

Review of: Volpe, G. (2020). *Archeologia Pubblica. Metodi, tecniche, esperienze*. Roma: Carocci. 258 pages. ISBN 978-88-430-9988-7.

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The book “*Archeologia Pubblica. Metodi, tecniche, esperienze*”, written by Giuliano Volpe, deals with the definition of Public Archaeology in the Italian context, highlighting it as a promising discipline and as a chance to rethink the role of on-field archaeologists. This book is the first of its kind, drawing an interesting array of conclusions about the growing experiences of public archaeology in Italy in the last decades.

The six main chapters are preceded by a general introduction and followed by a conclusion dedicated to the future perspectives of the discipline in Italy. The introduction rather clearly outlines the general Italian context and the questions that the author tries to answer in the following chapters. *Archeologia Pubblica* displays several contradictions: on the one hand, it has recently reached widespread popularity – to the point of potentially turning into an empty trend; on the other hand, it is still fundamentally unknown in its definition and features, to the public at large and more importantly to the Italian academia – leading to a wide gap between the growing presence of *Archeologia Pubblica* as an on-field reality and its full acknowledgment as a discipline and research subject. Another point of discussion is the distance between archaeology and society in general, historically aggravated by the restriction of volunteers’ participation, and amplified by policies which focus on preservation and safeguard but discourage research and enhancement. This, as Volpe underlines, could be solved by developing integrated plans which combine preservation demands with environmental, economic, and social policies in an active and participatory perspective, also aware of Faro Convention instances.

After a brief discussion in the first half of the first chapter concerning the origins of the field in the USA and in the UK, the author outlines several crucial turning points in the Italian history of the discipline. He explains that the international debate has been mainly received in Italy by medieval archaeologists, who promoted a few key initiatives leading to the development of the notion of *Archeologia Pubblica* as the Italian interpretation of Public Archaeology (VANNINI ET AL., 2014). More specifically, the First Italian Congress of Public Archaeology was the result of the joined

efforts of the Chair of Medieval Archaeology of the University of Florence, a collaboration which took its first steps in 2007 during the planning of the international exhibition *From Petra to Shawback. Archaeology of a Frontier* (VANNINI & NUCCIOTTI, 2009). The exhibition, which took place in Florence in 2009, was the first one in the country planned explicitly to produce a Public Archaeology experience and was designed above all to guarantee accessibility for target audiences, which were then monitored in order to analyse the public and to measure the cultural and economic impact of the event on the city (BONACCHI, 2011). This experience established a first set of practices and encouraged the regional workshop *Archeologia Pubblica in Toscana. Un progetto e una proposta* (VANNINI, 2011), which set the stage for the First Congress and offered a first definition of *Archeologia Pubblica* as “the study and the strengthening of the role that archaeology, as a historical discipline, and the interpretation and management of archaeological resources play or might play to the benefit of society and its development” (BONACCHI, 2011, 103 f.). A year later, a more balanced debate was set during the conference *Public Archaeology in a time of crisis*, which elaborated on the relationship between archaeology and society as part of a consideration on the role of archaeological heritage in the current economic crisis (BONACCHI, 2013). Thanks to the above-mentioned events, the increasing attention given to the discipline in the last decade has allowed the development of new studies about communication and presentation of archaeological heritage, leading the way to a series of initiatives such as the book *Archeostorie* and then *Archeostorie: Journal of Public Archaeology*, the first academic journal on the topic. What the author underlines very clearly is that the idea of “archaeology as social commitment” has been a part of the Italian experience for decades, a spirit perfectly embodied, among others, by Italian medieval archaeologist Riccardo Francovich. What is still missing on the Italian scene, though, is a clear and well-established theoretical framework and methodology, in a field of “a hundred flowers” (ZANINI, 2018, 176) without real consistency on the national territory.

Chapters 2 to 5 get to the heart of the topic, discussing the four main areas of interest that define *Archeologia Pubblica*: (2) communication, (3) the professional profile of both the archaeologist and the volunteers, (4) sustainable economic development, and (5) public participation.

