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From Research to Dissemination. An Experimental Project of Community Archaeology at the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia

Valeria Di Cola*, Marina Lo Blundo**

Abstract

Il litorale ostiense e l'immediato entroterra, attingendo ai quartieri che gravitano attorno all'area archeologica di Ostia antica, è un'area fortemente urbanizzata con vasti

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This article was firstly conceived while Dr. Valeria Di Cola was working as a fixed term Research Fellow at the University of Roma Tre, Department of Humanities (co-funded by Lazio Region for a satellite project of PRIN 2017 on Public Archaeology), where she had researched on creating links between the scientific knowledge and the local community base at Ostia and its surroundings, elaborating a specific methodology and practice to be experimented (2021-2023). After, Dr. Di Cola has started a collaboration with the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia for developing activities towards the young communities of the territory, in order to enhance the opportunities offered by the Park within the European Heritage Label. In this frame, thanks to the support of the officer Dr. Marina Lo Blundo, Responsible of the Public Archaeology project, a first experimentation has started with a group of teens from the Scout Group Roma 59 based in Casal Palocco.

agglomerati socialmente differenziati ma contigui (Ostia, Acilia, Axa Casal Palocco ecc.), nella quale non è facile ragionare in termini di "comunità di patrimonio" in senso stretto. Nell'ambito della ricerca sulla metodologia e le tecniche di animazione culturale condotte nell'ambito dell'Archeologia Pubblica, si intende sperimentare il coinvolgimento diretto del variegato pubblico dei residenti dell'area circostante il sito archeologico di Ostia antica, a partire da un progetto pilota che coinvolge un gruppo Scout della zona, in collaborazione con il Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica nell'ambito dell'European Heritage Label. Al metodo didattico più tradizionale, basato sul principio di educare chi ascolta (supponendo un deficit di conoscenza), si preferisce l'approccio dialogico, coinvolgendo la comunità fin dai primi momenti della costruzione dell'attività divulgativa, secondo prassi ampiamente sperimentate in contesti europei e internazionali. Tale nuovo percorso presuppone la disponibilità ad individuare e conoscere il pubblico, ad accettarlo come mediatore, e richiede, pertanto, la costruzione di attività di breve e lunga durata, sia all'interno che all'esterno dell'area archeologica.

Ostia's coast and its hinterland, working in the districts surrounding the archaeological area of Ostia Antica, is a highly urbanized zone with large, socially differentiated but contiguous built-up areas (Ostia, Acilia, Axa Casal Palocco), where it is difficult to apply the concept of a "heritage community". As part of the research conducted on the methodology and techniques of cultural entertainment, in the field of Public Archaeology, the project aims to experiment a direct involvement of the local community, residing in the surrounding of the archaeological site of ancient Ostia, starting from a pilot project with a Scout Group, in collaboration with the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia within the European Heritage Label. The dialogic approach to the public is considered more engaging compared to the traditional method based on the principle of educating the listener (assuming a lack of knowledge), so the aim is to actively involve the residents since the very first moments of the construction of knowledge, starting from their experience of the place, according to practiced widely tested in European and International contexts. This new path requires a willingness to identify and get to know the public, accepted as a mediator, thus devising long-term activities, inside and outside the archaeological area.

> I would consider my work to have been put to good use if I were sure that knowledge of Ostia had been disseminated to all and its importance for Roman studies recognized.
> Guido Calza

1. *Preliminary mindset. The public as protagonist*

Scholarly attention towards the idea of publicly sharing academic knowledge has gained considerable ground in Italy in recent years. As it is well known, the topic made its first appearance in the 1970s. In the United Kingdom, the pioneering studies of Peter Liddle paved the way, placing «community archaeology» at the heart of a true cultural movement; at the same time in

the United States, Charles R. McGimsey began to reflect on the public aspects of archaeology[1].

More recently, as part of the discussion conducted within the International Centre for Cultural & Heritage Studies of the University of Newcastle, questions have been raised about the exact meaning of «community archaeology». The meaning of the expression appears elusive because it has taken on a variety of interpretations all over the world, compounded by the fact that a clarification of the boundaries between «community» and «public» archaeology is needed[2]. To remain with the first definition, the involvement of the community is clearly an expression of the social implications of archaeology's public function. In the English-speaking world, in particular, a peculiar world has sprung up, consisting of groups that bring together people by age and interests to practice archaeology *with* and *for* the local community, with a strong involvement of the latter. Research has revealed that, in addition to the predominant presence of fifty-year-olds (retired or without children) compared to younger people, there is a degree of social selection if membership fees for groups are charged[3], as is in the nature of associations.

