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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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The case of the *Arles Rhône 3* Project: an example of underwater heritage communication

Caterina De Vivo

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Abstract

Underwater archaeological heritage has often been considered invisible by definition: due to its location, communicating this heritage to the public is considered particularly complicated. However, the problems in communicating underwater heritage to the wider society simply make more evident the issues that regard archaeology in general. This work aims to make the Public Archaeology discourse aware of the importance of engaging local communities and visitors in the 'heritage production' process, as well as on the need to adopt more and path-breaking strategies to communicate archaeological heritage to society. The case of the Arles Rhône 3 Project will be used to demonstrate the important goals that can be achieved by using clear and powerful communication strategies in presenting archaeological heritage to the public.

Keywords



Introduction

'Cultural heritage' is a wide term that relates to objects, monuments or works of art inherited from the past, which are specific to a community or a society, and to which a given society attributes a 'cultural value' (Throsby 2010, p. 106). Cultural heritage in general is not the mere transcription of the past, but a selection of it to which we attribute a value (Le Boulanger 2013, p. 11). This means that heritage is not something given, that exists by itself, but it is an achievement. As was recognized by Smith "heritage is therefore ultimately a cultural practice involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and understandings" (Smith 2006, p. 11). The process of 'heritagization' of the past (Sánchez-Carretero 2015, p. 12) is not always easy and sometimes there is a gap between those who, like the archaeologists, decide that something has to be considered as heritage and the wider society; therefore the people does not always perceive what has been institutionalized as heritage.

The problem of making the archaeological heritage meaningful to the wider society, is even more relevant in the case of underwater archaeological heritage that, in most cases, is completely inaccessible to most of the people. In order to describe what underwater heritage is, we have to share the definition given by Forrest who noticed that "underwater cultural heritage is a confined category of 'cultural heritage'" (Forrest 2002, pp. 3-6).

Therefore, the main difference between underwater cultural heritage and cultural heritage in general is not given by a particular meaning or value, but only by the fact that underwater heritage has been partially or totally, periodically or continuously lying underwater (which means below the surface of the sea or of bodies of internal waters). The turning point for the discovery of the underwater environment, and for the development of underwater archaeology, came in the 1940s with the invention of the Self Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (SCUBA) diving system (Bass 2011, p. 5). With the development of the SCUBA diving techniques, from the 1950s, the first underwater archaeological campaigns started to be carried out (Ruppé & Barstad 2002, pp. 3-4).

One of the key issues regarding underwater archaeology is how to make it accessible to the public (Davidde 2004). The work carried out by the team of the Departmental Museum of Arles in Southern France (PACA Region), offers food for thought on the possibility of communicating to the wider society the existence of underwater heritage and of archaeological heritage in general. In fact, as from the 1980s, important archaeological remains were found in the murky and dangerous waters of the Rhone river, near the city of Arles: it was impossible to think about in situ musealization of the site (Kunzig 2014, pp. 92-93). Through the presentation of the case of Arles, this paper aims to investigate the problems pertaining to the communication of archaeological heritage to the wider society.

This paper is the result of a three-year PhD research on issues related to the management of underwater heritage in the Mediterranean context; the data presented were collected through field studies. In order to collect the necessary data, unstructured interviews were carried out with people working in the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles, and surveys were carried out among the citizens of Arles.

The underwater heritage of the city of Arles

The case of Arles represents something quite unique: the presentation to the public of underwater heritage located on a riverbed. Generally speaking, the Southern French city of Arles, located on the bank of the river Rhone, owes its popularity to its heterogeneous heritage, to its relations with the famous Dutch artist Van Gogh, as well as to many arts-connected events, like *Arelate - journées romaines d'Arles* (Arelate - Roman days of Arles); the Arles historical city center is also listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1981.

However, as regards underwater heritage, the river Rhone was fundamental to the development of Arles in ancient times, and it is precisely on the Rhone's bed that the underwater heritage of the city is located. The first objects that literally came from the riverbed were found accidentally; since the 1930s, several fortuitous findings were made by fishermen, or discovered by chance during dredging works (Sintès 2012). In the 1980s the French DRASSM (Department of Underwater Archaeological Research. L'Hour 2012) started a research campaign along the banks of the river in the city of Arles; the research gave important results, and, in particular, a huge garbage dump placed along the river bank, where many archaeological materials from different time periods were found, has been intensely studied (Martinez 2012, pp. 17-18). The quantity of archaeological objects detected on the riverbed during the last twenty years is really impressive. The investigations on the Rhone riverbed continued for more than 20 years, producing important results and providing important data for the reconstruction of the ancient history of Arles (Long 2009). Moreover, in the river many shipwrecks from different time periods were also found (Long 2009, pp. 232-235).