Communication is certainly a crucial point in Public Archaeology, but a common mistake is to

wholly identify the field with it. Important steps have been taken in the last decade, but the relationship between communication and archaeologists, as its main actors, is still being defined. Surely “being plain and clear is an ethical choice” (p. 58), but today a majority of archaeological and museum communication in Italy is still characterised by a measure of obscurity in reporting to and displaying for the general public. The reasons of doing so seem to be a “narcissism” on the part of the professionals, which use the technical language learned and established as favoured in the university context as a way of asserting their power (p. 58). After the exhibition of the famous Bronzi di Riace in Florence in 1980, the gap in knowledge of the public needs and intentions became apparent, as the overwhelming success of the exhibition overlapped with a complete failure by the professionals in predicting it. Still today, there has been little research focusing on the understanding of the public of archaeology in Italy (Bonacchi & Ripanti; in Europe: NEARCH), even though it is a crucial step in studying specific communication plans. The progress of the last decades in developing digital tools and extending the use of social media, has of course luckily led to new strategies of exploitation in the context of museum structuring and public engagement, with examples of undeniable success such as the Salinas Museum, in Palermo (pp. 72-74).

But who are the professionals in the field of cultural heritage in Italy? The traditional archaeologist has changed through the years and, for sure, Public Archaeology now gives us the chance to rethink more organically about his role in contemporary society. After the extraordinary increase of applications in Archaeology graduate programmes of the last decade, their number has decreased, mainly due to the limited employment opportunities and a not-yet-defined professional position. While the number of archaeologists and professionals in the field of cultural heritage at large has been consistent since the 1970s, the general employment situation remains hard to assess considering that, still, no official bar for the profession exists. The conflict seems clear: on the one hand the profession has changed throughout the last decades, mainly because of the technological progress influencing their expertise (though a similarly informed update of university programmes has not yet followed), but on the other professional opportunities have remained restricted and poorly regulated (p. 85). The author then briefly outlines the working profile of the archaeologist, dealing with the weaknesses of the

Italian job scene, and pointing out two key points that should be considered in defining a new path. First, while in the past the public sector (universities, the Ministry, research centres) represented the main recipient of the new archaeologists, today the highest percentage of professionals are self-employed; extending the job market, giving the chance of hiring third sector societies and associations (not to be confused with volunteering) to regions and municipalities, would open up new opportunities of employment. Second, the absence of an official bar of the profession leaves the majority of self-employed archaeologists to work on building sites as construction workers, with generally no rights on publication of the results of the excavation, a prerogative of the Superintendent’s officer. This kind of work is quite often precarious, underpaid and usually not provided on a long-term basis (p. 87).

Given the current status quo in Italy, at the economic centre of the profession stands a problematic dichotomy. On the one hand cultural heritage is not traditionally considered (especially in a political environment) as economically productive; on the other, the misconception is still alive that any attempt to build a good enhancement project which involves an economic element, would mean a commodification of cultural heritage. The solution lies in integrating the two sides of the discourse: a thorough cost-benefit evaluation, especially in terms of tourism attractiveness, on one side; and an informed management of cultural heritage aimed at producing a positive impact on its territory and community on the other. Through the discussion of two case studies from Naples, the author concludes that a new strategy of territorial development, with the cultural element at its core, might also fill the void created by the decline of the secondary sector at the end of the past century. In this light, the author suggests shifting the focus from well-established “cultural attractions” to local heritage, which is recognised as essential by its community, and coupling this shift with the development of specifically designed enhancement strategies. In this light, crowdsourcing is identified as a powerful tool, able to combine public participation and crowdfunding. An example is the web-based platform Micropast (BONACCHI, 2014, 21 f.) which aims at analysing how archaeological online communities are created and grow and the reasons that motivate people to participate. Micropast returns in an aggregated and open form its crowdsourced archaeological data and hosts a community forum in which to discuss ideas, develop new research projects and crowdfund.

The book as such represents the first monograph on the topic of Archeologia Pubblica. Far from the intention of writing a “manual”, the author succeeds though in giving a consistent overview of the discipline in Italy, starting with the history of the first experiences of Archeologia Pubblica of Italian medieval archaeologists, and arriving at its first definitions as a discipline. By doing so, he offers a clear outset for an excursus of the main experiences on the field. The structure is strong and the bibliography consistent, a result of the author’s long experience and his thorough review of the existing public archaeology projects on the national territory. In conclusion, despite a tradition of self-centred research by Italian universities, Archeologia Pubblica appears to have a long history in Italy, at least in the practice of “archaeology for the public”. What is still missing is for a clear theoretical framework to be recognized in Italian academia and in the archaeological curriculum as a fundamental methodology for all archaeologists willing to interpret their role in society at the highest level. The challenge, as the author says, is to make the past alive and accessible to everyone.

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