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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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INDEX

7 Editorial

Cinzia Dal Maso

15 Memories

Italy to Italians. Interview with Daniele Manacorda 17

Carolina Megale

Butrint before the Butrint Foundation 25

Richard Hodges

35 Topic of the year: Small but Kind of Mighty

'Pompeii-mania' in schools Down Under 37

Louise Zarmati

Memory and Earthquake. The Pilastrri excavation project (Emilia Romagna, Italy) toward a shared community archaeology approach 47

Giulia Osti, Lara Dal Fiume, Simone Bergamini, Rita Guerzoni, Micol Boschetti, Valentino Nizzo, Margherita Pirani, Stefano Tassi

The case of the Arles Rhône 3 Project: an example of underwater heritage communication 57

Caterina De Vivo

The Virtual Etruscan Museum of Populonia Gasparri Collection: enhancing the visitor's experience 67

Carolina Megale, Carlo Baione

Edutainment and gamification: a novel communication strategy for cultural heritage 79

Stefania Mancuso, Maurizio Muzzopappa & Fabio Bruno

91 Satura Lanx

Italian public archaeology on fieldwork: an overview 93

Francesco Ripanti

Disciplinary locus and professional habitus: the roles of Researcher and Discipline within the socio-political and cultural domains 105

Massimiliano Secci

Italian museums and Twitter: an analysis of Museum Week 2016 119

Chiara Zuanni

135 Postscript

Akira Matsuda

137 Archaeotales

The Lombards, a completely different story 139

Mariangela Galatea Vaglio

April 12th, 1204: Constantinople under siege 143

Francesco Ripanti

The Christmas Song of the custodian 147

Marina Lo Blundo

151 News

Living archaeology at the Archaeodrome 153

Francesco Ripanti

A wedding with surprise: orange blossoms at the museum 155

Nicoletta Frapiccini

How Millennials are changing our culture 157

Anna Paterlini

Being an archaeologist in Kurdistan. Interview with Luca Peyronel 161

Cinzia Dal Maso, Chiara Boracchi

The Monuments Men of Libya 165

Giulio Lucarini

169 Children's Corner

Tonight, we're sleeping at the museum! 171
Giovanna Baldassarre

The source-chest 175
Nina Marotta

179 Reviews

Warship battering rams on display in Favignana 181
Cinzia Dal Maso

Light on the new Salinas Museum 185
Flavia Frisone

The Riace celebrities 189
Giovanna Baldassarre

Agamemnon's Version 193
Giovanna Baldassarre

Watching the world with *Blu's* eyes 195
Cinzia Dal Maso

VOLUME 1

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Section

TOPIC OF THE YEAR

Small but Kind of Mighty

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Memory and Earthquake: the Pilastrri Excavation Project (Emilia Romagna, Italy) toward a shared community archaeology approach

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Abstract

Even though in Italy public archaeology is neither taught in universities nor it is object of a significant debate, some ongoing initiatives may properly be placed within this field. This is the case of the Pilastrri excavation project which started without a clear public engagement strategy but is now pointing toward a more participative and structured one. This paper aims to provide an exhaustive case study as well as remark the potential of the programmatic involvement of the public into archaeological projects and its possible developments and outcomes in the Italian environment.

Keywords

🔍 *Pilastrri excavation project, Community Archaeology, earthquake, Italy, public participation.*

Premise

- Oh well, you must be the archaeologists! By the way... what are you up to now? –
- We are preparing for the new excavation campaign at Pilastrri, on September 14th! –
- And what is your excavation about? A cavemen village? –
- *Er... not exactly. Indeed, a village of about 3500 years ago, but... the inhabitants were not 'cavemen.' They wore amber and mastered bronze.* –

This dialogue is part of a blogpost written on the occasion of the 2015 *Day of Archaeology* (Osti 2015b) and reflects a common attitude of the early phase of the Pilastrri project: the archaeologists' willingness to interact with the local inhabitants to trigger some sort of civic engagement. Although no clear strategy was supporting our approach, that blogpost has been one of the first occasions in which we consciously defined our project as a 'public archaeology experiment.' In June 2015, during the first conference in which we participated as a team (Bergamini et al. 2015), we publicly raised, for the very first time, the question about the true nature of our experience. Now, a year from that episode, and with a better knowledge of the international declinations of public archaeology, we can list the Pilastrri project, for its intrinsic nature and developments, under "the convenient banner" (as defined by Moshenska & Dhanjal 2011) of community archaeology.

