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Community archaeology Personal thoughts from Slovenia

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I often hear other archaeologists in Slovenia complain about public ignorance regarding archaeology, heritage and the past. Who is responsible for this ignorance? What can and should be done to change this?

I am an archaeologist from Slovenia, a small EU country rich in archaeology and cultural heritage. Thirteen years have passed since I first came in touch with archaeology when I started my university studies and it has been quite a journey.

The first time I was faced with ignorance regarding archaeology was my own ignorance. Upon graduation from high school I knew virtually nothing about archaeology as heritage and as a science. I was baffled by how little time is devoted to learning about archaeology as part of the History subject during all the 4 years of high school.

I often encounter ignorance of archaeology while working on different archaeological surveys and excavations. There, local people approach me to ask me about the past, what we do and why we do excavations. If it is just a few fragments of an old pot, why is it important? Only finds made of gold count to them. Those are questions you get asked over and over again. And I admit the answers I provide are usually insufficient when heard for the first time, mainly because I present them the value of archaeology that isn't measured in monetary terms. It is frankly frustrating.

We can find ignorance of archaeology also among archaeologists and other heritage professionals. It is not a lack of knowledge of what archaeology is as a discipline, what we do or about the past. It is more a lack of questioning why we do archaeology and what value does archaeology hold for us as well as for other people beyond monetary value.

To answer my first question, i.e. who is responsible for this ignorance, in my opinion we don't need to look far. In short, I hold us, archaeologists, and our elitist self-righteous attitude of dealing with heritage and communicating with the public, responsible for the skewed public image of archaeology.

This brings me to the question of what needs to be done to change this situation. How do we achieve that? To answer this question, the first thing we must do is ask ourselves, why is archaeology important in our lives? We as professionals must find in ourselves how we identify with archaeology and what value archaeology holds for us.

For me, doing archaeology means more than abiding by the laws and international conventions that protect archaeological heritage. Archaeology holds one of the keys to understanding who we are, who our ancestors were and how they lived, and how the cultural landscape that we live in is changing through time. With deep time view I started to value the landscape (where I live and elsewhere) and the environment as fragile heritage and realized that its current state cannot be taken for granted. I identify myself with the landscape where I live and work.

I strongly believe archaeological heritage must be protected, but in a way that people and communities not professionally involved with archaeological heritage protect, support and live with it. This is why I see great value in community archaeology.

My first step into the field of community archaeology was when I started to focus my main research on landscape archaeology. Thinking about and doing archaeology outside the boundaries of finds and archaeological sites helped me, because I saw that we always live within past landscapes. That encouraged me to find paths to approach local people, work with them and show them from the start what archaeology is hidden around villages, on their fields and in the woods. I also try to show the local community that archaeology has a value as an active element in our everyday living

space, and that the cultural and natural landscape that surrounds us was neither made today nor just for us. It has a past, a present and a future.

Moreover, archaeology cannot live and develop without public support. In Slovenia, as soon as you start working outside of state-funded archaeological research and have to find other sources, or the private sector needs to pay for excavation because of heritage law you get an indifferent or slightly hostile attitude. In the course of my 13 years of personal experience in excavations, I met only one or two private investors that were really interested in archaeology.

The reason why ignorance of archaeology as a professional community is still persistent even among younger archaeologists is that, during our studies, we did not receive any training or education regarding community archaeology. At least that changed after the Bologna reforms, and now there is one subject in a 5-year programme of studies about community archaeology. But that is just a first step because practical experience and good feedback are indispensable to a community archaeologist.

I gained all of my experience in community archaeology through reading, working and engaging with the public. And I learnt there are many different interest groups and different ways to engage with them, so I always seek new ways to do it.

With our work and love for archaeology we must set an example for the public to follow and communicate how we value archaeology. In order to achieve that, we must constantly engage with communities wherever we live and work.

I am constantly involved in landscape surveys, archaeological hikes, public lectures, and articles about archaeological sites in local papers. I know that in other countries this is just a start or a basic stone. But for community archaeology in Slovenia (at least in part where I live) it is a step-up. And it is a start towards improving the public image of archaeology and reducing public ignorance.

It gives me confidence for future work that some people surrounding where I work started to regard me as an archaeologist and archaeology in a positive way. In a few villages people started to work on how to incorporate a number of archaeological sites

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into local touristic paths. Feedback from the public shows that they want to be informed and engage with archaeology.

As a final note, I wish to say to all fellow archaeologists who practice community archaeology: Keep up all the good work and enthusiasm. We make the world a better place to live in.