Fig. 1. Arles Rhône 3 wreck Cg13/MdAa/Chaland Arles Rhône 3. ©RemiBenali.

The discovery of the Arles-Rhône 3 wreck in 2004 was particularly important. The wreck was found almost completely covered by the river sediments: by 2005 part of its cargo was already discovered, but the study of the wreck continued until 2011 when, with a very difficult operation, it was removed from the riverbed and cut into ten sections so that it could be restored, processed and then exhibited in the Departmental Museum of Arles (Marlier 2014, pp. 23-33). The boat is a barge, used for navigating on the river, and it is 31 meters long and less than 3 meters wide, a type of Gaul-Roman previously unknown (Marlier 2013, p. 59). Its state of conservation is unique: 90% of its hull and equipment is conserved (Figure 1). Significant findings are a long oar for controlling the barge as well as a 3,70 meter high mast, a dolium and other implements like plates and oil lamps for daily life, as well as the votive coin that was inserted into the barge hull for good luck (Marlier 2013, pp. 59-61). Finally, also the cargo of the barge was found: in fact, at the time when it sank it was transporting a cargo of calcareous stones to the Camargue area. Through the analysis of the wood and of other organic materials, the barge has been dated at the second half of the 1st century AD, and it most probably sank because the river was in spate (Bromblet et al. 2014, pp. 248-258). Due to its incredible state of conservation, in 2010 the barge was declared National Treasure by the French Ministry of Culture (Marlier 2014, p. 309). Of course, none of these archaeological findings are visible in situ, but the archaeological objects found during the first twenty years of investigations, as well as the *Arles-Rhône 3* wreck itself, are visible in the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles.

In April 2014, Sabrine Marlier, the scientific director of the Arles-Rhône 3 project, was interviewed by the author of this paper. Marlier explained that, in order to host the wreck in the Departmental Museum of Arles, in 2013 a new wing of the Museum was inaugurated, from which, interestingly enough, the stretch of the Rhone river where the wreck was found is visible. Together with the wreck are exposed also two scale models; one shows the underwater archaeological excavation of the Arles-Rhône 3 wreck, and the wreck is reproduced as it was found in situ with its cargo, with the archaeologists working on it. The other scale model shows another example of a barge that was used in Roman times for trading, both on the Rhone river and on the sea; the barge is reproduced as it is moving in the direction of the Mouth of the river Rhone.

The display of the Rhone's heritage in the Museum started in 2009, when an exhibition was opened that lasted until January 2011; it was entitled César, le Rhône pour mémoire (Caesar, the Rhone for memory) (Long & Picard 2009). The exhibition was named after a marble bust that was identified as a portrait of Julius Caesar (Figure 2), founder of the Arles colony. It was found in 2007 on the right bank of the river together with other marble statues and architectural fragments: the bust drew the attention of scholars because it could be an early portrait of Caesar, dating to the 1st century BC when he was still alive (Roger 2012, pp. 41-46). Given the importance of the statue, its image was chosen as the symbol of the exhibition on the archaeological findings from the river Rhone, and it was included in all brochures and catalogues. After Arles, in 2012 the exhibition moved to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where, as in Arles, videos were projected showing the difficult work of restoring the archaeological objects once they have been recovered from the river.

After the exhibition, the objects recovered from the river Rhone were hosted in the



Fig. 2. Portrait of Julius Caesar Cg13/©MdAa/Buste attribué à Jules César.

Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles, where, as we already mentioned, a new wing was created. The new section of the Museum, which is 800 sq.m. wide, was built specifically to host the *Arles-Rhône 3* wreck, but now 450 more archaeological objects are displayed there, that allow a better understanding of the archaeological and historical context of the wreck (Sintès 2013, pp. 8-9).

