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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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INDEX

7 Editorial

Cinzia Dal Maso

15 Memories

Italy to Italians. Interview with Daniele Manacorda 17

Carolina Megale

Butrint before the Butrint Foundation 25

Richard Hodges

35 Topic of the year: Small but Kind of Mighty

'Pompeii-mania' in schools Down Under 37

Louise Zarmati

Memory and Earthquake. The Pilastrì excavation project (Emilia Romagna, Italy) toward a shared community archaeology approach 47

Giulia Osti, Lara Dal Fiume, Simone Bergamini, Rita Guerzoni, Micol Boschetti, Valentino Nizzo, Margherita Pirani, Stefano Tassi

The case of the *Arles Rhône 3* Project: an example of underwater heritage communication 57

Caterina De Vivo

The Virtual Etruscan Museum of Populonia *Gasparri Collection*: enhancing the visitor's experience 67

Carolina Megale, Carlo Baione

Edutainment and gamification: a novel communication strategy for cultural heritage 79

Stefania Mancuso, Maurizio Muzzopappa & Fabio Bruno

91 Satura Lanx

Italian public archaeology on fieldwork: an overview 93

Francesco Ripanti

Disciplinary locus and professional habitus: the roles of Researcher and Discipline within the socio-political and cultural domains 105

Massimiliano Secci

Italian museums and Twitter: an analysis of Museum Week 2016 119

Chiara Zuanni

135 Postscript

Akira Matsuda

137 Archaeotales

The Lombards, a completely different story 139

Mariangela Galatea Vaglio

April 12th, 1204: Constantinople under siege 143

Francesco Ripanti

The Christmas Song of the custodian 147

Marina Lo Blundo

151 News

Living archaeology at the Archaeodrome 153

Francesco Ripanti

A wedding with surprise: orange blossoms at the museum 155

Nicoletta Frapiccini

How Millennials are changing our culture 157

Anna Paterlini

Being an archaeologist in Kurdistan. Interview with Luca Peyronel 161

Cinzia Dal Maso, Chiara Boracchi

The Monuments Men of Libya 165

Giulio Lucarini

169 Children's Corner

Tonight, we're sleeping at the museum! 171
Giovanna Baldassarre

The source-chest 175
Nina Marotta

179 Reviews

Warship battering rams on display in Favignana 181
Cinzia Dal Maso

Light on the new Salinas Museum 185
Flavia Frisone

The Riace celebrities 189
Giovanna Baldassarre

Agamemnon's Version 193
Giovanna Baldassarre

Watching the world with *Blu's* eyes 195
Cinzia Dal Maso

VOLUME 1

February 2017

Section

CHILDREN'S
CORNER Translated from Archeokids
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Tonight, we're sleeping at the museum!

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 Museum, kids, sleepover

Sleepover at museums is becoming increasingly popular in Italy: children have a lot of fun and they get acquainted with museums in an unconventional way. A truly unforgettable experience that is destined to remain forever in their memory.

Sunday morning. It's probably around six, maybe a bit later, and I think I've only slept for three hours at most. I squint in the dim light to figure out where I am because I'm definitely not at home — at least that much I remember. I look around and see beside me a glass display-case with huge baked-clay vases inside: kraters decorated with large masks. I also realise that I have spent the night in a sleeping bag (when's the last time I used a sleeping bag? When I was twenty?) and maybe that's why my back hurts.

Then, all of a sudden, a small figure approaches, points his finger at my eye, nearly blinding me, and says: "I can't fall sleep anymore!"

Oh!!! So that's where I am! At the museum! This is the night, or rather the morning after the children's night at the museum!

"Gabriele, it's still early! Lie down in your sleeping bag, close your eyes and rest for a bit. It's Sunday morning, after all."

But Morpheus, it seems, has disappeared into the darkness, that rogue of a god! And now, one after another, all twenty children, who with their sleeping bags have occupied the largest gallery of the museum, are beginning to stretch, chatter, turn their flashlights on, throw pillows... In other words, there's no way of keeping them quiet, their excitement is still through the roof and what (little) sleep they've got hasn't done anything to calm it down. Might as well get up.

"Alright, you can get up... First the boys and then the girls, go wash up and then let's have breakfast!"

The archeological museum of the town I live in, Bitonto, is entirely dedicated to the Peucetians, a tribe that inhabited a large portion of central Apulia before the arrival of the Romans. In truth, we know very little about them, and what we do know is mostly based on the findings of tombs with grave goods, often objects of great worth and rare beauty. They were farmers, cattle herders and, above all, warriors. My town, Bitonto, Butuntum, was one of the most important towns inhabited by the Peucetians, and this little museum possesses a collection of artefacts — vases, weapons, helmets — that deserves to be known and appreciated even by the youngest of visitors. Numerous events are

organised to get the townspeople involved, directed at all kinds of different audiences. But it's a much more difficult and complicated task to attract children's attention, and make them come back a second and a third time, and then tell their parents, their grandparents, their school friends. It's one of those bets that, if you win it, you can be satisfied and have a clear conscience as a professional archaeologist. The children agree to participate if there's an enticing occasion, if there's an unforgettable activity that is destined to remain forever in their memory. A night at the museum, for example! The truth is that I have had a fixation with sleeping in museums for as long as I can remember: for years, I have participated in such nights organised by others and have proposed to organise similar events to the museums I know.

