

# Working with archaeological finds – the “Initiative Seniorarchäologie”

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## Abstract:

The discussion about public participation in archaeology tends to deal – more or less fervently – with one topic: fieldwork. Participation mostly consists of joining excavation teams and surveying with a metal detector. Admittedly: Most laymen are very interested in excavations, moreover, to them it seems to be the very core, the sole aim of Archaeology. Well, we all know this view is both correct and amiss. Sadly this rather one-sided, restricted standpoint neglects a good 50 percent of the work archaeologists carry out day-to-day: namely working with finds, research and communicating results via different media, from printed publications and exhibitions to blogs and videos. In truth, there are a lot of possibilities to engage interested citizens, to – metaphorically speaking – dig into archaeological chores, other than fieldwork. Are those approaches really less popular among laymen or are they simply not known well enough, due to lack of media coverage? After all, the cliché of a proper archaeologist is still focused on the image of the tough guy/girl exploring the unknown and – above all – finding exciting, that is precious, objects. So let's step back from the obvious pitfalls of cinematographically imbued, deceiving stereotypes and consider other options, because this is exactly where initiatives like “Seniorarchäologie” fit in perfectly.

## The “Initiative Seniorarchäologie” – original concept and subsequent changes

Founded in 1995, the programme initially had two objectives: To support Vienna's urban archaeologists and to provide interested citizens with hands-on access to their archaeological heritage. In the beginning washing finds (pottery and animal bones) and writing find numbers onto these very objects were the two main activities offered. In addition participants were encouraged to search for matching pieces of pottery.

These were both important tasks, which should not be underestimated, not least because they demand deft hands and a considerable level of concentration. For example, each mistake with a find number has well-known, far reaching consequences for the entire material and – in a worst case scenario – for the processing of the excavation as a whole. Important as those steps may be – it is possible to execute them without any further knowledge of the objects in question, archaeological/historical periods and social patterns. But there was room for improvement.

As a matter of fact structural changes and – to be more specific – the certainty, that when colleagues retire the jobs are cut, forced our hands. Even with a dwindling staff and the total loss of our conservation/restoration personnel the basic work had (and has) to be accomplished. Databases must be tended to, preliminary photos need to be taken, finds require classification considering a variety of aspects and matching pottery pieces cry out to be reunited. Strengthening public participation and filling the gaps in our workforce with laymen seemed the obvious choice. Fortunately a “new generation” of interested citizens showed considerable interest in learning and proper archaeological training. Our new helpers were eager to address themselves to the more challenging tasks of archaeological work behind the scenes.



*Fig. 1. Interested citizens at work (© Stadtarchäologie Wien).*

## Replacement archaeologists?

Is it a new trend, to replace paid archaeologists with volunteering layman? Definitely not, most would insist vehemently, but: The lady doth protest too much, methinks. To be fair, this question poses a delicate problem that needs to be discussed as well, but before we do so, it is necessary to specify the assistance volunteers are able to offer and the training/tutors needed to allow them to succeed.

Working for the “Initiative Seniorarchäologie” still comprises washing and inscribing artefacts, but it does not stop there. Other parts of the work process – e. g. describing form and function, tempering and the firing atmosphere of pottery finds, dating the objects, feeding the information into a database and taking photos – are now also accomplished with the assistance of volunteers. Furthermore photos need to be organized and numbered according to special guidelines stipulated by Wien Museum. Due to the lack of a proper conservation/restoration department, well trained and highly motivated laymen close the gap, offering time and skill in exchange for knowledge. The times of looking for matching pottery pieces without the opportunity to acquire further knowledge are gone for good. Participants rightfully expect each and every bit of information, historical detail and storyline the archaeologist is able to provide.

## Each trainee needs a good teacher

This brings us to the point of the qualified teacher. As a matter of fact the training received in our programme reaches more or less basic “Proseminar” level. In the end at least some of the laymen tend to be better trained than many a student dropping by. Short lectures, visiting excavations and museums as well as the critical discussion of exhibitions complete the programme.



*Fig. 2. Visiting an excavation (© Stadtarchäologie Wien).*

For the archaeologist it is hard work to maintain that status – make no mistake about that. But beware of false ambition! Flexible access to information is still of the essence: From a certain level onwards the volunteering person has to be free to decide how much information he/she wants to receive.

To walk this fine line and provide the level of tuition required, archaeologists in charge need to be experienced finds specialists possessing a rather comprehensive general knowledge of material culture. And there’s the rub. Current trends in University education with regard to archaeology don’t bode well for the future. A declining interest to produce well trained finds-experts can be noticed in all archaeological disciplines. Pottery in particular has become rather unpopular. This is a paradox. Working with pottery finds is still an easily accessible and valid approach to get an overall as well as a detailed impression of phases, social strata, import and export etc. on one or more excavation sites.

## **Public meets underground – Archaeologists as the good guys**

Archaeology's bad public reputation as a time delay factor for construction work of any kind does still linger, but has lost a lot of its fervour. As a matter of fact in many a case it is just the other way round. As archaeologists are hell bent on pleasing and appeasing each and every party involved in big building projects, it is sometimes the construction work itself that becomes unpopular among citizens. The archaeological support on the other hand, comprising excavation work, finds-analysis and background stories fattened up by researching written sources, becomes a way to identify with the project, or at least to gaze at it more benevolently. Archaeological discoveries are no longer considered an obstacle, but are perceived as an opportunity to learn and a gateway to the past of one's own neighbourhood. This is exactly how we try to position archaeology in the recently begun subway project U2/U5, the city government of Vienna is right now busy to implement.

## **Last but not least: It's "good practice" we are talking about.**

The aspect of lifelong learning is quite popular these days. A few years ago, most studies about volunteers in archaeology were primarily interested in the support provided for the institution. Nowadays the focus lies on the tutorial aspect. The question is no longer: "What von your volunteers do for you?" but : "How much training and improvement are you offering to interested citizens?" Last Years "good practice" study of the "Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit und Konsumentenschutz" awarded the Initiative for its potential to promote lifelong learning.

## **Conclusion as well as basis for discussion:**

First: There are more ways to engage in archaeological work, than just fieldwork.

Second: Initiatives like "Seniorarchäologie" have proven beyond any doubt, that working with finds can be very attractive for interested citizens.

Third: These programmes are no job killer. A proper number of archaeologists are needed to provide the essential training and support, to make the effort worth the while.

Fourth: University strategies concerning the education and training of archaeologists are interwoven with any effort to educate the average interested layman. Only a well-trained archaeologist can become a good and responsible teacher.

## **References**

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