Deciding what to exhibit in museums: Does it really matter?

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Of all the abundant papers focusing on museum environments, few dismantle the decision-making process which characterizes the planning of displays and site presentations, going beyond space restrictions and physical needs of ancient artefacts. Such an approach is essential to understand why these decisions matter. A natural question which is seldom asked is, why display to the public in the first place? The present paper will start with this question, discussing briefly the two main theoretical stances in current western discourse on the subject. Two local case-studies will follow, supplemented by examples of projects which revolve around archaeology and communities. In the conclusion, theory and case-studies will be brought together in order to explain the link between archaeologists and non-archaeologists vis-à-vis archaeological heritage presentation.

Models of museum and site presentation

Why do people feel the need to display archaeological material? The two main museum models in western discourse are the Deficit Model and the Multiple Perspective Model (Merriman 2004, 5). The Deficit Model considers "the public" as an uneducated mass in need of professionals to give them "the science" behind artefacts. The main aim of exhibiting within this model is to make people understand archaeology and support archaeologists. Public involvement is allowed as long as it fits the agenda. Contestation, debate and conflict are ignored. Within the Multiple Perspective Model, focus is not on archaeology but on people. Projects and displays are intended to enrich them, and not the archaeological record. The main aim is to stimulate reflection and creativity. Each model has its positive and negative sides and will influence museum exhibitions and projects accordingly (Merriman 2004, Smith & Waterton 2012). But does it really make a difference which model is adopted? Can a model be used exclusively, without the influence of the other? The next sections will delve into two local case-studies which show that what is displayed, and how, does make a difference in people's lives.

'Neanderthal Man in Malta?'

The first case-study has as its focus the site of Għar Dalam (Birżebbuġa). Albeit not as 'touristically' popular as other sites, it is extremely significant for speleological, paleontological, ecological and archaeological reasons (Zammit Maempel 1989, Fabri 2007). The pillar of deposits left in place by the archaeologists makes it the perfect site to understand stratigraphic processes. It is the only place in Malta where one may see an example of the Victorian-style museum since the old museum display has been kept intact and can still be visited alongside the didactic museum set up in 2002 (Fabri 2007). The showcase which this case-study focuses on deals with the cultural layers discovered in the cave, more precisely the bottom shelf entitled 'Neanderthal Man in Malta?' (Fig. 1).

The story of this display started in December 1996 with an article by journalist Natalino Fenech in *The Malta Independent on Sunday* which presented the theories of three medical doctors (Anton Mifsud, Simon Mifsud and Charles Savona Ventura) arguing for a Neanderthal presence in Malta. Among the evidence mentioned there were two 'taurodontic teeth' said to have been found at Għar Dalam. These teeth became the lynch-pin in a newspaper debate which

Figure 1. Display at Għar Dalam Museum, entitled 'Neanderthal Man in Malta?' Photograph: the author 12 March 2012.

followed in 1997 between Anton Mifsud and John Samut-Tagliaferro, an archaeologist and consultant palaeo-pathologist. The main point of dissention was not the possibility of a Neanderthal presence in Malta but rather the validity of the evidence being put forward in support of the theory. One crucial point of contention was the tests carried out on the teeth in 1963 by Dr Kenneth P. Oakley from the British Museum. Test results indicated that the teeth were not earlier than the Neolithic, however the Mifsuds argued that these results had been forged. They explained this extensively in their publication *Dossier Malta: Evidence for the Magdalenian*, published by the authors in 1997, in the middle of the newspaper debate. Of particular note is the interest shown by other people in what must have seemed trivial to many. Letters to the editor of *The Malta Independent on Sunday* were sent by at least two non-archaeologists (George Camilleri 12 January 1997, 23) and Joseph Ellul (19 January 1997, 27).

The newspaper debate ended in summer of the same year, rather inconclusively since the conspiracy theory being put forth was difficult to prove or disprove. In spite of this, the theory still found its way in the Għar Dalam display, alongside the infamous teeth, a bust showing a reconstruction of a Neanderthal human and a timeline of related studies dated 1917-1997. Seemingly innocuous, this display had serious consequences.