Is there a risk of discrimination in the access to knowledge?

In the Italian context, as recently noted, important work has been done in the field of public archaeology, with some projects becoming a useful cultural tool to ensure the very survival of local communities[4]. It should be said that there is less of a tendency to separate the concepts of public and community, since there is widespread agreement on the idea that archaeology is born public; but there is a practical difficulty. Whilst activities to share academic knowledge may be successfully organized in small towns or villages where the «local community» is well defined and identifiable, and the interaction direct, the situation is very different in urban and metropolitan areas. Here the difficulties posed by the dispersive and rarefied nature of contacts between residents and places of culture discourage the development of projects from the

[1] An updated summary is in Volpe 2020, pp. 25-46.

[2] Thomas 2014.

[3] Thomas 2014, pp. 24-25.

[4] Specifically, we could mention the activities organized by the chair of Medieval Archaeology at the Università di Padova, where research groups are involved in concrete mediation among communities, which often ask for help establishing knowledge-building and local heritage enhancement activities in which to participate actively (Brogiolo, Chavarria 2019; Chavarria 2019). Other valuable experiences, which at various levels have engaged with the public to promote scientific research in small towns (e.g. in Ferrara, along the Appian Way in Campania, in Policastro Bussentino, in Catania), are collected in Pallecchi 2017. For an overview on a specific "emotional" approach to Community Archaeology experimented at the archaeological site of Vignale (Tuscany), see Ripanti, Mariotti 2018 and Benetti *et al.* 2022. Finally, particular attention deserves the project led by Past Experience group and Archeodig at Poggio del Molino, where scientific research matches with public engagement, increasing cultural management (from De Tommaso *et al.* 2010 to Megale, Monti 2021).

outset, particularly those of long duration, even though these are more likely than others to achieve concrete results.

In large cities, then, the presence of places (monuments, archaeological sites) considered a strong draw for mass tourism and thus of economic interest has over the years generated a large market for cultural services, which has tended to monopolize the supply and lower the quality. But in terms of educational practice, contact with the cultural mediator or expert, capable in the time available of making a difference to the experience of the individual visitor or the group that they accompany, evidently still remains alive and necessary[5]. However, the time/money ratio regulates the provision of such services, with the result that – in metropolitan contexts with a high tourist density – cultural offerings fall victim to overcrowding.

V.D.C.

2. *The rules of participation*

In which cases, then, can we speak of a participatory learning experience? To start, we need to define what is meant by «participation». Again in the English-speaking world, attention has been focused on the shift from «telling» to «involving» (or consulting) the public, with a focus on the field of operation of archaeology. From an initial model based on educating the listener (assuming a lack of knowledge), a different approach based on learning was developed, then further evolved towards sharing with the public right from the start of the communication activity, in a process of content co-creation in a dialogic dynamic[6]. This seems to show that a more democratic and «horizontal» approach has yielded better results in the context of the «public engagement» process.

Indeed, the public itself is the essence of enhancement, or at least it should be, to the extent of guiding the choices made in the context of knowledge sharing. Before taking any action we should ask ourselves if the public that we intend to acculturate really cares about the issue. The real challenge, then, is to outline the rules for participation.

From the English-language studies mentioned above another point emerges: who is (or should be) called upon to construct the contents and forms of dissem-

[5] The "visitor logs" usually exhibited at the entrance of museums, regularly compiled by visitors and unfortunately never published, are full of such comments. Most recently, attention has been paid to the issue of the scholarly training of professional figures, in addition to licensed tourist guides, charged with cultural mediation as an investment for the better enhancement of cultural heritage: Ingoglia 2021.

[6] Moussouri 2014, pp. 13-14, with specific bibliography.

ination, and with what tools. In the museum field it was found that, at least initially, cultural institutions organized themselves as best they could, working on «what works», in other words counting on the abilities of their various collaborators and thus organizing activities that did not actually satisfy expectations.