As can be easily imagined, the entire project was extremely costly. During the interview, Marlier recalled that, even if the Arles-Rhône 3 wreck was found in 2004, the decision to take it out of the water was strongly linked to the idea of asking the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) Region to use part of the Marseille 2013 European Capital of Culture event funds to help finance the project, that had a final cost of 9 million euros, 2 million of which were used only for the excavation and recovery of the wreck (Marlier 2014, p. 309). Claude Sintès, the director of the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles, stated that in 2010, when Marseille was officially chosen as the 2013 European Capital of Culture, the local politicians were looking for stimulating cultural projects that would attract and maintain the public's interests to be financed by the 2013 funds. The decision to finance the Arles-Rhône 3 project was certainly influenced by the great success of the 2009 exhibition (Sintès 2013).

During the interview Marlier explained that, because of the great economic investments made in order to carry out the project, it was necessary to inform first the inhabitants of Arles on what was happening. The general feeling of the team working on the project was that, if the idea was to re-launch the image of the city starting from its cultural heritage, it was essential that the inhabitants of the city be aware of the importance of the history and of the reason for such a huge investment.

The involvement of the local community

Since 2008, the Museum Communication Service has been organizing activities to make the inhabitants of Arles aware of the existence of the archaeological underwater heritage, and this not only by making use of the collection of the Museum (Denise 2013, p. 66).

In April 2014 also Fabrice Denise, the Head of the Communication Service of the Departmental Museum of Arles, was interviewed by the author of this paper. As explained by Denise, several activities were organized to attract a wide public and to involve the inhabitants of Arles in the Arles-Rhône 3 project. In fact, the general vision of the Museum is that each time a new discovery or research is carried out by the Museum Research team, the Museum staff immediately starts to plan how to transmit the new research to the public. This is what the Museum has always done with terrestrial archaeology, and for this reason it was applied to the underwater investigations as well. According to Denise, the Departmental Museum of Arles was one of the first in France to have a strong didactic ambition. Denise described the main activities carried out in the Museum in order to promote the underwater heritage:

First of all, as from 2008, each Wednesday, along the bank of the river facing the Trinquetaille neighborhood (close to where the underwater investigations were carried out), seminars were organized to explain to the local population what was happening along the river. Everybody could attend the seminars, and informative panels were used to supplement the explanations of the archaeologists. Some materials recovered from the river were shown, and archaeologists explained to the people how many information they can extract from

one single object. Moreover, during some of these seminars, it was possible to observe the archaeologists at work underwater. In fact, the underwater archaeologist was connected to a video camera that allowed people on the river bank to see exactly what he/she could see. In addition, during these initiatives, the divers wore full face diving masks which allowed them not only to communicate with and listen to the people on the river bank, but also to interact with them. These seminars took place throughout the excavations and came to an end when the *Arles-Rhône 3* wreck was recovered from the riverbed.

- ◆ Another activity that continued also after the wreck had been recovered, is the organization of on boat guided tours along the river. In fact, from 2009 on many short cruises are being organized along the river in the city of Arles by the Museum, to acquaint people with the archaeology and history of the city from the river. Underwater archaeology in general, and specifically the discoveries made on the riverbed are highlighted. Interestingly enough, the cruises organized from 2009 until the opening of the new wing of the Museum, were free of charge.
- In 2011, at the end of the underwater archaeological campaign to recover the wreck of the Arles-Rhône 3, the Museum staff invited all the inhabitants of the Arles neighborhood of Trinquetaille to a party at the Museum. During the evening, videos and documentaries on the work carried out in the Rhone were shown. Since the event was an enormous success, the Museum decided to repeat it every year and called it the Rhône Movie Party. It is a convivial, free of charge event: guided tours are organized to the section of the Museum dedicated to the Rhone, which is open until midnight, as well as cruises on the river by night, exhibitions and documentary projections. The theme of the party is the relationship between humans, and in particular the inhabitants of Arles, and the river Rhone.
- Finally, as a result of all the activities

organized since 2008, in 2014 a participative exhibition was organized in the museum, named Raconte-moi le chaland (Tell me about the barge). Here, creations made by the inhabitants of Arles and related to the Arles-Rhône 3 wreck were exhibited, like drawings produced by schoolchildren, or scale models of the barge and of archaeological contexts recreated with LEGO. The highlight of the exhibition was a parade float that was put up for a public parade in the city of Arles, and that resembled the Arles-Rhône 3 wreck.

