

Experience archaeology or bringing archaeology to a wider public

Elisabeth MONAMY

Acheomuse – Archäologie mit allen Sinnen erleben

Abstract: When asked what I do or where I work, my answer is: “I am a Near Eastern archaeologist!” Most people nod and smile, but I realize that they have no idea what I am talking about. While teaching at University I was shocked to find out that students had only a few notions about how present archaeology and especially Near Eastern themes are still pregnant in our daily life. From there on, I decided to make a change: to bring (Near Eastern) archaeology to a wider public, to reach the “normal” population and make my audience realize that antique topics, not only known from the Bible, are still prevalent. To achieve my goal, I chose to combine a relaxed and friendly atmosphere with bringing new information, food, drinks and knowledge. I started my own business and organize antique cooking classes! I started with Roman recipes, and people actually were very curious about the daily life in the Roman Empire. Every cooking evening is of great joy for the participants: they have fun cooking Roman recipes, something new to them, and they enjoy learning a little more about this ancient civilization. It was such a success that I decided to extend the cooking classes to Babylonian cuisine. During the conference I presented this innovative idea of archaeology for Austrian circumstances. Although what I offer may not appear very scientific, it is a huge job of publicity for archaeology: people talk about it, learn something new and realise that past civilisations are still around us in our daily lives.

Keywords: experience, archaeology, antique cooking habits, public relations

Introduction

Although archaeology and history surround our daily lives (names of shops or markets – “Pharao Blumen” in the 10th district in Vienna or brands name – “Nike”, “Gauloises”, “Lego” or ancient symbols as tattoos– eye of providence or images in advertisement – Obelix used by the bakery Wienerroither or just a place filling text – “lore ipsum...”), many people do not understand or know what archaeologists really do! Many stereotypes (excavating dinosaurs with a toothbrush, being Indiana Jones...) are nevertheless prevailing about their work and their results. Movies and cartoons still use outdated theories, making it very difficult for the viewers and/or readers to understand that the ideas are old fashioned and inaccurate. Expecting these stereotypes to evolve thanks to new technologies is not realistic. One cannot expect the wide audience to change their perceptions. People want to have a first-hand experience, they want to learn and try something new while having fun and trying on a new adventure. Bringing archaeological topics to a wider audience should combine scientific knowledge and entertainment. Archaeologists and Scientifics have to go towards the people and make the first step. Therefore, the main topic of this paper is how to get archaeological or historical topics to be known and / or perceived by a larger public.

Most museums or excavated sites offer a large panoply of activities for adults and children like flint stone carving, sewing clothes, archery, scavenger hunt, gladiator fights, medieval feasts with knight’s tournaments

and knight's diner etc. But one major inconvenience is their geographical location. Most of the big historical sites are located outside cities, in the countryside, and not accessible through public transportation systems (for example Carnuntum next to Vienna, Magdalensberg in Carinthia, the Dino-Zoo in Charbonnière-Les-Sapins/France or Kaltenberg/Germany) and therefore difficult to reach for many people. One needs a car to get there: but in Vienna, a majority of the population does not want or cannot afford a car (a very efficient public transport system within the city makes also for a strong argument against owning a vehicle), and is therefore unable to visit the historical sites.

A second disadvantage of these sites is their office hours and their calendar of events. The majority offers activities as punctual events during a limited time period: from late spring to late summer (April - October). It is totally understandable that it is not profitable to open the whole year when the weather makes it uncomfortable to sit outside for a longer time. It is hard to find a place where you can enjoy insights in antique periods the year round.

And last, the knowledge transfer is based on fun and entertainment at the expense of scientific correctness. An example could be the clothes from the Middle Ages. Although a lot is known about clothing from this period, one can still find mixtures the complete attire of a lady except from the shoes typically worn by serfs.: a hat from a lady with a dress or shoes from peasants. While it is understandable to stick to clichés and meet the audience's expectations, it would be more appropriate for these site to first and foremost base their exhibitions on true, correct and scientifically approved data.

Archeomuse

One year ago, I took the decision to combine enjoyable time and learning something new, having a nice and interesting evening with new information, food, drinks and knowledge. Ancient cooking classes offered in Austria by Archeomuse are an innovative way to enable a larger audience to experience one domain of archaeology: the daily life and more specifically food in ancient cultures. These ancient cooking classes take place where the clients are: in down town areas or surrounding districts, but also in different locations in Vienna like cooking schools or adult education centers or else in Carinthia (in a bookstore specialised on cooking books) and focus on cooking and eating habits from Stone age to the beginning of the Middle Ages in Europe, Mediterranean area, ancient Near East and Egypt. Furthermore, these antique cooking workshops are on demand or at least once a month the year round.