All of this is already familiar to experts in the art of managerial «storytelling», which has become a genuine instrument of control (of staff, production and revenue streams). Indeed, the effectiveness of a well-structured story is expressed when the story remains fixed in the mind of the listener, and this generally occurs because the emotions come into play. The positive interaction between the listener's emotional world, the subject of the narrative and the context demonstrate how crucial the skillful involvement of the audience is and how necessary the targeted construction of the content[7]. In large companies, the creation of a success story hinges entirely on anecdotes (stories), because exchanging stories seems to be one of the ways «to make one's vision of the world understandable and therefore to share it»[8].

Embracing Di Blasio's pioneering reflection on «storytelling» in a museum context and on the seven principles that should guide its development, we see that the sense of discovery is the fuse capable of igniting enthusiasm, encouraging the involvement of the participants[9]. We believe this may be even more true in an archaeological site.

From company storytelling to museum storytelling, there are necessary steps to be taken, as the contexts and objectives of communication differ. However, an aspect common to both seems to be the careful choice of both the methods and tools of help in constructing a story with the characteristics of a success story[10]. That is, of course, if the aim is to communicate quality contents in the hope that they will not only be understood by the public, but also appreciated and further disseminated.

V.D.C.

3. *Outside the fences: the local area and its social structure*

Compared to small towns or large cities, the situation for the archaeological site of Ostia is different again. Located about 4 km from the coast and sur-

[7] Salmon 2008, esp. pp. 46-47.

[8] Salmon 2008, p. 47, quoting Thierry Boudès, professor at the École Supérieure de Commerce in Paris.

[9] The Di Blasio's research, aimed in particular at involving a public of children, was undertaken in the early 1980s for an exhibition on the Vikings at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Di Blasio, Di Blasio 1983).

[10] See the experiences gathered in Dal Maso 2018.

rounded by a series of villages and built-up areas that have gradually occupied the agricultural landscape between the Tiber and the sea, the ancient town of Ostia covers about 33 hectares. With a view to constructing a learning experience protocol based on interaction with the public, it is useful to trace, at least broadly, a framework of the reference context in which we will be working.

The cultural and social makeup of the Ostia area and its immediate hinterland are extremely varied. A territorial macro-analysis shows that the area adjacent to the site, historically characterized by agricultural settlements, has been progressively swallowed up by built-up areas of medium and low quality, especially in the area running down to the coast and stretching from the Idroscalo and the new port up to Torvaianica. The situation is similar in the villages scattered between the Rome-Lido railway, the Canale della Lingua and the major communication routes between the capital and the coast (Via del Mare, via Cristoforo Colombo).

Most of the latter originated as temporary settlements for displaced people after the war and are still characterized by economic and cultural depression (Dragona, Dragoncello, San Giorgio etc.). Moving further south, along the Canale della Lingua, the situation changes at Casal Palocco, a district originating as a project by some well-known architects (Adalberto Libera, Ugo Luccichenti, Mario Paniconi, Giulio Pediconi, Giuseppe Vaccaro) in collaboration with the urban planning office of the Società Immobiliare Sociale between 1961 and 1975, aimed at the middle class and inspired by the American experience of Aldo Samaritani and Emilio Pifferi of SOGENE[11]. The area was, and still is, known as the "Green Planet" for the presence of large green spaces alternating with blocks of detached houses and large low residential buildings, provided with all the essential services of city life but at a safe distance from the urban chaos, including the largest drive-in cinema in Europe (now decommissioned). The situation is similar in the AXA district (Agricola costruzioni società per azioni, later the Associazione consortile società per azioni), built in the 1960s to host the middle and upper-middle classes in an environment built on a «human scale», with a wealth of green spaces and equipped with all the essential services.

This urban and economic diversity is matched by a differing distribution, in terms of quality and the difficulty of interacting with the community, of primary and secondary schools.

Since the 1980s attempts have been made to manage this socially complex situation by Agesci (Association of Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts), grouping together neighbourhoods between the Tiber, the coast and the area immediately inland with the aim of bringing together the inhabitants of these

[11] Razeto 2015; see also the website created by Sapienza University: <http://www.archidiap.com/opera/quartiere-casalpalocco/>, 28.03.2024.

districts in a community of intentions and actions, engaging young people aged 6 to 20 in collective activities aimed at character-building and group co-existence, working to overcome social inequalities[12]. There are also numerous recreational clubs operating in the area, in the form, for example, of Cultural Associations, whose activities are focused on the study of nature (Castel Fusano pine forest, Portus nature reserve, etc.), of the residential districts through photography, of the local area through exploration guided by archaeologists and experts; various residents associations work to safeguard the decorum and functionality of the neighbourhoods in which they live.

