I remember myself at the end of the talk, standing in front of a bewildered and intrigued (in equal doses) audience, only to experience the -somehow- apologetic comment of the organising professor to the audience: "I see that we need to look into these things now, that all became science". I have talked about this memory elsewhere in detail (Lekakis 2015) mainly to pinpoint that despite the 40 years of bibliography that had then lapsed -McGimsey, for example, produced his seminal volume in 1972- there was still a lack of information about the concept and practices of public archaeology, at least in the Greek academic context.

Ten years after this awkward presentation, I am confident that most people in archaeology and dare say neighbour disciplines in humanities (history, anthropology, folk studies et al.), following the post-modern trends of plural public addressing, have acknowledged the need to act outside their limited academic bubble and appreciate public perceptions and adaptations of their parole or even interact with some of the diverse communities present at local or peripheral levels. In Greece, this certainty can also be corroborated by the multitude of heritage management and museology programmes currently available in academia; A recent study records 20 MA programmes and 299 academic courses including public archaeology classes (Catapoti et al 2020).

One would expect that this plurality would be reflected in the current heritage practice. However, this is not the case, as most of the archaeological practice in Greece continues to be top-down, seeking consent rather than participation; not to mention 'co-creation' to quote the current trend in Europe. The reasons for this inconsistency are multiple and probably outside the scope of this note. One could easily discuss the distance of in-bound scholarship from the national heritage policy and practice, the lack of customised tools that would make theory relevant and useful, the severe budget cuts and understaffing of the bodies responsible for the tasks, coupled with the different -even conflicting- agendas of the stakeholders involved. Main issue however is the consideration of public engagement as a parergon or a bureaucratic necessity or sometimes a populist endeavour for micropolitics, in the very end of the archaeological project (Lekakis 2020a: 80-89). It is still not uncommon to read about 'public archaeology' activities as the concluding festival following the completion of a restoration programme that 'returns' the building to its 'rightful owners'.

Plus 10

What the future holds, remains of course to be seen. But in our precarious conditions, digital means of interaction promise wider coverage and more flexible and impactful ways to work with. Apart from an area to research, this is an obvious pathway for public archaeology in Europe and Greece at the time where a number of relevant cultural products, as digital tours on sites and museums, skill developing courses, masterclasses et al. are already available. However, the collective trauma of isolation would -hopefully soon- need to be tended with closer social encounters. Heritage as a venue for 'wellbeing', is a hot topic in bibliography nowadays and public archaeology will need to position itself towards that; But this is only the front end, and it might turn out to be as disconnected from action and elusive as the previous trend for the 'sustainable management' of the cultural resources.

Immediate needs lie below these trendy aspirations. Participation in the culture/heritage of choice has been declared as a pivot sociocultural objective in the realm of the human rights (UNESCO 2007) and public/community archaeology holds all the rele-

vant tools to facilitate this. However, as we discussed in the case of Greece, methodologies need to be adapted to the cultural realities and background of the region applied. As public archaeology/history initiatives will continue to sprout moderately, growing in multiple venues, with convoluted beginnings, ends and outputs, we need a clear, engulfing, meaningful and prefigurative political strategy, in the national, local or our-own-initiative level. This strategy will be focused on broader goals, as empowerment, democracy and freedom and might lead us to the intended, i.e. successful archaeology for the public projects, but also leave something behind to the society as a whole, be that a way to organise in collectives, behave, interact, resolve tensions and respect each other.

In the last few years, commons theory and practice are being re-introduced in the public realm, as a hybrid academic discipline and a sensitive, inclusive process of managing public goods collectively and on the ground (Lekakis 2020b). Either we discuss about pastures, open-source code, knowledge, urban infrastructures or indeed heritage, the commons are goods used and produced collectively, administered in egalitarian and participatory ways by the communities that manage them and make them accessible on regulated terms. Can this be our overarching strategy for heritage management and public archaeology? Heritage commons is indeed a novel conception but a plural and inviting one, providing social meaning to our participatory endeavours in open, welcoming and empowering ways. The development and activities of the solidarity movement in Greece during the crisis were promising, and suggestive of the colourful agencies that can promote and diversify relevant initiatives, countering severe austerity measures. Whether this or another political principle can propel public archaeology towards its very essence, making archaeology public, is now a query to explore and a pathway to trudge upon.

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