

Boosting public participation in archaeology using test-pit excavations in Austria

Bernhard ARNOLD, Verein zur Erhaltung und Erforschung der Burg Ried am Riederberg, Austria

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Situation in Austria

Public participation in archaeology and citizen science are topics gaining increased attention in recent years – also in Austria. Despite ratification of FARO convention (Hebert et al., 2019) by the Austrian government in 2015 not much changed for the public. Only a very limited number of archaeological projects are offering participation in fieldwork and research for citizens. As a direct result of FARO subscription ArchaeoPublica, an organisation for public participation in archaeology (ArchaeoPublica, 2019), was founded by professional archaeologists and members of the public in 2015. Other kinds of projects are for instance senior courses from Urban Archaeology Vienna targeting archaeological finds processing and recording and educational activities for undergraduate students in schools.

These few possibilities for direct participation are not a result of lacking interest of the public as the results of a recent survey pointed out (Karl, 2016): About 74 % of Austrians indicate a moderate, high or very high interest in archaeology. 85 % of these show a significant interest in archaeology and 58 % would participate in actual archaeological activities. On the other hand, causes for the limited options in active participation can be found in the so-called ivory-tower-mentality and in missing or low understanding of science and research in the Austrian population (Peter, 2019).

Community archaeology in the UK

A promising model for boosting the number of participants could be found in the well-established British community archaeology. The extensive tried and tested method of test-pit excavations applied in the research of currently occupied rural settlements offers an uncomplicated way in involving participants of any age. The idea for standardized evaluation pits arose from investigation work on medieval settlements. Previously research was focused mostly on deserted villages. But this type of settlement is quite a special one in comparison to the thousands of still occupied historic settlements today. Investigating currently occupied settlements is only possible by integrating the citizens in the research process. The active participation of the local population enables scientific researchers to enter private garden and backyards.

Test-pits are standardized 1-meter square evaluation trenches. By excavating in virtual 10 cm contexts (also known as spits) the removed soil is sieved and all finds are recorded. Dating the found pottery fragments help to document different periods of domestic activities at a particular site. By repeating this procedure many times in the surrounding occupied area, a map of settlement activities over different periods can be created. With the yielded information it is possible to postulate new theories about the impact of influences on the historic population, like epidemics or natural disasters, not only for a single settlement but also for vast regions.

In a short time, citizens and students are able to learn a lot about research work in archaeology. Normally a test-pit campaign can be dug in two days, preferable on Weekends. The excavation process of every pit is stopped either by reaching a depth of one meter, reaching natural ground, reaching a complex archaeological feature or when the available time is running short. Eventually all opened trenches are backfilled, and the removed turf is put back in place.

Test-pit excavation projects are an important part of public participation in archaeology in the United Kingdom (Lewis, 2014). In June 2003 volunteers dug one thousand test-pits for Time Team's Big Dig program on Channel 4. Since 2005 the University of Cambridge involved about several thousand students and local residents in east England digging more than 2000 test-pits in ten years. In 2019 the EU-funded Community Archaeology in Rural Environments – Meeting Social Challenges (CARE-MSoC) project started test-pit excavations in four European countries, involving the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Czech Republic and Poland (Lewis et al., 2018).



Fig. 1. Work at Riseley 2014 Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA). Photo by Access Cambridge Archaeology (<https://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/news/riseley-2014-higher-education-field-academy-hefa>) is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

The educational background of projects like the Higher Educational Field Academy (HEFA) or the Independent Learning Archaeology Field School (ILAFS) led by University of Cambridge focuses in particular on regions with low educational levels. Archaeology functions as a low-threshold instrument to give participants an insight into scientific research work and to encourage students to get interested in studying on a university after secondary school.

Getting started in Austria

A possible way to get started with projects of this kind in Austria would be to involve university and academic institutions and encourage them to set up independent research projects focusing on test-pit campaigns. Another way would be to join an EU-funded scheme like CARE-MSoC. A funded university project could cover a region of up to several boroughs and involve up to thousand people of many local communities. On the other side municipalities, museums or public associations could start local research projects to cover few settlements. One or more municipalities (up to a borough) could involve dozens or up to hundred people of local communities. A range of such small-scale projects could join up with an umbrella organization to share scientific data and social experiences creating a national or international network of community archaeology projects. Whatever type of project can be established, the number of people and students that can be reached is a promising motivation to at least give it a try.



Fig. 2. Work at Long Melford 2014 Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA). Photo by Access Cambridge Archaeology (<https://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/news/long-melford-2014-higher-education-field-academy-hefa>) is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).

Social benefits

Last but not least, there are a number of social benefits that affect community test-pit projects: different kinds of people have been getting together in local communities, working together and having a good time. Children, students and non-academics get in touch with scientific research work and gain experiences in teamwork. They are taking responsibility by executing all stages of required work: first they measure out and mark the test-pit square followed by careful removal of the turf. The next step includes the excavation work and the documentation of every context on record sheets as well as washing and sorting finds. At last, they backfill the trench and carefully put back the turf on the ground to restore the lawn.

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