Based on the picture outlined above, although briefly, it is clear that the social community of reference is heterogeneous. How many of these worlds should a scientific dissemination project come into contact with if it is to be defined as 'participatory'?

V.D.C.

4. *Making community at ancient Ostia: our start*

For many of these groups, regardless of their cultural background, the ruins of Ostia are a feature of their mental landscape that is still present and alive, perhaps much more so than for the residents of Rome who grew up inside the ring of railways surrounding the city[13]. In principle, Ostia Antica "belong" to the coastal area, at least in the sense of visual familiarity, thanks in part to the fact that up to the 1990s the various much freer and more unhindered ways of accessing the archaeological area fostered a direct and immediate – but not necessarily respectful – relationship with the vestiges of the Roman city. Although today the concept of protection is understood differently, it must be acknowledged that something has changed in the dialogue between citizens/communities and archaeological remains, that is, between the custodians of local memory and part of the material fragments of that memory. Indeed, it is not just the ruins of the Roman era, but the entire environmental context that many of the residents still alive today have seen changing and modifying over their lifetime.

The point of view of those living in the "suburbs" of Ostia, in the strip between the coast and the edges of the city of Rome, in the territory of the X

[12] Interesting interaction is currently promoted, for instance, by the Department of Archaeology of University of Cambridge with the Derbyshire Scouts upon a common project of cultural education through the involvement of young people in archaeological activities (Di Cola 2022).

[13] In this sense, the direct experience gained by the writer as president of a cultural association rooted in Casal Palocco, represents a constant opportunity to deepen the point of view of the people residing in the coastal area.

District (formerly the XIII District) is an interesting one. This became clear during the referendum proposal advanced in 1989 for the establishment of a Municipality of Ostia. With 200,000 inhabitants and covering over 15,000 hectares this would have become one of the most populous municipalities in Lazio. The residents of Casal Palocco rejected the idea outright, fearing that they would become a suburb of Ostia: better at that point to be a suburb of Rome[14].

It is precisely on the basis of lost memory that we could start to reconstruct a process of understanding, sharing and transmission of the history of the ancient port of Rome. Starting from the hopes expressed by the Newcastle research group (above), the aim is to involve the various members of the community in the hinterland of Ostia in a process of «public consulting», i.e. in the co-construction of knowledge, starting from the assumption, which cannot be taken for granted, that the public likes the proposed contents and/or the ways in which they are delivered. Such a process would be difficult to implement fully in the presence of mass tourism, at least in the initial experimentation phase. However, taking advantage of the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, an initial experiment could be started at this point to accompany the citizen body along that necessary path of recovery and re-appropriation of its cultural spaces. In this sense, research bodies, through the researchers active in the field, would act as social connectors by disseminating knowledge, accompanying the community on a path of shared learning potentially capable of becoming an instrument of emancipation.

Fortunately, the research project has been luckily experimented for the first time with a little but promising group of youngsters (aged 14-15), involved not just as students or sons/daughters visiting the park, but as part of the Scouts local community, well known to be organized, opened to play and actively join adventures, focused on the respect of the environment and usually available for experiences of collaboration with the local institutions. The big value in this group is the total and happy participation, as the program of public archaeology activities has been inserted in the year-based educational project that every Scout group must fulfill within his yearly life.

This specific kind of interlocutors had represented an excellent choice in terms of experimental training, besides it has also highlighted the good intuition of choosing an organization that is deeply rooted in the territory with a special connection to the other hundreds of groups in Rome (and in the entire country[15]).

In the following paragraphs a brief summary of the European Public Archaeology frame and the details of the project experienced is given, as a starter

[14] Razeto 2015, p. 264.
[15] Di Cola 2022.

of a hopefully long and solid relationship between archaeology and heritage, community and researchers.

V.D.C.

5. The "Public Archaeology in Ancient Ostia" project at the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia: a pilot experience

Since 2020, when it was awarded the European Heritage Label, the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia has developed a series of Public Archaeology activities. Previously, with the realization of educational activities for families[16] and public lectures on archaeology and legality issues open to the local population, the Park looked to local stakeholders with the intention of positioning itself as a cultural garrison immersed in the social fabric. The acquisition of the European Heritage Label[17] made it possible to become part of a network of sites (currently 60 throughout the European Union) and to access specific calls for funding.