Thanks to finds from archaeological excavations, texts, ceramics, images (drawings, mosaics, sculpture, and so on), a lot is known about kings and their families, laws, architecture and religions. Clothing is also identified to a lower extend. Unfortunately, food is merely seen as sacrifice, grave goods or medicine. Although we can admit what kind of animals were hunted and / or breed, what kind of plants were cultivated, we hardly know anything about eating habits. "When, how and what was eaten? What combination did they have? What were the costs of a meal?" are still open questions. No cooking books remain from Mesopotamia or ancient Egypt, for example. Some recipes from Babylonia have been found on clay tablets in cuneiform writing. A Roman recipes collection called "De re coquinaria" from Marcus Gavius Apicius is said to be the oldest cooking book. It is imaginable that recipes were not written down and were only passed orally from one person to another. All these recipes still unknown from a wider audience are the focus of Archeomuse The main concern of

Archeomuse is to have a specific glimpse in the daily life of antique civilisations: a glance into antique cooking pots! What did all these great but mainly forgotten civilisations eat? An antique cooking workshop is a time travel into antique kitchens and a way to experience archaeology. This different approach to archaeology and history should enable more people to learn about ancient civilisations in a comfortable and entertaining way.

Ancient cooking workshop

The evenings begin with a historic and geographic introduction while appetizers from this period are offered. Besides, eating habits as well as trading routes are explained and shown on maps. Then, the recipes are presented in their original language and in German translation. The participants are asked to read and think about how to cook these meals without any further information. It is meant to be experimental at some point. But of course before they start cooking we discuss the quantities of the ingredients and especially of the spices, where they came from and how they were used. Then, the participants are asked to cook the meals in order to have a complete menu at the end, mostly after one hour or one and a half hours of cooking. At the end of the evening, all enjoy the meal and talk about the new tastes. The discussions revolve around the new experiences, the unusual mixtures of ingredients and spices.

Before leaving, the participants are asked to fill a feedback form in order to find out what their expectations were and what reasons made them participate in these antique cooking workshops! The results are encouraging and very positive! 47% come to learn something new, be it history or be it culinary art. 20% came to learn something new about cooking and eating habits in antique civilisations! It shows that the transfer of knowledge about ancient cultures is a reason to participate in these ancient cooking workshops. Of course this new idea and the cooking challenge play an important role, too, in the attendance.

A particular antique cooking workshop is offered to Latin classes in schools in Vienna and Lower Austria: reading, translating and analysing Roman recipes from Apicius' cooking book with pupils! Pupils learn Latin in school, visit one or two sites around Vienna but do not know much about Roman civilisation. The Roman eating and cooking habits take centre stage in these specific workshops. After the theoretical part, the pupils will cook the recipes together and finally taste the new old meals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that the antique cooking workshops are a new approach in Vienna to give insight into ancient civilisations. This original knowledge transfer is attracting historian enthusiasts looking for a new way to learn something about past civilisations as well as amateur cooks looking for new cooking challenges. Giving access to antique civilisations through a new perspective is possible. Archaeology and public relations with the help of scientific entertainment is attracting and people are interested in learning. Presenting the work of an archaeologist and the cultural heritage in urban areas like here in Vienna is indeed available to a wider audience.

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Figures



Fig. 1 – Roman cooking workshop, Klagenfurt 2015



Fig. 2 – Sala Cattabia from Apicius

Expectations

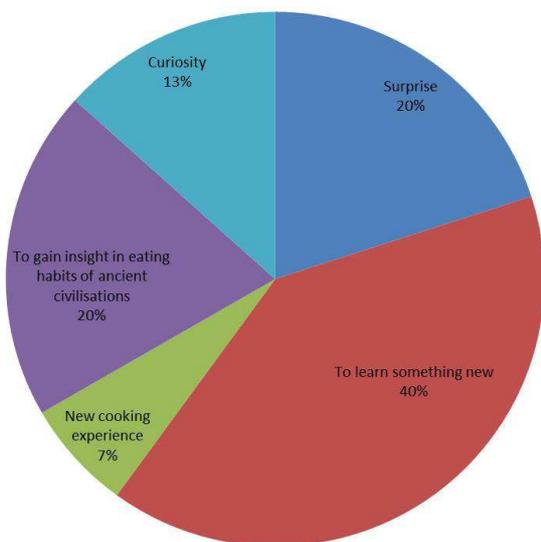


Fig. 3 – Expectations