On 30 May 2012, the *Times of Malta* published a letter written by Giles Oakley, Kenneth P. Oakley's son, where he expressed his disappointment to find in one of the displays at Għar Dalam a statement that his father had been accused of forgery. He said that people might think it did not matter but 'it's very simply about fair play and decency'. He wrote, '[m]y father was no forger and no reputable museum should give the impression he was', asking for the removal of this reference. A letter in support of Oakley's plea was written by Anthony Bonanno, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Malta (*Times of Malta* 5 June 2012, 10), and a reply letter to Oakley was written by Anton Mifsud (*Times of Malta* 8 June, 9), claiming he based himself on authentic documents and declaring he would be willing to review his statements if presented with the necessary evidence. Ultimately the display was changed as explained in a letter by Kenneth Gambin, at the time Heritage Malta's Chief Curator, published in the *Times of Malta* dated 16 June 2013. The offending sentence was removed after consultation with George Zammit Maempel, the person who curated the permanent display at Għar Dalam in 2002.

If the role of museums is also to stimulate discussion, then presenting different points of view is essential. However, the Għar Dalam incident shows how important it is to explain why a display is set up in a particular manner and why an artefact found its way there. An example is the "merman" displayed at the British Museum (mentioned in the Museum's online catalogue www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?ob

jectId=558837&partId=1). Although it is a fake, it is displayed in the Enlightenment Gallery as an example of the kind of curiosity to be found in a collector's cabinet, showing 'how museums changed during the eighteenth century from cabinets of curiosity to the type of museums we are more familiar with today', as explained on the Museum's website www.britishmuseum.tumblr.com (accessed on 3 April 2016).

As evidenced by this case-study, exhibiting alternative theories in museums can backfire badly so rigorous and professional research needs to be carried out to back the alternative choices involved as well as to try to foresee as much as possible the consequences of the display. Thus, the discussion should revolve around how to be professional whilst embracing the concept which acknowledges multiple voices within site/museum presentation, thereby bridging the realities of archaeologists and non-archaeologists and the social, as well as academic potential of archaeological sites/museums.

The Muslim cemetery in Rabat

The second case-study concerns the *Domvs Romana* (Rabat, Malta), focusing on the display of the Muslim Cemetery remains. Discovered in 1881 whilst planting trees, the first remains uncovered at the site consisted mainly of an ancient Roman house and Muslim graves of a later date. As was typical of the era, attention was focussed almost exclusively on the classical remains. In fact, at the beginning of the 1900s, the site opened to the public as the "Roman Villa Museum". After a revamp in 1948, it reopened as the "Museum of Roman Antiquities", with its Muslim medieval aspect still very much on the margin. Medieval archaeology was still relatively obscure at the time, so this is not too surprising. It was only in 1984 that the so-called "Arab Rooms" were inaugurated, although this Arab display was located at the very end of the visit, as the least prominent display.

In 2002 the site had to be closed for extensive works. A new display opened in 2005, and the site is now officially called *Domvs Romana*. Since the site is quite complex, with parts pertaining to different periods, a chronological approach was preferred, with the most recent happenings displayed first (curator Suzannah Depasquale, *pers. comm.* 2012). Thus the Muslim cemetery display is now prominently positioned almost exactly upon entering the premises. During interviews carried out by the author it was learnt that pressure was exerted for this not to happen (Barbara 2013, 147).

To understand why this would be an issue one needs to move away from archaeological material and consider the Arab community in Malta in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its contextualisation within a European frame of mind.[1]

The analysis carried out by the author in this respect was based on qualitative interviews with members of, or people in contact with, the Muslim community in Malta as well as textual analysis of twentieth century history textbooks (Table 1). All the textbooks analysed are characterized by deixis and exteriorizing language, placing the readers in a specific space, assuming them always Maltese-born Roman Catholics. The textbooks issued in the first half of the twentieth century show this extremely clearly and, through diction and images, the Arab period in Maltese history is portrayed negatively especially when compared to the arrival of Count Roger (Barbara 2013, 122-132).