It was one of these calls, won in 2022, [18] that gave the Park the opportunity to put into praxis a public archaeology program aimed at two particular audiences: new residents, that is, people from ethnic and linguistic minority communities, and scout groups. Here we present the part of the project related to the involvement of scout groups. The project took place between the fall of 2022 and early 2023, consisted of a series of meetings that ended with a theatrical performance in the Roman theater of ancient Ostia, during which the participants dealt with the different topics addressed during the workshop training meetings. [19]

Ostia Antica was the gateway to Rome for men and women from all over the Mediterranean. The site is relevant for its vocation to multiculturalism, civil coexistence and integration: a place of circulation of goods, of different cultures and religions that coexisted in an empire to the point to be considered

[16] The project "Navigating the Territory," carried out in collaboration with Fondazione Benetton in the Archaeological Area of the Ports of Claudius and Trajan was aimed at children and youth and families and offered a wide range of workshops and experiential visit programs of both archaeological and naturalistic nature.

[17] The European Heritage Label is an action of the Council of Europe for the enhancement of the common European heritage with a view to disseminating to the European citizenry, especially the younger generation, the values of European-ness common to the EU member states, of which the cultural sites that are part of the network make themselves pro-motors: Lo Blundo 2021.

[18] Grant Award European Heritage Label Sites - EAC-A05-2021 – BH4788 2021 PMM 2847.

[19] A video was made of the theatrical performance and is available on the youtube channel of the Archaeological Park of Ancient Ostia: <https://youtu.be/nxq3nJaTw3k?si=XnZWp2faabbesqCr>, 28.03.2024.

a predecessor of today's Europe. This is the European relevance of the site and this is the start point of this project.

The Archeological Area of Ostia Antica received the EHL award in 2020 with a sustainable project focused on transmitting the knowledge of Ostia Antica to the new generations, the local audience and the international community. In particular, emphasis was placed on the international character that was relevant in the ancient city during the Roman Empire. Within the didactic project, enhancement and communication activities, as well as the way of approaching the Park itself towards all types of audience, through the use of the English language on the website, on the social networks and on the panels inside the archeological area.

Ostia Antica was the "Gateway to Rome" open to welcoming people, goods and ideas from all over the Mediterranean and the ancient world. A crossroads of people and things, a naturally multicultural place frequented by the most diverse ethnic groups and religions. A single place where people from all over the Roman Empire met.

Together with the great port of imperial Rome, connected to it, named *Portus*, Ostia constituted the largest commercial and international traffic hub of antiquity. Today, as then, it is Fiumicino International Airport, 7 km from Ostia and adjacent to the ancient *Portus*, that plays the role of international hub. A vocation to international traffic that the territory has had for about 2000 years. A story that is important to transmit and tell, first of all to the local communities living in this area. The pandemic has shown us how important it is to start from local communities, to build a bond with those who live in Ostia Antica and in the surrounding neighborhoods, to ensure that the local people are an active part and can become ambassadors of the territorial cultural heritage.

The interest of the project[20] is aimed precisely at developing the themes of multiculturalism and international circulation, working on two levels: a level aimed to young local people who are already part of a specific community, the one of the Scouts, in order to disseminate among the new generations the sense of exchange, travel, hospitality and multiculturalism; a second level, on the other hand, is aimed to the ethnic and linguistic minorities in the territory, which we want to involve and make participants in the history of the territory in which they live and work. A territory that we want to belong to everyone.

The project is configured as a Public Archeology experience.

It took place on-site, i.e. in the archaeological area of Ostia Antica. A videomaker documented the activity, he created an audiovisual product that is both

[20] The Grant Award 2022-funded Project was a pilot project; a continuation of the project is planned for 2023 with other funds, so it should be considered *in fieri*.

a storytelling of the activities and an emotional one, in which the audience are the protagonists.[21]

The project aimed to involve the Scout groups of the area (associations that have existed since the 1980s, with a solid tradition of associations and experience behind them) through the organization of experiential activities in which children are protagonists and actors: the adolescents themselves would embody the figure of the cultural mediator in the family and in their aggregation group; on the other hand, it aimed to involve the ethnic and linguistic minorities that gravitate to the area through the formation of cultural mediators who will act as a link between the Park and the ethnic and linguistic minority groups that will join.

The common overall objective was therefore to give the tools to know and make known the historical richness of the territory and to show what Ostia represented in antiquity: the gateway to Rome, a multiethnic and multicultural city, a place of meeting and exchange of people, cultures, ideas, goods, objects and religions.