To understand, however, the reason why it took so long to find a suitable definition, it is necessary to pose a different question: how are public archaeology and its declinations perceived in Italy?

In Italian, 'public archaeology' is translated literally as *archeologia pubblica*, but the expression does not embody any specific set of practices. The timid and scattered attempts to start a discussion about the way archaeologists engage with the public in Italy (see Bonacchi 2009; Giannitrapani 1998; Parello & Rizzo 2014; Vannini 2011; Zuanni 2013) are far from providing an appropriate framework. Similarly, the expression 'community archaeology' lacks an equivalent in our language: the closest parallel is probably *archeologia partecipata*, 'participatory archaeology.'

The difficulty in rendering the expression is a direct reflection of the absence of a well-developed academic debate, and it is for this reason that a design of the project's ideal placement and the identification of a theoretical pool of matching knowledge took some time. This paper aims at providing a higher resolution portrait of the Pilastris experience through the analysis of its distinctive features, its evolution and its recent developments. This self-evaluation wants to provide useful insights towards the construction of a shared (and reasoned) community archaeology practice in Italy.

Background and project development

The following section presents, in essence, the socio-economic and demographic background in which the project took form.

Economic and demographic framework

The municipality of Bondeno is located in the heart of the Po Plain, close to the western boundary of the province of Ferrara (Emilia Romagna, north-eastern Italy, see Figures 1a and 1b); the extension of its territory is about 180 sq. km. The area has some economic importance for the production and manufacture of fruits, vegetables and cereals. For its demographic features, it ranks at the 60th place on a list of 340 municipalities, but

these data are not comforting: the high average age (about two elders for each young adult), combined with the drastic population decline (increasing since 2010), are determining a growth rate over the -10%.

Pilastris is a small fraction of the municipality of Bondeno, a village of about 1,000 inhabitants located at the very border between Emilia Romagna and Lombardy. On account of their location as borderland, the poor public transport connections and the lack of reception facilities, the village and its surroundings are far from touristic routes. Rural economy is the predominant source of income for the inhabitants. The strong fiscal pressure linked to the new millennium economic crisis brought along a massive die-off of commercial activities: only a few farms and a big-size company specialised in tomato harvesting machines are still bearing up. The village has some gathering places managed by local associations (the parish, the community center, the sports club, etc.) and until a few years ago had also a primary school, whose building was demolished because of the irreparable damages caused by the 2012 earthquake.

Genesis of the excavation project

On May 20th 2012, a major earthquake of 5.8 magnitude struck Emilia Romagna; the aftershocks caused about 27 casualties and left about 14,000 people homeless. The epicentre was only 24 km from Pilastris.

That dramatic event unpredictably triggered the excavation project. Everything started when the Pilastris community and the municipality of Bondeno decided to rebuild the primary school. The project required to spot another area for the construction of a new anti-seismic structure. Among the properties of the municipality only one was suitable, and it was located 250 mt. from the Bronze Age settlement of the 'terramara' of Pilastris (1600-1200 BC), known since 1979 thanks to the researches of a local historian. Predictably, the local Superintendence for Archaeology carried out some shovel test pits and found a thin Bronze Age layer bearing archaeological evidence. The initial friction with the community was soon

