

Who needs citizen participation?

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In recent years it has happened quite often that laymen are not only interested in history and archaeology, learning about new discoveries and new theories about lost civilisations, but also seek direct contact with archaeologists and their work. This may be very popular with the general public and in different media, but how do archaeologists react? How can archaeologists prepare themselves for the fact that all at once not only colleagues and students dig along but also laymen who have no idea of the work and the subject? Or maybe they have seen a documentary on TV or online and believe they now know enough to participate in a dig. Prejudices from both sides, laymen are just “treasure hunters” and archaeologists are arrogant scientists who do not want to share their knowledge, make the comprehension for the other quite difficult.

In addition to the extra preparations that are now necessary for the archaeologist and thus take up more precious time, the excavation management on site must take the time during the excavation to familiarize themselves with laymen. This first and most important fact is the factor time. Time is something archaeologists do not have! Time will be needed for organisational purposes or bureaucracy. And later on site archaeologists have to take the time to teach during a “crash course” the archaeological methods and excavation technologies to laypeople. Is it at all possible to acquire in a very short time (excavation can take from some weeks up to months) the knowledge, which specialists have laboriously acquired during many years of experience and study? It is not only about the excavations methods, how to dig and handle the finds on site, but also to understand their meanings in a context and register all the information required from a database. An object alone provides only a fraction of information if it is not considered in its surrounding. Especially during rescue excavations, one has hardly time to explain what has to be done when digger and construction worker breathe down archaeologist’s necks. Recently, there have been companies that have specialized in excavation participations for laymen. They introduce the interested parties to the methods and provide the necessary background knowledge. This can be a great relief for excavation supervisors, who have to invest less time for laymen. Laymen are now looked after by archaeologists who support them in every respect during the excavation. There is also a new proficiency pass which enables to evaluate ones competences in digging.



Fig. 1. (© E. Monamy)

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Most of the time laymen interested in archaeology and especially in excavation or participating in any other way are not young people. They are people who have their (well paid) jobs and want to live their passion for history and archaeology during their holidays and free moments. These people have time and already a lot of life experience. They heard and read a lot of popular knowledge and believe to know everything about one subject. Accordingly, it can happen that they will not accept a younger archaeologist in charge who will tell them how to work. The author's own experience shows that elderly people have difficulties accepting younger specialists or experts. They are not considered as experienced or professional enough.

Last but not least, why should laymen dig along? Can archaeologists ask a medical doctor to assist and have a look during a vital operation just because they feel like learning something new about medicine? Can archaeologist spend their holidays as a policeman chasing burglars with a gun around a town just because they saw a very fascinating documentary on TV?

What can it be that laypeople bring with them in order not to burden the work of archaeologists?

In this short impulse lecture, the author will show that citizen participation in archaeology in the digital age is not possible without reservations. These reservations will be listed and explained to show that it is not as easy to image citizen participation in archaeology even in our digital era as many seem to believe.

References

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