The main goals of the project are:

1. Being promoters of a public archeology project.
2. Encouraging people, in particular young people, to engage with Europe's cultural heritage and to reinforce a sense of belonging to the European common space.
3. Improving the way in which the European dimensions for our EHL site are embedded in the everyday activities carried out by the Park but also promoting the European narrative of our EHL site at an international level in the occasion of European events, panels, conferences and days.
4. Creating a cohesive community that shares ideas and knowledge about European history, archaeology, culture and heritage, with particular reference to the history of the Mediterranean.
5. Using this project as a case history to contribute to debate in Public Archaeology.

M.L.B.

6. *Project focus: topics, approaches and activity in detail*

Group identity and preliminary strategy

During the activity, the group involved was formed by 6 people, plus a couple of adults group leaders. The young participants were aged between 14-15

[21] This video, filmed by the videomaker Diego Di Nardo, is available on the Youtube channel of the Archaeological Park of Ostia antica: <https://youtu.be/C0nWG8mrU4w?si=M8aNyZ3CFg222fiP>, 28.03.2024.

and some of them were diversely affected by personal difficulties (in health/behaviour/relation).

The little group involved belonged to the Rover section of the Scout education program: they are going through their teens, manifesting from the beginning a strong enthusiasm mixed with all the typical fears of the adolescents. To get them involved, Dr. Di Cola had joined some preliminary meetings with the Group Leader Unit, in order to present the project on behalf of the Archaeological Park, for discussing with the leaders about topics, goals, methods and schedule of the activities. This has represented a crucial step in the process, since the involvement of youngsters under the supervision of adults, that are following a specific educational progress still working on group experiences, brought the entire proposal on a serious and long-term perspective.

To this preliminary step has then followed the setting of a calendar with appointments at the Archaeological Park.

Topic, approach and development

In this first edition, due to some difficulties and late advise, the Scouts had joined a single focus on Religion in ancient Rome, which has anyway opened a lot of "windows" out of the secure walls of their community.

The main activity was focused on tracing the historical main religious trends in ancient times, where the young Scouts have attended the activity together with the «language immigrants», equally involved in the Project[22]. This meeting of people of different ages, belonging to the same territory although coming from diverse origins, sitting around the same table to learn some new "stories" about Religion in ancient times (having a solid Catholic background) surrounded by the ruins of ancient Ostia has been impressive in itself.

The first part of the activity has been more "scholarly based", similar to a lesson delivered to the audience to give some necessary historical coordinates and geographic reference to start with. The questions were numerous and the curiosity was possibly the main factor that has characterize the entire session. A good results has been the opportunity to catch (not entirely) the attention of the youngsters, usually not exactly easy to conform to the general sound. But the frame – being immersed into the Area of Four Republican Temples – has played the main role in rising emotions and feelings about history. Making archaeology *in* the ruins of *that* past we wished to transmit, was the key concept. Looking at the reactions of the young Scouts, they felt intrigued by the situation they where learning history in.

[22] The historical focus has been conducted by Dr. Franco Tella. For further details, see paragraph 5, above.

The approach, hence, was strongly archaeological, in order to put the participants straight in touch with the material evidence, as part of the History they were called to deal with. Moving to the second part of the activity, walls and foundations were invested of the role of "speakers", in order to push the group "touching" some examples of religion and cults in Republican and Imperial Ostia. The activities had implied the analysis of the remains of the four temples preserved along the *Decumanus*, with a special focus on the only one that has a less uncertain interpretation, the temple of *Venus*. The young participants dealt with the ruins of the podium and the cult room of the temple; the read the inscription mentioning *Venus* located in the cult room; finally they analyzed the evidence of frequentation of the sacred area overtime, supported by Dr. Valeria Di Cola, expert of archaeology of buildings.

The experience has led to a turning point when the group of youngsters started to mimic the cult of Venus, pretending to be followers of the Goddess. They had felt the instinct of interpreting with gestures and poses the subject. This reaction had been the signal we were waiting for form the guys, as we dint want to force any process. But their spontaneous interpretation of the Goddess' sacred world meant that they had accepted to be engaged in the activity. Hence, we moved to the third step: *active archaeology*. We launched the idea of writing a script for a little theatrical representation of the topic they were discussing. Of course, our final goal has always been performing archaeology at the theater of ancient Ostia, as the perfect location for this Project. But we were not sure of the enthusiasm of the participants about acting in front of their relatives.