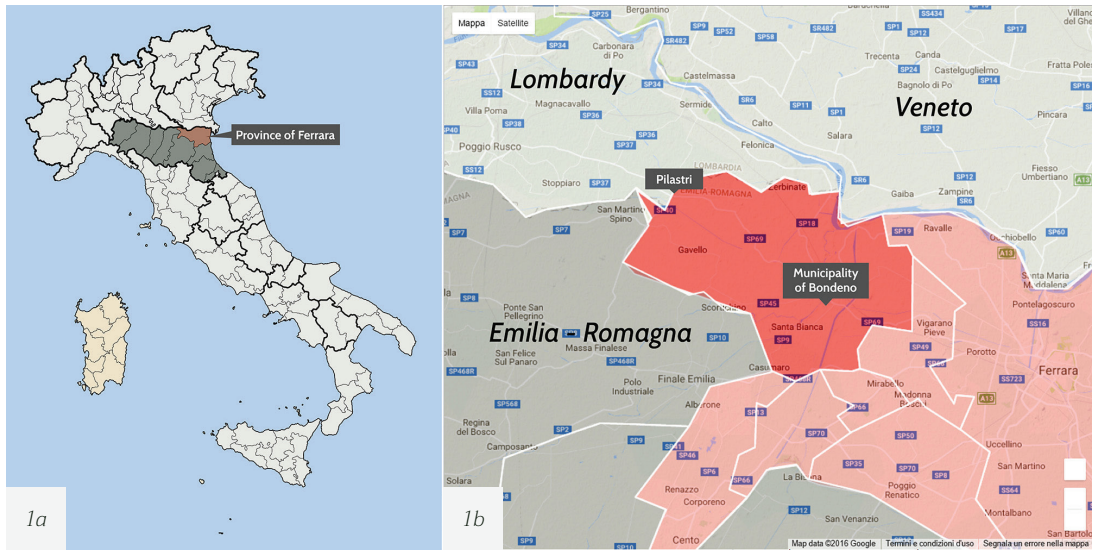


Fig. 1a and 1b. The province of Ferrara [a] (public domain image from [Wiki media Commons](#)), the territory under the municipality of Bondeno and the location of Pilastrì [b] (from <http://www.urbistat.it/adminstat/it/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/bondeno/38003/4> | Map data ©2016 Google).

overcome by the shared decision to construct a temporary building, placed on a platform thick enough to preserve the archaeological layers.

The interest aroused by the archaeological findings under the new school, as well as the excellent relationships established between the Superintendence for Archaeology, the public authority and the local community, resulted in a first excavation campaign in 2013 and, so far, in the stipulation of a three-year excavation convention (2014-2016). Since the very beginning, the scientific research was directed by Valentino Nizzo, a Superintendence archaeologist, while a team of professionals from an archaeological cooperative (P.E.T.R.A) coordinated the operations on field. Logistics, laboratory activities, communication and management were carried out by volunteer resident archaeologists enlisted in cultural associations (Associazione Bondeno Cultura, Gruppo Archeologico di Bondeno and Culture Keys workgroup).

Since 2014, a multidisciplinary team of professors and students from the Universities of Ferrara, Padova, Modena and Reggio Emilia have contributed actively to the excavation and research activities.

Excavation campaigns 2013-2015: a community archaeology account

In 2014 the Pilastrì excavation project - which is part of a wider project named *Memory and Earthquake* (Nizzo 2013) - fixed goals that can be summarized in three major points:

1. investigate the archaeological site with modern techniques and technologies, looking specifically for new clues about the diet of Late Bronze Age people (*research*);
2. involve the public in archaeological activities, emphasizing the role of archaeology as a vector to promote dialogue between the past and the present (*engage*);
3. educate the old and new generations to the local cultural heritage (*educate*).

In order to run a smooth workflow, our 'enlarged' team started with a clear division of roles and a good inner coordination on different tasks.

In 2014, our scientific director drew a well defined organization chart (Figure 2): the listed subgroups should be considered as interdependent and not working exclusively on their area of competence. Despite this

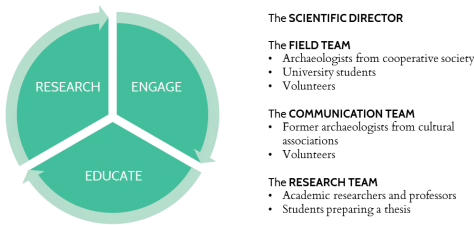


Fig. 2. The three key thematics of our project and our team structure since 2014.

programmatic approach, at the beginning we had no specific work strategy for the engagement area.

A posteriori, and borrowing concepts from the discipline of public archaeology, we can say that our experience started necessarily with a practice-based approach (Okamura & Matsuda 2011, p. 6) with a hybrid educational/public relations character. The question is whether our project changed over the years, or evolved towards other models. As assessed previously, in this paper we analyse the evolution of the project in order to outline its 'potentially' reached values and sustainability. During the upcoming campaign (mid-September to end-October 2016), we will perform the evaluation of the impact of the project on the involved communities. The project will be funded for three more years, and we therefore need to both quantify the work done so far, and carry out a contextual quantitative and qualitative analysis (a preliminary account on the first three years excavation is published in Bergamini et al. 2016).