During the 1920s, Maltese attitudes towards Arab peoples appear to have undergone significant changes. The disassociation from Arabs during this period was most probably the result not only of religious differences but also of fear following important legislative decisions. With the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925, all Blacks, Indians and Arabs within the British Empire had to be registered as aliens, making employability difficult, decreasing the value of their work and

Name of textbook	Date	Author/s (if any listed)
Ġrajjet Malta u n-nies tagħha	1935	A. V. Laferla
Gateway to our Nation's History	1969	C. G. Bonavia and J. M. Demanuele
Ġrajjet il-Gżejjer Maltin	1971	S. Laspina
Ġrajjet Malta: minn żmien il-qedem sal-ħakma Għarbija	1976	-

Table 1. List of history textbooks analysed.

putting them at risk of deportation (Tabili 1994, 56). Therefore, Maltese personalities abreast of political and legislative changes, such as Gerald Strickland, wanted to differentiate Maltese people from Arab ones (Kasvikis *et al.* 2007, 135).

In the 1960s, a Nationalist government wanted to strengthen the notions of *Italianità* so we notice a revival of Latin propaganda, which naturally avoided any emphasis on connections with North Africa (Vella & Gilkes 2001, 274). This approach could be strengthened even further post-Independence. A noticeable shift took place in the 1970s with a Labour Government and its successful attempts to forge relationships with North African countries (Partit tal-Ħaddiema 1979, 46). This may explain the inauguration of the "Arab Rooms" in 1984. By the end of the 1980s, with the Nationalist Party once again in government paving the way for Malta to join the European Union, focus reverted once again on the European traits of Maltese culture. The annual reports of the Museums Department (MARs) are very telling in this respect. The situation towards the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century was also affected by international happenings such as 9/11 and immigration. These events did not change the view of people but rather brought to the fore certain issues that were up till then dormant, especially the "us" and "them" argument. Grima (2014, 119) points out that these views and attitudes may be traced back to 'native understandings of the historical past'.

Analysis of this case-study enabled the author to think more on the apparent lack of interest in Muslim archaeological remains in Malta among members of the Muslim community. By way of example, during an interview with the author, curator Suzannah Depasquale mentioned that an attempt to contact and involve the Imam in the *Domvs Romana* project was not successful (*pers. comm.* 2012). This might have been a case of trying to contact the wrong people at the wrong time, especially at a time when Muslim minorities were keeping a low profile. Apart from that, one cannot expect people to be interested in something they do not know about. Few people (Muslim and non-Muslim) know of the existence of a Muslim cemetery at the *Domvs Romana*. Dissemination of information and project creation therefore should not be based only on visitors' interest, as interest is very much linked to what is disseminated. If what is presented is the same, the "audience" will want the same or, not knowing other options are available, will not want anything at all. This circular thinking needs

to be broken, otherwise the museum/site cannot develop into a creative and active space.

But why go through all this theoretical debate? Is not archaeology simply the study of ancient things and are not museums there to showcase these ancient objects? The most important thing that one has to keep in mind is that a structure is important not because it exists but because it means something to people now. The present community is a crucial element. Visiting is a personal and intimate experience, not always understood by those setting up the display. 'Personal heritage tourism' is a perfect example, with people visiting sites for personal reasons such as ancestral links (Timothy 2014, 34). Often the act of visiting is also linked with understanding who we are and who we want to be (Smith 2006, 2; Timothy 2014, 35). Although it is practically impossible to integrate all existing perspectives, it has to be understood that heritage managers are governing not only 'heritage' as a broad term but the cultural and social values and emotions associated with the sites.

Zimmerman (2006, 42) narrates how during one of his digs in Mexico he went to the Anthropological Museum of Mexico City with local workers, some of whom had never been there. At one point he saw a worker crying in front of the stone calendar. Asked why he was crying he replied that he never knew how great his people once were. Archaeological sites and museums are indeed the setting where processes of experience and discovery occur, where different experiences meet each other, enriching one another through sharing of ideas or creating dissonance by confrontation, which is also part of value creation.

Many people think that striking a balance between the social potential of sites and responsibility to the site and to the discipline is impossible but the next section offers a brief overview of two projects that managed to incorporate both aspects.