These are nothing but the main public activities (without considering the many seminars and conferences) that, as described by Denise, have been organized to involve the inhabitants of Arles in the *Arles-Rhône 3* project, but the Museum organizes similar activities all the time to promote its entire collection. So, just to give an example, in 2015 another participative exhibition was organized to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Museum. The Museum organizes around 500 events per year (Musée Départemental Arles Antique 2013, pp. 46-47).

The reaction of the public

In 2014, a small survey in the city of Arles was carried out by the author of this paper, in order to understand whether or not the inhabitants of Arles knew about the existence of the underwater heritage in the Rhone. 300 people were stopped over a period of 6 days between February and April 2014. People were selected only on the basis of their availability to answer the questions of the survey, which is why it took 6 days to stop 300 people; in fact, Arles is a small town and there are times during the day when there are few people around. Four of these 6 days were working days, the other 2 were Saturdays. As we can see from Chart 1, almost all the people interviewed (93%) knew about the existence of the Rhone's underwater heritage, demonstrating that the advertising and awareness raising campaigns of the Museum probably worked. This result is even more relevant if we consider that,

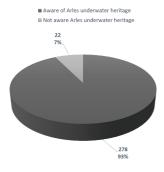


Chart 1. Awareness of the existence of the underwater heritage in Arles.

in 2014, the same survey was carried out in other places in Italy, France and Spain where there have been attempts to make underwater heritage accessible; the case of Arles proved to be the most successful in terms of raising the awareness of the local community (De Vivo 2015).

The success in terms of public activities carried out by the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles to explain to the inhabitants of Arles the *Arles-Rhône 3* project, was described by Denise and Marlier as follows:

- ◆ The seminars along the river Rhone banks: both Denise and Marlier remember the success of the event. They said that an average of 100 people (tourists and inhabitants) participated in the seminar each Wednesday; moreover, some people returned regularly, bringing their own chairs from home. Some of these habitual participants also started to bring with them articles they found in newspapers to show them to the people working on the project, as a sign of appreciation. It was during these seminars that Marlier became aware of the strong tie between the Museum and the citizens.
- Rhône Movie Party: the idea of inviting the inhabitants of Arles to the party was due to the enthusiasm shown during the years of work along the riverbank and during the Wednesday seminars. Denise said that 200 invitations were sent, but 800 people (all inhabitants of Arles) showed up, and the Museum staff did not want to

- send anybody back home. Thanks to this extraordinary success, they decided to repeat the experience every year.
- ◆ Participative exhibition: also this idea was born out of the great success of the two above mentioned initiatives, and, to some extent, it was a way to reward the inhabitants of Arles for the enthusiasm they showed during the entire *Arles-Rhône 3* project. According to Marlier and Denise, many schools also participated in the project, especially some high school classes from both Marseille and Arles, and this motivated individual students to follow the *Arles-Rhône 3* project for four years.

Another way to understand how not only the Arles-Rhône 3 project, but generally the entire Rhone section of the Museum, that opened in 2013, is perceived by the public, is to look at the comments left by visitors on the Tripadvisor website (the site was last retrieved on May 26th 2016). In fact, the Museum is ranked as the first attraction out of 57 in Arles, and it has 701 comments, almost all positive. Moreover, the majority of those who left a comment mentioned the barge wreck, and many considered the Rhone river exhibit as something extraordinary. Several people think that the barge is the most interesting exhibit in the Museum and that the Museum, which is very interesting overall, deserves a visit even iust for the boat.

These data seem to confirm what Denise had affirmed: in the last few years, the number of visitors to the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles increased considerably while, before the year 2000, the visitors to the Museum were just 5% of the tourists in Arles. As Calude Sintès stated during an interview to TPBM - Semaine Provance on February 11th 2015 (Deuff 2015), on the occasion of the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Museum, in 1995 the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles had only 30,000 visitors, while in 2014 they were 153,000, groups of visitors excluded.

Conclusion

If we look at the underwater heritage of Arles in its original context, that is, on the bed of the Rhone river, it is almost completely inaccessible to the general public because the waters of the river are dangerous and uninviting. Therefore, in this case, in order to make underwater heritage accessible to the public there was no other way but to remove it from its original context. It is true that the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage, in article 2.5, states that preservation in situ should be the first option, but this does not mean that preservation in situ has to be the only option; in fact, Rule 1 establishes that other activities can be carried out if authorized by a competent authority (Maarleveld et al. 2013). It is true that the entire project of recovering the barge and exhibiting it in the Museum has been extremely expensive, but this is not the most relevant aspect of the story.