Below, the key traits of our project are summarised and organised under the following themes:

1. financial aspects and funding;
2. marketing mix;
3. civic engagement;
4. educational and didactic activities;
5. publications and dissemination.

1. Financial aspects and funding

Since 2013, the project has been funded mostly by the municipality of Bondeno (some extra support was given by the Province of Ferrara and, occasionally, by some local associations). Until now, most of these funds have covered the fixed costs of the excavation campaigns and the salaries of the hired professional archaeologists (Table 1). Since 2015, the didactic activities have been a stand-alone entry managed by our workgroup (Culture Keys) providing the services: the cost per person covers the price of raw materials and allows us to reach the break-even point (BEP), a necessity for a cultural association.

Occasionally, we have performed live fundraising sessions during thematic public events attracting large audiences (e.g. the *Bundan Celtic Festival*, with its average of about 15,000 people, distributed in three days every year). The collected donations, however, contributed to our budget to a very limited extent, and barely covered the funding gaps (e.g. the cost of the analysis of archaeological materials). We are confident that we will be able to perform better in the future, thanks to our new programmatic efforts: we are currently completing the design phase of a structured fundraising plan, in collaboration with a young archaeologist specialised in this sector.

Sometimes, the citizens sustain the project directly, by supplying us with whatever they can provide: even if this kind of help has little impact on our resources, we really appreciate it. Free photocopies and essential goods (even the cakes we receive!) are, for us, a direct measure of people's appreciation for what we are doing for and with them.

2. Marketing mix

As you can see in Table 2, we expanded our online presence through time, mostly to promote our initiatives rather than to test some unconventional participative forms. In 2015, we started to organize activities and events even outside the excavation campaign period (re-enactment, workshops, presentations, etc.), rooted in the local traditions. In this way we incurred in a cross-media process

1. Financial aspects & funding		2013	2014	2015	2016
Excavation, board and lodging		✓	✓	✓	✓
Further archaeological analysis		×	✓	✓	✓
Didactic activities		×	×	✓	✓
Donations		✓	✓	✓	✓
Fundraising		×	✓	✓	✓
Crowdfunding		×	×	×	✓

2. Marketing mix		2013	2014	2015	2016	
NM	Social Networks	Facebook	✓	✓	✓	✓
		Twitter	✓*	✓	✓	✓
		Instagram	×	✓	✓	✓
		YouTube	✓*	✓	✓	✓
	Website	×	✓	✓	✓	
TM	Brochures	×	✓	✓	✓	
	Flyers	×	✓	✓	✓	
Gadgets	T-shirts	×	✓	×	×	
	Stickers	×	×	✓	✓	
	Bookmarks	×	×	✓	×	

NM: New Media; **TM:** Traditional Media | ✓*: through non-proprietary profiles

3. Educational and didactic activities	2013	2014	2015
Visiting schools	7	11	10
Visiting school classes	9	30	27
Total visiting students	180	488	565
Total students involved in laboratorial activities	NG	101	450
Kind of laboratorial activities proposed	2	2	4
Dedicated contests	×	✓	✓
Projects outside the excavation campaign	×	×	✓

NG: Not Given | 2016 data are under analysis

4. Publication and dissemination		2013	2014	2015	2016
Publications	Scientific journals	×	×	✓	✓
	Magazines	×	✓	✓	✓
	Catalogues	×	×	✓	✓
	Independent	×	×	✓	✓
Thesis	×	✓	✓	✓	
Conference contributions	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Organized seminars	×	✓	×	×	
Organized exhibitions	×	✓	✓	✓	

Tab. 1 to 4. Quantification of the data discussed in the paragraphs 1. Financial aspects and funding [1], 2. Marketing mix [2], 4. Educational and didactic activities [3] and 5. Publication and dissemination [4].

that let us differentiate the traditional communication channels and languages (Nizzo 2014). As for traditional media and gadgetry production, we are now at a standstill: we

need more information to make the necessary improvements to our strategy and organize ourselves properly. At the moment, we are producing an annual brochure to present

the forthcoming excavation campaign. Only local sponsors can contribute financially to the realisation of these brochures, since we tailored the contents to highlight services that are locally available, and the brochures were distributed in proximity and across the regional borders. Our initiative was targeted to enhance the visibility of our supporters, even if Pilastrri does not have a proper 'touristic profile.'