Past objects, present communities

The Stanwell Mothers Project

This project consisted of a 12-hour course with young mothers from Stanwell in England (Cole 2012). Through handling of archaeological artefacts associated with food and farming, its aim was that the mothers would understand the origin of food and the nature of agriculture as well as helping to raise their self-
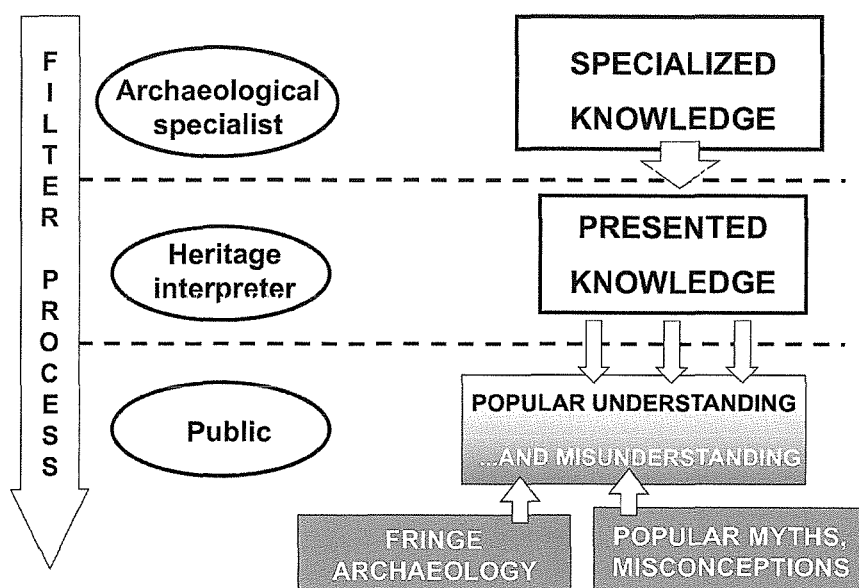
Figure 2. A deficit model for the dissemination of knowledge about the past (after Grima 2004, 1).

esteem and increase their skills, thanks to observation exercises, photography, and cooking sessions.

Cole admits that at first she had portrayed the Stanwell Mothers Project as post-processual, and she had thought she was adopting the altruistic multiple-perspective model. Yet, in the end, she makes it clear that she had adopted elements from both the deficit and the multiple-perspective models. She had started this project to experiment with how non-archaeologists interpreted "mysterious" archaeological objects. She had also set the parameters of study herself and the mothers still looked for her assistance and approval throughout every stage. Archaeology was brought to a new audience and the coordinator (an archaeologist) gathered new insights.

At the same time Cole explained how the project was very beneficial for the mothers, especially since all of them came from an area marked with poverty and malnutrition. Many of them had experienced a difficult childhood with limited educational opportunities and, as a consequence, lack of employment. After the project all of them had a higher self-esteem, some of them changed their eating habits, and others moved on to further courses. According to Cole (2012, 74), '[t]his was not just an archaeological project that involved the community. It was a community project that affected archaeology.'

Most of the mothers had not been very enthusiastic about the course initially. They confessed that they were not sure they were going to enjoy it since they had always associated archaeology with 'bearded men, dusty objects and boring lessons'. And yet they became so engaged that

they actually forgot to take cigarette breaks. Their attitude might be explained as apparent lack of interest since they had never really been exposed much to archaeology and therefore they could not really know whether the subject matter was engaging or not.

Hunt the Saxons

Faversham Society Archaeological Research Group in Kent, England (FSARG) is a NGO composed of community members (not archaeologists) established in 2005 'to empower local people in dealing confidently with the archaeology of their hometown' (Reid 2012, 18). For their first project they wanted to 'develop a low-profile low-cost research project open to participation by anyone prepared to put in time and effort.' The research question was carefully chosen as they wanted to avoid creating conflict with contracting units and other stakeholders since Faversham is a highly-contested space. It also needed to be an exercise which did not require a lot of skill and which could be done short-term, involving as many people as possible whilst using their imagination.