Although this paper focused on underwater heritage, if we think about it, all archaeological heritage is invisible by definition. In fact, one of the best known archaeological methodology manuals says that "archaeology is partly the discovery of the treasure of the past, partly the meticulous work of the scientist analyst, partly exercise of the creative imagination" (Renfrew & Bahn 2000, p. 11). Using a methodology as scientific as possible, archaeology brings back to light witnesses from a hidden past. The main difference between underwater and on land sites is that, once an on land site is brought back to light, the heritage can generally become more accessible to the general public.

The relevant outcome of the Arles case study is the sense of responsibility of the scientific staff of the *Arles-Rhône 3* project towards the local community; they clearly stated that, in order to be successful, the project had to be considered relevant by the inhabitants of the city of Arles, and this was especially important because of the huge amount of public money invested to realize it. In this perspective, the project was perfectly in line with the idea that archaeological heritage belongs to the public and its value should be perceived by the wider

society (Schadla-Hall 2006). This is related to Geertz's definition according to which culture is "[...] an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitude toward life" (Geertz 1973, p. 89). In this sense the museum of Arles achieved its aim of transforming archaeological heritage into a symbol with an intrinsic meaning, a powerful cultural object, where as cultural object we mean "a shared meaning embodied in form" (Griswold 1987, p. 14). The Arles-Rhône 3 wreck became the symbol of the hard work the archaeologists carried out in the polluted waters of the river Rhone, in order to give back to the inhabitants of Arles their history, a history they can be proud of. Of course, extensive information about the past (like river navigation in ancient times) is provided through the ancient objects and the related panels, but the narrative somehow makes history valuable to the people. Moreover, texts are very easy to understand, so that visitors, even if they have no historical or archaeological background, nonetheless they can understand the history.

This fundamental, because general public has difficulty in interpreting archaeological objects; in many cases, when archaeological findings do not have an aesthetic value, they can be considered meaningless by the public (Shanks & Tilley 1992, p. 68). The real act of revealing the underwater heritage is not just aimed at placing it in the Museum, but also at giving it a meaning, for example, through the reconstruction of the context, through its stories, and by showing how archaeologists work. Quoting Geertz again, who said that culture is also made by a "story people tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1972, p. 26), the Museum has been able to create a story (connected to the Arles archaeological objects) people tell themselves and to other people.

In fact, as Tilley recognized "[...] no archaeologist interprets for him or herself. Interpretation is a social activity for an individual, a group, or an audience. Such an audience for whom both excavations and

site reports are produced matter. There is something inherently unsatisfactory and elitist about the notion that excavations should be undertaken only to satisfy the specific research goal of archaeologists" (Tilley 1989, p. 280). This is connected to the social role we attribute to archaeology, whose task is not only to discover the past, but also to communicate it to the general public, since the 'product' of this research - the archaeological findings - is everyone's heritage. Moreover, archaeological heritage is never something objective, and therefore archaeologists should also make their interpretations and the limits of their research explicit (Smith 2006, p. 299). Nevertheless, the case of the Departmental Museum of Ancient Arles demonstrates how positive the results, in terms of heritage awareness and appreciation, can be if the local communities are involved in the discovery, study and dissemination of the heritage, especially when compared with other cases where such approaches were not experimented (De Vivo 2015). Moreover, this case was even more successful if we consider that its task was to raise awareness on the existence of underwater heritage that, because of its original context, is completely inaccessible to people. It is important to remark that solutions were found to show the barge while it was still in the murky Rhone waters, giving people even the possibility to understand what archaeology is and that it can be practiced also in the water.

This case was probably so successful also because the very first audience for whom the entire communication campaign was planned were the people from Arles: the whole communication strategy was planned, first and foremost, to make the *Arles-Rhône 3* project meaningful and relevant to the citizens, not to create a tourist product. Therefore, the Tripadvisor website data prove that the achievement of the goal of arousing the local community's interest in its own historical heritage, also gave the Museum positive results in terms of visibility and increase in the number of visitors.

Finally, we highlight the fundamental role played by the clear, accessible communication

of the archaeological heritage that engages the public through a narrative approach, so that it does not provide the public with just a presentation, but also an interpretation of the archaeological objects and sites.

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