3. Civic engagement

Until 2015, the participation to all the activities of the excavation campaign was open to volunteers, so that they could be deeply and actively involved. Even if we do not possess data attesting the effective outreach, we perceived an enthusiastic atmosphere among those who participated. The video collaboration (Ripanti & Osti 2015) that we presented to a European contest organised by the NEARCH project (*European Competition: You(r) archaeology* 2015) well evidences the level of engagement we were able to trigger.

The fact remains that the digging activities have always been the most appreciated by and appealing to our offline audience. Unfortunately, this kind of participation will not be possible anymore: a circular letter recently emanated by the General Direction for Archaeology of the Italian Ministry of Culture (Prot. n. DG 1325 issued on 15.02.2016) excludes from the digging activities whoever has no study title in archaeology or is not a student in archaeology. From now on, only side support to other archaeological activities like sieving, cataloguing, etc. will be open to the non-specialists. The opportunities to participate must be, therefore, strengthened and evaluated, probably through a new and transversal dialogue going beyond the mere archaeological fieldwork.

The idea to start a dialogue between the archaeological knowledge concerning ancient food and the traditional gastronomy has already proved to be a viable pathway: the *Terramara in Tavola*, an annual countryside festival that we developed in 2014 in close collaboration with local associations, proved itself an interesting ground for the construction

of collective identity (Nizzo et al. 2015). It has also been one of the occasions that pushed us to perform evaluations during the 2016 campaign: we understood that we need to build new constructive and measurable touchpoints with our audiences to empower our future initiatives.

4. Educational and didactic experiences

Since the beginning of the project, the educational aspect (both of university students and of new generations) has been emphasised and taken into account. In fact, our first attempts to approach the public took the form of didactic activities and guided tours at the excavation site, and mostly targeted the local community and the schools. The number of schools that requested access to didactic activities progressively increased over the years (Table 3); proportionally, their geographical provenance became wide and varied.

In 2015 we had the occasion to go beyond the traditional forms of educational activities, and move closer to holistic co-creative ones. That year, during the excavation campaign, a local businessman offered us funds to incentivize children's participation even after school hours. We thus launched a creative writing contest among primary and secondary schools, called *Tazze con le Corna* (literally 'mugs with horns,' a characteristic trait of the culture of the 'terramare'); we asked the participants to write stories about the ancient inhabitants of the Terramara of Pilastrri. The guidelines on how to write a story were provided through a fictional video (Osti 2015a) that presented both commonplaces to avoid (inferred directly from our experience with the visiting kids) and the basics of our work. The final prize consisted in the publication of the ten best stories in a dedicated volume, together with ten matching illustrations realised by professional artists from the territory.

At the moment we have completed the selection of the finalists and we are coordinating the realisation of the artworks; publication is scheduled for the end of the 2016 excavation campaign. We will be able to evaluate this experience properly only at the end of the

process and after the final encounter between kids and artists, but we do consider it highly formative and we intend to carry forward this kind of activities.

5. Publications and dissemination

Our financial resources and our timings differ from those typical of academic research and publication: it will take us a longer time - even the next three years - to give birth to our first significant publication on research advances and results. Therefore, we wanted to diffuse at least the preliminary results (Table 4) either concerning the ongoing archaeological researches (Pecci et al. forthcoming; Abu Zeid et al. 2016) and our public engagement activities (Nizzo 2014; Nizzo 2015a; Manacorda 2015).

This is not the place to list all the publications we managed, promoted or collaborated in, so we will be content with drawing up the essence of this matter. Public archaeology literature emphasises how difficult it is to reconcile proper archaeological practice with community participation, and we experienced it ourselves. Up to the planning phase of the 2016 excavation campaign, balancing these two aspects has not been easy; now they are actually coexisting and none of them is being neglected. Indeed, perfection is unreachable, but compromises, collaboration and a clear division of roles - together with coordination among multiple and partially overlapping teams - are proving to be effective working solutions for us.