Fortunately, working with the Scouts has implies that they are already trained for joining interpretation, although not based on archaeological matters. We then started working on the script, Dr. Di Cola has traced the outline of a story to be detailed with the help of the young Scouts and their leaders, and the process has been rich in ideas and suggestions from the very beginning:

1. Main goal: tracing the story of two cults in Ostia, an explicit one, as the cult of Venus (documented all over the roman world through a plenty of sources and artifacts), and a secret one, that of Mithras (differently, mysteric and generally unknown). Once again, the topic has been chosen in order to highlight the peculiar *ostiensis* context.
2. Strategy: brainstorming with the group to create the story, according to the roles the youngsters wanted to play and the historical challenges we were providing. Some of them have preferred to work remaining in their safe area (opting for few words to memorize, secondary roles to play), others had bravely chosen to be speakers of the entire story. The choice was then left to the guys in a sort of self responsibility step.
3. Outcome: the plot has been built up. Two groups of priests bumped into each other while rushing along the *Decumanus*. One is the group of *Ve-*

nus' followers, the other is the group of Mithras'. Every group was supposed to explain the audience the peculiar aspects of each cult: buildings, rituals, experience, rules. So the dialogues were constructed in order to highlight the opposite nature of the Venus and Mithras' cults. The Scouts had so made their costumes as much philologic as possible, under the supervision of one of the group leaders, with a MA in Humanities.

4. Interpretation: As a conclusive step of this first experience, the Scoutes had interpreted in the theater of ancient Ostia the plot they had written. While they were interpreting the historical contents for the audience (their parents, relatives, friends and tourists) they were actually learning a little but archaeological based story about religion in ancient Ostia.

V.D.C.

7. *Conclusion and future perspectives*

In these preliminary project of community archaeology based in the archaeological site of Ostia Antica, a new process for involving the public has been started to genuinely work towards building awareness and acceptance of cultural heritage as a resource.

Indeed, by stressing the beneficial effect that contact with antiquity always has and still can have on an individual or a group, we could even go so far as to re-establish the development of a collective perception of heritage based on the equation «archaeology = well-being and heritage = benefit». Provided, however, that the scale is a local one and the structure of the proposals available, starting from the many and varied cultural offering of the Archaeological Park, takes the form of a network, so that the various entities can contribute to creating a mosaic of experiences for the enhancement of cultural heritage.

To summarize, in conclusion, the above reflection intends to call attention to some fixed points that should be observed in creating a dissemination activity in the future, still in collaboration with the public, as a legacy for the use of the local community:

1. strengthening of the community-site relationship
2. deepening of the public-site relationship
3. better definition of the professional figure of the archaeologist/researcher/disseminator
4. greater cohesion between institutions of learning and users
5. definition of the protocol and its replicability

Upstream of all this is the need to invest in educating (in this case, the word the right one) the civic community on the nature of the profession of the

archaeologist, illustrating the meaning of the search for antiquity in a contemporary key to improve how the profession is perceived: as a link between collective memory and its use, in its universal social utility[23].

In this light, the first application of the theory explained in the "Public Archaeology at ancient Ostia" project, has opened up a frontier of dialogue with the young members of the local community. The involvement of a group of teens through the frame of the National Scouts organization (AGESCI) has represented a valid option, for the following reasons: the age of the girls and boys involved suites perfectly the current European call to action towards the youngsters; the belonging to an organization, like AGESCI, is a pro in terms of building up a long term program of activities, in the name of continuity and development of a conscience on the cultural heritage, since the teens; the short topographic distance between the Archaeological Park and the Scouts Groups of the coastal territory, seems to signify a shorter distance between the youngsters and the Cultural Heritage of their home land. This reaches a lot of importance in terms of building up a relationship – based on the engagement in archaeological activities, with both funny and serious moments – between the young generations and their territory.

Looking at the future, we hope this project will become a permanent activity that the Archaeological Park of ancient Ostia, through the support of professional archaeologists and researchers. And the most valuable reason to proceed comes from the feedback given by the Scout groups: they reported that it has been an unforgettable experience, where they felt involved into the world of history and archaeology and they couldn't wait to come back again to ancient Ostia. For now, the activities with the Scouts has restarted in November 2023 and they are still ongoing.

V.D.C., M.L.B.

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