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EXCAVA(C)TION IN VIGNALE **Archaeology on stage, archaeology on the Web**

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Abstract

As an orchestra or a rock star, archaeologists have their audience too. This paper wants to highlight an integrated approach between fieldwork, its account and its dissemination to the public in different ways, including social media. This potential integration has come to life in the 2011 excavation of the Roman mansio of Vignale (Italy) and it has been named "Excava(c)tion". It doesn't mean a new way of digging but another way of approaching the excavation, an approach integrated toward and with the public, both on site and on the social Web. "Excava(c)tion" conceives the site as a stage and digging as a performance, through a continuous dialogue between archaeologists and the public. Archaeologists share their work in the form of guided tours (live, theatrical-like performances), communicative diaries and videos (edited, motion-picture performances) and on a blog (www.uominioceseavignale.it). They receive back comments and oral accounts from the local community about the main themes of common interest. "Excava(c)tion" means engagement both of archaeologists and the public in the pursuit of a global multivocality during archaeological excavation.

Keywords

Excava(c)tion, Vignale, performance, multivocality, archaeologist

1. **Excava(c)tion: from wordplay to communication strategy**

Vignale is an archaeological site on the coast of Tuscany, opposite the Elba Island, near the well-known ancient city of Populonia. Vignale, whose ancient name is unknown, was a Roman farm in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, evolved into a larger *villa* in the 1st century BC, and later became a *mansio* on the major Roman road Aurelia/Aemilia Scauri from the 1st to the 5th century AD. A team from the University of Siena has been carrying out excavation campaigns since 2004, in collaboration with the Direzione Regionale per i Beni Culturali e Paesaggistici della Toscana. Both authors have been part of the team since 2007. The latest report is that of Giorgi and Zanini (Forthcoming).

Early in 2011, when it was time for students to start applying for fieldwork, we decided to promote the next excavation campaign in two ways. The first one was the traditional flyer with photographs of archaeologists and ancient remains, a short text highlighting the main archaeological features and research topics, e-mail addresses and our website URL (<http://www.uominiecoseavignale.it/>). The second one was something new, more like a marketing campaign. The 'marketing campaign' was focused around "Excava(c)tion", and included two steps to attract students. During the first week, several flyers were placed on faculty blackboards, featuring only 'fancy' slogans such as "*Excava(c)tion*", "*Much more than an excavation*" and its Italian version "*È molto più di uno scavo*", without any further indication or visual resemblance to our well-known graphic identity, such as the project logo and the almost-standard fonts and layout. Our aim was to make people curious and create expectations for something that was going to happen. The following week, the same slogans were put again on display together with QR-Codes pointing to a promotional video on YouTube. QR-Codes are 2-dimensional barcodes, capable of storing several hundred characters and typically used to provide direct links to web pages and apps for smartphone users, saving them from typing potentially long URLs and, thus, avoiding mistakes. All smartphones can be easily equipped with a QR-Code reader application, and the adoption of QR-Code based on advertising is increasing. Judging from our personal experience, at least half of the students potentially interested in joining the excavation had a smartphone capable of reading a QR-Code and following a link to the YouTube video. Based on our three-year experience in archaeological video-making (described in more detail below), we had assembled a one-minute video with fast-paced music and scenes from fieldwork and daily life at the excavation house, very much in line with current popular TV advertising.

The video was then uploaded to our YouTube account as a hidden item, that is to say an item visible only to those users who know the full URL (in this case: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGLMXjkZsfU>), but neither listed on our account page nor available among the search results. The idea was to bring about prospective participants to see this video, but only if they were curious enough to solve our riddle.

Flyers that promote excavation campaigns are usually quite serious. They convey a conventional and stereotyped image of activities taking place at an excavation, focusing on the archaeological features that make it unique. On the contrary, the 'riddle flyers' explicitly bring communication to the foreground, and prospective students may want to choose the medium over the message, or at least that was what we had been expecting.

We were expecting around one hundred views of the video, based on the number of flyers and on that of both undergraduate and graduate students in our department. Unfortunately, our expectations proved to be completely wrong, and the video only had 7 views in one week after the 'launch'. Adding a human-readable URL to the flyers did not bring any improvement. We had to come to the conclusion that either our students were not curious enough, or the communication strategy we adopted was flawed. We eventually analysed our strategy, and identified some weaknesses that we have been trying to avoid since. These weaknesses have mostly to do with QR-Codes, that are not as well-known as we were hoping: most smartphone owners either do not know or do not care about QR-Codes in general. Secondly, there is *too much* advertising on faculty blackboards, and undergraduates are well known for missing events if they are not solicited via other means such as e-mail. Furthermore, all students tend to concentrate on notices about lectures, class timetable changes and house renting, and even those who engage regularly in social media do not think of them as an appropriate way to approach their (early) academic life, that is to say they rather keep their social life separate from their academic life.

