

Whose Past? The Public and Archaeology in the 21st Century

Dr. Nicholas C. Vella

Archaeology is an enticing discipline. By its very nature it is eclectic and exciting, a rich source of inspiration and delight. To the student of ancient history it is essentially a method of recovering and studying material remains of the past. On a popular level, it is often a trip into the mysteries of temples and pyramids, of the discovery of spectacular finds. In Malta, images of prehistoric monuments in glorious sunshine and artefacts displayed as treasure are widely deployed as symbols of national identity or as a backdrop for the sustained drive to increase tourism. Between the esoteric and the political, archaeology as a discipline and (relatively new) profession has a valid place in modern society. It is my contention that it has an important role to play in public education and outreach.

1988 saw the birth of archaeology as a degree subject at the University of Malta, an acknowledgment of the fact that archaeological practice requires formal education and training. With the setting up of the Department of Classics and Archaeology, this University has been able to offer a demanding programme of studies that provides a broad humanistic education and a critical engagement with the methodologies and techniques that are adopted in the field of cultural heritage. Involving external examiners for all levels of degree classification has ensured that our graduates attain an international standard. The transferable skills of an archaeology degree – developed proficiency of literacy and numeracy, the evaluation of data and the construction of inferences, the presentation and communication of facts and arguments, experience of diplomacy, lateral thinking – provide a foundation for other careers, a point that many assessors of graduate potential often forget or are not aware of.

Beyond the level of education and training at tertiary level the potential of using archaeology in educational programmes or initiatives involving the public has been underrated. The new legislation regulating the management of Maltese cultural heritage requires the State to provide public enjoyment and appreciation for the rich diversity of past human experiences. At the same time, the law places an onus on the Maltese people to safeguard *their* cultural heritage. But people support things with which they identify, which they understand and enjoy. Going by the current low level of visitors to archaeological sites and museums the mandate is a challenging one and innovative ways will have to be found to put into practice the letter and spirit of the law.

The University has been committed to teach about archaeology to an audience wider than its own students. Since 1996 an annual summer school in archaeology run by the Foundation for International Studies and the Department of Classics and Archaeology has brought local and foreign amateurs and enthusiasts in touch with local heritage through hands-on work at the site of Tas-Silg, Marsaxlokk. Several individuals – sixth form students, teachers, tour operators, professionals, housewives, pensioners, and volunteer members of non-governmental organisations – enrol on the programme to get to know more about what archaeologists do and to see discoveries being made. After two weeks of lectures and four weeks of supervised excavations, popular misconceptions fostered by myths and stereotypes presented in the media are dismissed in favour of a reality that involves painstaking and expensive work in the field and in the lab, report preparation and the care of collections and records. Some participants have even gone on to pursue a degree in archaeology.

Another initiative has been to involve primary schoolchildren in the excavation process. For several days, archaeology undergraduates together with pupils from St Anne's Primary School in Marsascala washed pottery sherds on the school premises, before joining the rest of the team on site to see the excavation and to sieve the earth being removed. Not only pottery fragments but bones and a variety of seashells and land snails were scrupulously recovered by the beaming young discoverers. Finding and examining the real "old" thing as it came out of the ground made all the difference, enhancing the pupils' skills at observation. But our initiative was only an experiment at sharing the past with children. The need of a more formal programme involving teachers and archaeologists, where intended goals and objectives set are properly evaluated, is certainly felt.

I believe that the best form of public outreach that will reap benefit in the long term will be the introduction of archaeology into the classroom. By this I do not mean the wholesale adoption of a new subject at primary or secondary level; teachers, pupils and parents already have an awful lot on their plates. What I have in mind is the recognition on the part of educators of the fact that archaeology is an excellent tool in training students to work more critically rather than memorizing information. "How do we know what we know?" is one question that can encourage pupils to challenge what is often taken for granted and to engage them in discussions. And for prehistory, with no written documentation available to tell us what people did and what artefacts were meant for, the scope of such an approach is appealing.

Archaeology can also be an attractive vehicle to teach other subjects, especially in the sciences, providing real-life application to the often-dry textbook theory. Take, for instance, the installation that was used for the production of olive oil in Roman times at San Pawl Milqi near Burmarrad. Here archaeologists have uncovered a fantastic architectural set-up consisting of a press bed and several weights, a type of machinery described in ancient Greek and Roman sources available as paperback translations. After separating the kernel from the berry through the use of a revolving mill, the oil was squeezed out of the mush under pressure, either by lever and ropes wound over a capstan or by a lever and screw. The oil, often mixed with warm water to make it less dense, ran into channels to gather in a series of frustum-shaped settling vats, and in turn into amphorae, those jerrycans of antiquity. Away from normal classroom surroundings, a lesson in mechanics and general physics unfolds itself in these relics from the past.

The same example can be taken further to include subjects such as geography or environmental studies (where is the closest source of water? where are the best soils? what was the source of fuel to warm the water?), history (when and why did cotton supplant the olive as a cash crop?), biology (what makes olive oil nutritious?). Creative teachers can discover that the study of an archaeology-related subject can knit an entire array of topics into a cohesive unit. A small number of archaeology graduates who have entered the teaching profession locally are already doing sterling work on these lines, setting up Young Archaeologists' Clubs to stimulate their pupils; more can be done, however, by supporting the initiative of a handful of individuals through structured programmes that cater for different age groups.

An archaeological site or museum managed in the right way can allow children to manipulate knowledge and artefacts, exploit spatial skills, draw, quantify, write and verbalise knowledge within an integrated curriculum. Of course to make such an endeavour successful you need the right people, educators with an infectious flair for

story-telling, who can see beyond their own narrow specialities, who are ready to share with others what they know, to become partners with their students in the act of learning. You also need the right teaching aids at hand, not just the obligatory slide projector and carousel, but resources to embrace a new pedagogical world made possible by the Web. The cooperation between archaeologists, museologists and those involved in the planning and organization of school curricula will go some way toward guaranteeing that future generations will be more aware of the reasons for the preservation, study, and interpretation of the historic environment.

An effort to bring some of the points just mentioned into practice is already underway. A local non-governmental organisation, Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna, has teamed up with the Department of Classics and Archaeology to participate in TEMPER (Training, Education, Management and Prehistory in the Mediterranean), a EU-funded project intended to strengthen the concept of a common Euro-Mediterranean heritage using our shared prehistory. The project has the support of the Ministry of Education and the Museums Department. Participants from Israel, Turkey, Greece, Malta and the United Kingdom are meeting at workshops to exchange experiences and to share in the joint development of integrated management plans for archaeological sites and educational pilot programmes.

Archaeology in the 21st century will be exciting if we are prepared to integrate wholly the public in research agendas and projects. Archaeological interpretation has the advantage of changing as a result of new ideas, new discoveries and new scientific techniques. History is continuously being refashioned. The public, young and old, have a role to play in this process of history writing. As one archaeologist put it: "... the dialogue of archaeologists with the public should warn us when our principal research asset is becoming exhausted. That asset is not money, but curiosity."

Dr. Vella is a Lecturer in the Department of Classics and Archaeology. He is Assistant Director of the University's excavations at Tas-Silg, Marsaxlokk.