The opportune day has finally arrived: we have the right team (in addition to myself, there is also Gianna Lomangino, the librarian of the local children's bookshop named Hamelin, Nicola Pice, the museum's curator, and four young volunteers, either interns or students, who are giving us a hand), and the schedule is densely packed; there are books, pencils and flashlights, and the children's enthusiasm is, as we quickly realise, boundless. The night at the museum actually begins well before bedtime. At seven in the evening, all twenty children have already arrived at the museum, each with his backpack and sleeping bag. It almost looks like a camping trip. The parents are having a hard time leaving their children: "Have you taken your toothbrush? You sure you want to stay? Do you need anything?" We spend more time trying to calm down the parents than the children, who in the meantime are beginning to become restless. Then, finally, the long marathon begins: we visit the galleries of the museum, we look at the objects in the display-cases, which today look more splendid than ever, we breathe in the smell of history, we try to immerse ourselves in a world made of myths and heroes. With an image, artefact or face engraved in each of our memories, we begin by modelling clay.

Myth is the guiding theme of this long

night because the Peucetians' culture, like that of most peoples of antiquity, was saturated with mythological events and beliefs, and the heroes and divinities painted on their vases are innumerable. The dramatised reading of Jason's myth, enhanced with stage-costumes and characters, is such a wonderful entertainment for the children that together they rediscover the pleasures of story-telling and reading aloud precisely here, in this place full of history and legends. The evening continues with a mythological dinner composed of cutlets and french fries, and the projection of a cartoon film that is a must-see for all who love superheroes: Hercules!

The cinematic interlude mostly serves as a brief period of respite for us adults, so that we can re-organise the space, collect our thoughts, eat a slice of pizza on the fly, and ask ourselves for the nth time: are we really sure we want to have these twenty over-excited children sleep among dozens of vases, with the risk of something being shattered to pieces, pace the Peucetians? Now that we are already here, there's no going back, especially given that our little heroes are so excited at the idea of sleeping (or rather, not sleeping) at the museum that after barely a half-hour of Hercules, they're tired of him and can't wait to pull out their sleeping bags and turn on their flashlights.

"When are we going to tour the museum with flashlights? Where's my sleeping bag?"

Gabriele, the mascot of the evening, keeps on asking me every five minutes.

Very well, let there be sleeping bags and flashlights! In an instant, the museum is transformed into a colourful dormitory and the atmosphere, once the lights have been turned off and the rays of the flashlights are bouncing from display-case to display-case and from face to face, has become magical: I have never seen a museum like this in my life, and the sight of me reading the story of the Trojan Horse by flashlight, seated amongst dozens of sleeping bags and surrounded by children, some engrossed by the story, others distracted, and yet others enraptured by the charm of the moment, will stay with me for a

while. We sleep little, very little. There's simply no way of keeping them calm and reconciling them to sleep. Some wake us because they cannot sleep, others because they're thirsty or have to go to the toilet... The night continues thus and morning arrives quickly, and all of a sudden they are all ready for the last, comic-book activity.

When I was a child, nobody organised nights at the museum; there weren't any crazy archeologists like myself and many others nowadays. If somebody had organised something similar somewhere, I would have leapt at the occasion. But it has taken me many years to truly understand what a museum is, and I understood it not by going to university or by visiting museums, but rather much later and partially thanks to children: listening to them and trying to invent stories and activities that would pique their curiosity. If we want children to get into the habit of regularly visiting museums, and not simply because somebody is imposing it on them, but of their own free will, we adults must make an effort, and especially those of us who work in archeology and culture, to transform

these usually sombre and dull warehouses of the past — places associated mostly with specialists and characterised by positively repelling explanations and descriptions — into living and welcoming cultural spaces, where even the youngest of children can learn, enjoy themselves, make discoveries and friends, play. The night at the museum, which to many might seem like a desecrating pseudo-cultural initiative with precious little educational value, is in fact one of many attempts (and, I would say, a very successful one) to enliven our polished museums and give them back to the entire community. For it is in these museums that communities may find a part of themselves and an important piece of their own personal and collective history.

Personally, the greatest achievement at 10 o'clock of the following morning, after 15 non-stop hours and with a craving for a strong coffee, are the smiles of the children, their reluctance at the idea of leaving, the joy on their satisfied faces, the thanks of the parents who immediately ask "when are you organising the next initiative?"

At least on this occasion, we've won our bet.

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