FSARG chose the Saxon period (AD410-1066) because a Saxon zone had been delineated but only on assumptions rather than actual findings. This project, "Hunt the Saxons", consisted of excavation of 1m² test pits in gardens of properties situated in the Saxon zone, with the consent and participation of the garden owners. The exercise also included sieving, metal detecting, reporting, and pottery training sessions carried out by professional archaeologists. Although nothing properly Anglo-Saxon was discovered during
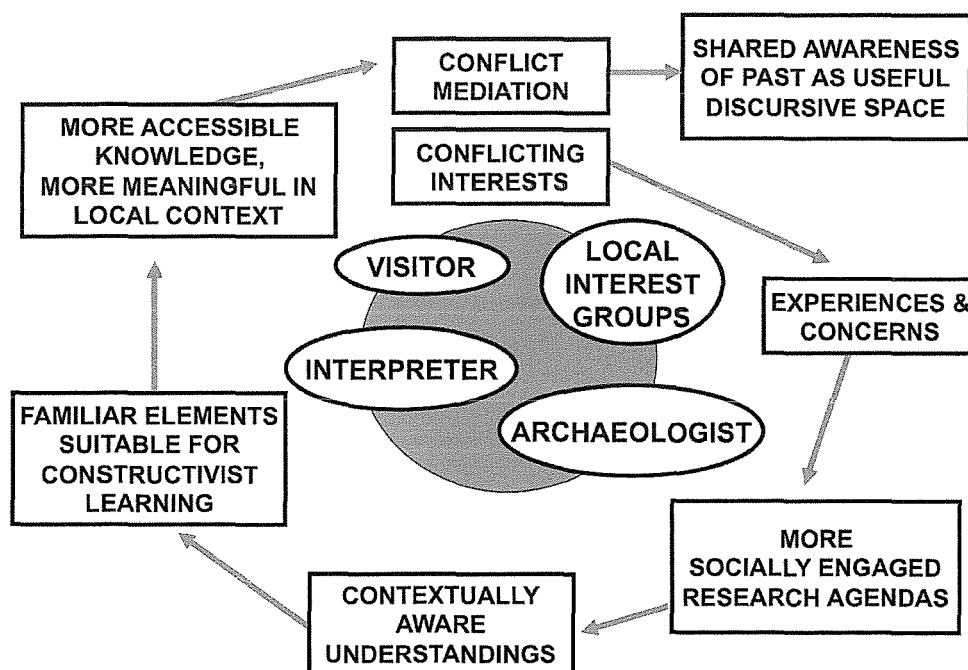
Figure 3. An interactive model for the creation and dissemination of knowledge (after Grima 2004, 4).

the first season, the first year resulted in an exhibition and in the publication of an interim report.

Both archaeologists and non-archaeologists benefited from the project. Participants enjoyed themselves, learnt new skills, improved existing ones, and increased a sense of community and pride in their own heritage. Archaeologists learnt more about an area which they did not have the time and money to research plus they obtained further insights since community members also carried out oral history exercises. There were limitations but it was a good start. FSARG's website shows how three similar projects followed and a fifth was being planned at the time of writing.

Conclusions

The brief theoretical introduction and the case-studies presented above lead to a discussion of a wider picture. It is clear that the linear process for the dissemination of knowledge about the past (Fig. 2) based mainly on the deficit model, is not satisfactory any longer on its own. In the linear process detailed information is produced by archaeological experts, watered down by heritage managers, and then fed to the public in sizeable pieces (Grima 2004, 1). This contrast heavily with the interactive model for the creation and dissemination of information about the past (Fig. 3) developed in the past decade.

The interactive process acknowledges the main actors as being the visitor, the interpreter, the archaeologist and the local interest group, placed on an equal level even though they may differ intellectually, socially, economically, and emotionally (Grima 2004, 4). This difference is not considered a drawback because conflicting interests present a variety of experiences and concerns. If research questions and projects are based on this variety, they would cover a wider range of interests. Thus the research agenda would be alive, evolving in an active (as opposed to a static) space and responding to current needs and interests of various audiences. Within such an approach, attention is paid to context, taking everything into account, facilitating learning and meaning-making. Knowledge is made more accessible, both physically and intellectually, so it is more likely to assume deeper meaning and greater value, even to those not initially interested in archaeology. Individuals are more likely to become receptive to archaeological heritage, since archaeological heritage would be more open to them. This whole process can lead to 'conflict mediation' which goes beyond archaeology and the past as it is transferred to the present.