Discussion

We probably put too much at stake without entering into details but, in the absence of precise data, this was the only way to draw a framework in which to fit a set of preliminary considerations. In the light of our experience (and drawing upon international ones), we can retrospectively assess that, that, in terms of community, we were influenced by different variables:

- ◆ Most of the archaeologists dealing with the public are members of the local community. As a consequence, they are first and foremost identified and trusted

for their social role, and only afterwards for their role in the project;

- ◆ There is a core community we are dealing with ('the locals'), settled within the municipality boundaries. It approximately matches the three aspects described by Carman (2011): it existed before the project's beginning, it has a marked sense of identity and it has a high heritage perception, capable of finding self-representing values in the archaeological materials;
- ◆ There are other emerging communities whose interest can easily be raised: we do not need to legitimate our work since it is already seen as necessary and desired by the citizens.

These three aspects enormously facilitated our work; social friction was, indeed, almost absent. We started, however, with precise purposes to fulfil and - predictably - the results obtained were not the ones we expected. About the reached values (as intended by Simpson 2009), we can just make some predictions until the data from this last excavation campaign will be analysed. Table 5 sums up our initial goals, the starting purposes and the outcomes (noticed by empirical observation).

As one can see, the *research* area is now following clearer directions that are leading to the involvement of other specialists. In fact, we switched our focus from charred seeds, whose evidences are quite poor at the moment, to faunas.

We cannot say much about the *engagement*: even if we succeeded in capturing the public interest, we need to innovate if we want to solicit active public participation.

As for the *education* area, we can say with confidence that our efforts towards the younger generations have been successful and, if we insist on experimenting transversal co-creative paths, we will succeed. On the contrary, there is still a lot to do with the adults: the local community follows us and supports us in several ways, but their interest remains superficial or discontinuous in time. It seems that, at the moment, we are unable to solicit

	<i>Initial goals</i>	<i>Reached values (from empirical observation)</i>
Research	Investigate with modern techniques and technologies the archaeological site, aiming in particular to find new clues about the alimentation during the late bronze age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Evidence for wine (gaschromatography on sediments & pottery) ▶ Now more focused on ichtyofauna and macrofauna rather than archaeobotany.
Engage	Involve the public in archaeological activities, emphasizing in second place the role of archaeology as a vector between past and present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ New limitations by changes in law ▶ The archaeology is locally seen as a profession ▶ Embrionic knowledge of the audiences
Educate	Educate old and new generations to the local cultural heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Great involvement of schools ▶ New co-creative horizons ▶ In need for new ways to interest adults

Tab. 5. A preliminary comparison between the main scopes of the project and the observed outcomes.

a strong and long-lasting interest that goes beyond the archaeological theory and practice. The situation could change only if we pointed toward transversal activities, and joined the education area with the engagement one (maybe using approaches like gamification). But the main question still remains: what could grant us a continuous interest from this specific target?

As assessed by Moshenska (2009, p. 41), “[...] the public audiences for archaeology emerge as active witnesses rather than passive spectators” and, in our case, if we can match their interest, their behaviour will be crucial in the experience modelling process. At the beginning, we experimented several planning phases without having a clear perception of what we could offer to arouse the public interest; in the future, we can gradually overcome the problem if we shift our relation with the locals to another (higher) level. In the past two years, we understood that, as long as we prioritize relation, study and comprehension of our audiences, we can righteously claim that the Pilastrì project has the potential to enhance the social role of archaeology.

Conclusion

A final consideration has to be drawn: does our project meet the sustainability criteria? Referring to Belford’s assessment (2014) on the three main sustainability areas that should be taken into account during the planning phase

of a community archaeology project, we can point out our weaknesses and strengths:

1. social sustainability: this is probably our best asset and it could only be improved;
2. intellectual sustainability: here we are stuck in the middle. If, on the one hand, we are open to collaborations with professors and students, on the other we exclude the post-graduates as we have no possibility to sustain them with scholarships. From an academic point of view, this is the most disadvantaged category;
3. economic sustainability: it is a major problem and we are far from reaching the needed requirements. There are no national funding programs covering this area. Moreover, its hybrid character (with the excavation carried out on private property and regulated by the Superintendence) makes it difficult to unlock European funds that could cover the financial gaps. For now we are forced to depend on contributions coming from the citizens or the municipality; we must find alternative sources to relieve or at least favour those who are sustaining us.

In conclusion, there is still work to be done: the above mentioned critical situations must be fixed if we really want to define ourselves as a sustainable model for community archaeology. Our first step, however, should now be not

the presentation of a list of facts, but rather a quali-quantitative analysis that remarks the impact of what we are doing. This is the right path to follow if we want to draw the attention of those who have the power to significantly improve our situation.

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