Apparently, we had been too optimistic about the engagement of our students with social media technology, largely misled by the assumption that our department has a reputation for being among the most advanced in Italy in the field of archaeological computing, applied informatics and social media (see on this last point Valenti and Zanini 2011; Massi 2011).

2. **Excava(c)tion – Archaeology as performance**

The second and more relevant stage of “Excava(c)tion” story takes place during the 2011 Vignale fieldwork season. The delusion of the communication strategy described above did not affect our ideas for the new field season, because there were no common features between the two.

What we did in Vignale was neither another riddle nor a new way of digging, but another way of approaching the excavation. An integrated approach is used with the public both on site and on the social Web. “Excava(c)tion” conceives the site as a stage and digging as a performance, through a continuous dialogue between archaeologists and the public, supported by different types of performance. First of all, archaeologists gave live performances: they acted at the site as if they were at the theatre, in order to involve a wider public. In this way, they were able to make more understandable a very poorly preserved site where the repeated ploughing carried out for centuries has damaged in an irreparable way the ruins of the site. Walls are not preserved in height, floors are cut, the site as a whole is not easily understandable. For these reasons, such shows are needed to involve people and make the work of archaeologists more clear. Performances are also a good way to catch the attention of children and engage them with the site. For example, archaeologists showed the arrival of horses and horsemen at the *mansio* (Picture 1), and tried to reproduce the arches of a kiln (Picture 2). Performances and live excavation experiences are not simple, especially for children, but we concluded that it was the most promising way of involvement, thus, we focused on that. Secondly, there was the communication performance. It was neither a guided tour, nor a scheduled tour. Instead, when people visited the site and asked for some information, like all tourists do, archaeologists shared something about the work they were doing as a work in progress, and invited them to visit the site again in the following weeks. This is a way of involving the local community in fieldwork, encouraging locals to follow it. Laracuate (2012) has stated that this kind of live performances cannot have a proper follow-up because it ends when the experience ends. Therefore, Laracuate has proposed the use of social media in order to offer an enduring understanding and involvement. In Vignale, interaction with the so called “free-choice learners” (Laracuate 2012: 85) was achieved by showing our work and answering questions on site. Blogs and social media are useful as secondary tools.



Picture 1: Archaeologists show the arrival of horses and horsemen at the mansio.



Picture 2: Archaeologists try to reproduce the arches of a kiln.

Beyond live performances, "Excava(c)tion" also included pre-recorded performances: one of these was a motion picture. We produced a series called "Una giornata sullo scavo" (A day on the excavation, available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/UominieCoseaVignale/>). Through this series we wanted to show what the various groups were doing on the site. In this case, the site was always the acting stage but, in order to use video as our medium, there was a post-production work, and therefore a pre-recorded broadcast. As in the previous excavation seasons, in 2011 we recorded a docudrama too, "Morte a Vignale" (Death in Vignale) (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7fa5uBQRGI>), with the aim of enhancing our communication strategy in a narrative way. The so-called "democratization of technology" permitted us to experiment and develop new ways of communicating through video (Tringham, Ashley Lopez 2001).

The third and last type of performance took place on the Web, and more precisely on our blog (<http://www.uominiecoseavignale.it/>). Instead of using the blog to tell a standardised story of our daily work, all students were in turn asked to write a blog post about their activity, as part of their duties. The outcome is a perhaps obvious example of multivocality. Older members of the team tend to think in terms of things to do, achievements based on their own objectives, extremely detailed stratigraphic problems, excavation strategies and so on. Newcomers have instead a hard time trying to articulate their interests with respect to the general aim of the project, but feel excitement for being able to perform archaeological tasks on their own ("I have cleaned this surface and it is now clear that the deposit of orange soil is on top of the others"), or for special and not-so-special finds ("my first Roman coin!", "the burial of a woman... let's give her a name"), and in general they think the most important thing they can do is to learn how to do something. Strategies, finds, learning, excitement, achievements: all of these matter to those who like and love our work, and there is no reason to present only half of it. Using our blog was a successful experiment of narrative in archaeology, and a way for students to learn by doing and obtain a basic education about public archaeology, that is entirely missing from current educational programs of Italian universities (a detailed account is made by Zuanni in this same issue of AP).

3. **Archaeologists as main characters**

In “Excava(c)tion” the site is the acting stage while the main characters are the archaeologists, who perform. The archaeologists of Vignale must engage with a local audience, composed mainly of inhabitants of the nearby village Riotorto and local scholars interested in archaeology. Every year this community of people becomes larger and more diverse, and therefore we must interact with all community members in order to find the best way to involve each and every one of them with our work.

