

## Chapter 2

# Public Archaeology, Archaeology and the Public

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Public archaeology is a flexible notion with several meanings: public engagement in protecting archaeological heritage, public interest in the results of research, and archaeology as a public service offered by qualified staff. Such a broad range of purposes and approaches involves various professionals and includes new disciplines supporting archaeology and advertising its achievements. Archaeology in Italy has always been public, since 1909 laws establish that underground and underwater finds are State property. The Italian Constitution also includes protection of landscape and cultural heritage among its fundamental principles. Nevertheless, public property of archaeological heritage seems no longer sufficient to make the communities feel as legitimate owner and involve them in archaeological enhancement projects. The increase of protection and promotion activities, the rise of mass tourism, and the evolution of communication strategies are forcing archaeology to face new challenges. In order to be roundly public, archaeology should not lose of sight its present-day public.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The adjective ‘public’ is a broadly nuanced one, its varied meanings etymologically connected to the substantive *populus*. Something ‘public’ has to do with a community as a whole, as an element of a recognized civil order, e.g. a municipal or national one (‘public interest’, ‘public health’). Public is what is common or prevalent among people who form a community (‘public opinion’). Public is eventually what is accessible and open to everybody, what everyone can use (‘public place’), as it is not privately owned or reserved for specific people or groups.

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Moving from a lexical analysis of the term ‘public’, one would consider archaeology and archaeological heritage as concepts obviously connected to the public sphere at all the aforementioned levels. The study, protection and enhancement of archaeological heritage are – or at least should be – strategic assets of public interest. Moreover, the archaeological heritage belongs to the communities, not just because of its intrinsic educational and moral purposes, but often also in terms of actual property.

Since the notion of ‘public archaeology’ was first formulated in the United States in the Seventies (McGimpsey, 1972), much has been written about the forms that this approach can assume, according to its different contexts of application (Bonacchi, 2010; Liverani, 2012; Diaz-Andreu, 2015; Moshenska, 2017; Bolduc, 2018; Karl & Frey, 2018). Public archaeology is actually a multifaceted concept that can be seen as a public service offered by the State through its professionals, an activity with outcomes of public interest, a practice deliberately involving the communities. The variety of possible meanings and applications appears affected by the social, legislative, political, economic and cultural frameworks in which public archaeology operates.

This paper considers some aspects of the situation in Italy, the Country with the longest tradition in the field of cultural heritage legislation and holding one of the widest and most varied archaeological patrimonies in the world. As a State responsibility, the public element appears well rooted and widespread in Italian archaeology. But when ‘public’ means that the people are the beneficiaries of a cultural feature or the legitimate owners of an archaeological heritage, a gap between the communities and their concern for the past can be often detected.

This position is clearly a contradictory situation to some extent: its genesis, current state and possible future perspectives will be now examined.

(R.M.A.)

## **PROTECTING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE: THE IDEA OF THE COMMON GOOD AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE**

For the first time worldwide, the UNESCO Conventions of 1970 and 1972 recognized the duty of States to preserve their cultural heritage, thus identifying a prominent public interest in this action.<sup>1</sup>

In the archaeological field, the various actions of protection are understood as an inalienable duty for Countries where strong rules give the State the ownership of archaeological finds: such may almost preclude any freedom of action by anyone other than the State itself.

Consequently, any form of safeguarding (protection, control, authorizations, excavations) is carried out by public bodies in the interest of the whole community and of future generations, without being conditioned by local, electoral or economic interests. The Italian legislative framework, from its long process of formation and its complexity, may be considered to constitute a model case for discussion about one particular denotation of ‘public archaeology’.

Italy, whose enormous monumental and artistic heritage makes it a palimpsest of outstanding and different cultures, was the scene of major historical transformations such as the Renaissance; later, it was the privileged destination of the Grand Tour, an obligatory step in the cultural education of the young aristocrats of the time, being an early manifestation of the now unified vision of nature and culture.

In this situation, the adoption of protective rules against the destruction of monumental sites and the dispersal of works of art has become essential. Over time it has determined the working-out of legal

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