Positivity does not result automatically, however, but needs to be worked for. The author is therefore proposing three actions, which will be referred to as pillars since they can sustain the interactive model, trying to put theory into practice.
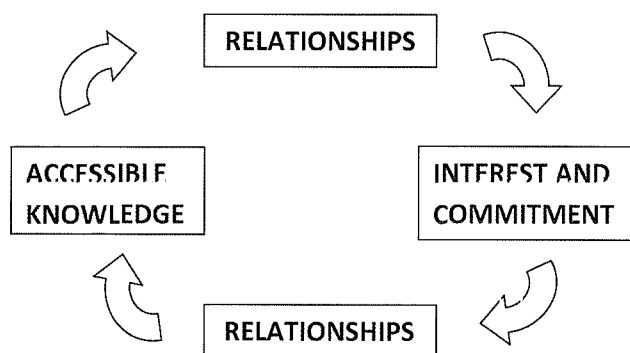
Figure 4. The three pillars which can enable an interactive model to result in a multi-vocal approach.

Accessible Knowledge: The first action is to make information accessible to allow curators and community representatives intellectual access to what might be the foundation of joint projects, as well as physical access to carry out such projects. Here cultural heritage regulatory and management bodies, together with academics, have a very important role to play.

Relationships: The second action is to form the right alliances and approach the right people, in the right way. What need to be enveloped are real relationships between archaeologists and non-archaeologists – not obligatory business transactions between sectors but intense sharing of experiences between individuals. Although this is primarily the role of curators, one needs to keep in mind that curators are often too overburdened and simply have no time for this. Creation of meaningful relationships needs to be facilitated from above, by allowing curators to have an adequate team around them, thus allowing time for social interaction which goes beyond simply attending conferences and working-groups which focus exclusively on the subject matter of the site/ collection under their care.

Interest and commitment from local communities: The third action can only be achieved if the first two become entrenched in archaeological heritage management. Ultimately awakening of interest and declaration of commitment is something which should be present on the part of all parties involved.

These three pillars are connected with one another (Fig. 4). Accessible knowledge is transferred via relationships to result in interest and commitment. Ultimately interest and commitment, through strengthening of existing relationships and the creation

of new ones, will generate more accessible knowledge. For the circular movement to start and gain momentum it has to be recognized that non-archaeologists are not a passive mass audience and so '[f]or ethical, intellectual and social reasons' they must not be left out of the picture (Reid 2012, 26).

Archaeology is indeed the study of past remains but we study the past because of the present. As Klamer (2014, 64) succinctly explains 'a museum tells the story of the past' but 'brings it alive in the present'. This article has tried to explain that although at face value there seem to exist two competing models: the deficit model (which sometimes might appear selfish), and the multiple perspective model (which diffuses power for the people's own good, seemingly completely positive). In practice elements of both are likely to converge in any project or museum presentation.

Turning back to the title of the paper: Does it really matter what we exhibit in our museums? Indeed it does. Archaeologists should reflect more on the relationship between archaeologists and other groups in society to understand why it matters so much. Archaeological sites can be important for anyone, albeit not necessarily for their archaeological aspect. Sites might be key players in processes of individualisation and social participation. A more comprehensive approach is needed, encouraging a deeper analysis of the persona of the archaeologist (in the various roles s/he performs) in a wider social context which problematizes certain concepts resulting into a constructive critique of that which is often taken for granted.

It is hoped that studies in this direction will lead to more interdisciplinary studies on the visitor's experience of sites, especially in terms of social bonding, self-realisation, self-esteem and therapy, instead of focusing only on academic education. Such studies might help archaeologists and heritage managers acknowledge the fundamental social role of the sites and collections they care so much about.

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Notes

1   The author acknowledges that "community" is not a satisfactory term as it emphasises more the aggregation rather than the choices of individuals. However, for practicality, it will be retained throughout the article.