Why is the role of the archaeologists so important? As they are those who actually dig the site, no one knows the site better than the archaeologists and, at the moment of the excavation, no one but them could tell what they are doing. In that moment, it is their responsibility to tell the public what is under their feet. In order to be successful, a variety of performances is needed and archaeologists have to be prepared for several types of activity, as we described above.

In general, an archaeological excavation is a difficult place to carry out activities that are typical in outreach projects, especially when children are involved: after all, an excavation is first and foremost a working site, with strict requirements in terms of health and safety procedures (Italian law 81/2008) that are far more complex than those applying to a ‘still’ archaeological site. From our experience, this is a big difference, but it is not necessarily negative: when the excavation is on, the public is not primarily interested in learning something about the history of the site, but rather wants to take part in our project as it happens. A similar process in a museum environment is described by Rodriguez Santana and Correa Guimerá (2011).

Amongst the archaeologists of Vignale, those who actively play “Excava(c)tion” know the general information about what we are collectively doing: the archaeology of the site and the history of archaeological research, the main themes of interest and some logistic information (i.e. the period of the excavation season). At the same time, those archaeologists have to keep in mind what they are digging, in order to choose the best performance in each moment. The archaeological site of Vignale is situated along the “Aurelia”, a major local road, so many people stop and ask for information during the day. Of course, in this situation, it is rather difficult to perform live because this would require the frequent interruption of work. Therefore, we concentrate more on the communication performance, leaving the live one for scheduled visits or guided tours.

With regard to the “Excava(c)tion” communication performance, this is a very good way to involve visitors without interrupting the work which is presented as a show to them. The local audience is engaged and has an opportunity to talk with the archaeologists: it is not a guided tour and the archaeologists do not have a prepared speech but decide what to talk about depending on the questions and the interests of the audience. During the 2011 campaign, the youngest students were also accompanying visitors. This was possible because they knew what to say and how, as they had been watching and listening to older staff members doing the same. The fact that a lot of visitors came to the site alone or in small groups allowed students to practise their communication skills in relative calm. More importantly, they understood the necessity of communication in archaeology.

Moreover, the communication performance requires no interruptions of work for all but one person. The other archaeologists at work are part of the ‘show’ the public expects to see. That is why they do not have to interrupt their work to make the view of the remains ‘clear’: archaeologists are part of the site as much as the remains. Thus, every area where archaeologists work can be considered as a sort of micro-acting stage. After asking about and listening to some general information about the site, visitors usually ask about the work of archaeologists in the different areas of the site. Generally, if possible, visitors should be accompanied by an archaeologist working in the specific area they are visiting. This way, visitors can get better information and listen to multiple voices while archaeologists, relieving each other, can carry on their work.

Regarding the “Excava(c)tion” pre-recorded performances, archaeologists are the main characters in these ones too. In the series “Una giornata sullo scavo”, the archaeologists are those who speak in front of the camera and, in the same clip, those who are digging in the field. The title of the series (i.e., A day on the excavation) focuses not so much on what we have found in Vignale but rather on the daily work of the archaeologists. The local community plays a rather active part in supporting our research and the most interested people often want to learn more about how we work. In the series, which is made of three short clips, we tried to give people an idea about the main activities that kept us busy during this excavation season.

Finally, archaeologists are the main characters of the docudrama “Morte a Vignale”: both in the scenes recorded on site, where they act as themselves, and in the re-enacted scenes, in which they embody

plausible men and women who would dwell in Vignale in the Roman period (for some earlier examples of re-enactment, see Appleby 2005). Our experience in docudrama started in order to diversify and broaden our communication strategy, but the double role gives the archaeologists another advantage: by talking about what they are digging, advancing hypotheses and bringing them to life with the re-enactment, they help structure the knowledge process (Zanini, Ripanti 2012).

4. **From broadcasting to engagement**

The communication strategy we envisaged for the 2011 excavation campaign in Vignale was different from that of previous years while maintaining some elements that we deemed positive, based on a thorough review of the ideas and issues summarised above. Two elements did not change between 2010 and 2011. The most important is our position, at the border of a major local road (only a few meters away, literally – the archaeological site actually spans on both sides of the road). This gives us a great visibility, although mainly from car and truck drivers who are unable to stop. The second element, that was envisaged to take advantage of the road traffic, is a big plastic banner featuring our general research project name, “Uomini e cose a Vignale” (a similar experiment in Jeppson 2012). What we did differently in 2011 was in first place to increase accessibility to the site, marking the outer, safe parts more clearly. Similarly, the website was changed from a one-way, broadcasting type (with long texts, possibly too boring for the public) to a two-way communication channel, adopting the now widespread practice of using excavation blogs to show the daily activity, enabling comments and questions. This change was relatively easy thanks to the WordPress platform that we were already using. The YouTube channel is tightly linked to the website and allowed us to publish rich accounts of our work alongside the text and photographs. Blogs need updates to keep visitors happy, and authors need visitors to be happy.

As archaeologists, it is visitors to the *archaeological* site and not to the *web* site that make us happy. Therefore, our two main objectives were to tell a wide range of stories and have people come to the site and see our work. The blog became a step in the ‘discovery path’ leading visitors to Vignale, rather than being a destination on its own. Literally thousands of cars travel across Vignale every day. Some drivers see us working and, after seven years, almost every local knows that we are archaeologists digging a Roman villa. Still, they want to know more and look for us on the Web, to obtain updates, more detailed information

and, most importantly, confirmations of their ideas about the site itself (some think it spans further to the South on the grounds of 19th century accounts, while others unsurprisingly look for mysteries).

Looking at the web statistics collected during the campaign, it was immediately clear that a lot of our web visitors were looking for us using the project name as a keyword: in other words, the basic element that helped visitors look for more information was the huge plastic banner. Very few used "*vignale scavi*" or "*riotorto scavi archeologici*" as keywords (Riotorto is the modern village just a few hundred meters away from the site); most of them typed "*uomini e cose a vignale*", exactly as it is written on the banner. Unlike the QR-Codes described above, the banner perfectly fulfils its role in facilitating contact because it provides a clear and immediate link to our work. Moreover, we meet expectations by making the website easily found under the same wording. Those who type "*uomini e cose a vignale*" in the search box have a desire to know more about what we find and how it relates to their knowledge of the site, but what they find is not just a summary of our archaeological research; we offer them not only what they were expecting (e.g., accounts of the site history over the eight centuries of its life, the Roman remains, the finds, etc.) but also stories from everyday life at the site and a direct invitation to come and visit us. Some of them find the time to actually come. Unfortunately, the site is closed on weekends, and that is probably a huge barrier for those who do not have time during the week. Nevertheless, this last year visitor numbers have risen significantly and we made a special effort to accommodate school group visits for all levels of education.

5. **Conclusions**

"Excava(c)tion" is a relatively new approach to fieldwork that wants archaeologists to take care of the public not in scheduled hours of the day but constantly, all day long, with a wide range of performances. This role of communicator is not reserved to specialists or supervisors, but rather it is open to the undergraduates who dig the site. This is feasible because what we tell is not "what we have found" but "what we are doing", favouring narration over interpretation. All archaeologists, from the site director to the youngest archaeologist, are involved; everyone contributes in their own way to enact "what they are doing" with words or live performances, both of which are processes through which we reconstruct narratives of the past (Joyce 2002: 81). In order for it to work, this approach requires an adaptation to the context: in Vignale we take advantage of the road. Other

sites should use other unique features to attract their own public. From the archaeologists' point of view, the change brought by "Excava(c)tion" has been quite remarkable. There is a notable difference between narrating the site to large groups of people and narrating it to small ones during fieldwork hours. Younger archaeologists need to pay more attention to what they are doing because they have to tell visitors about it. Thus, they also need to learn the main themes of research at the site. Moreover, for most of the younger archaeologists it was their first experience with a blog about an ongoing archaeological fieldwork and, while it was not easy for them initially, the division in groups clearly allowed them to form and exchange their opinions in a more direct way.

Why did we do all this? The wider local community of Vignale and Riotorto did not give us any money in order to carry out the excavation, but we received invaluable subsidies such as accommodation and food, and also general logistic help from the local authorities, every year since 2005. The community expects something back from us; in the first place, they expect the restitution of a piece of ancient life in their native landscape, fulfilled by the excavation. However, as archaeologists, we also have the equally important responsibility of communicating what we are doing, and we decided to undertake this responsibility with Excava(c)tion. We tried to structure and develop a sort of "Democratic model" (Holtorf 2007: 157-161) where the community offers something and asks for something back in an osmotic way. The archaeologists responded to the community's requests according to the information available to them but in a more involving and innovative way (i.e., the various performances). However, whenever possible, we avoided a top-down relationship between archaeologists and the public, that is characteristic of the anachronistic "Educational model" (Holtorf 2007: 150-154). On the contrary, Excava(c)tion is about rejecting the distinction between primary research and secondary dissemination, placing the fieldwork and the media produced as a way of mediation and engagement with the public (Shanks 2007: 274), keeping a promise and, eventually, generating trust (Erickson 2011: 50-51).

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