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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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Living archaeology at Archaeodrome

*Francesco Ripanti**Center for Public Archaeology Studies 'Archeostorie'* f.ripanti@archeostoriejpa.eu**Keywords** *Archaeodrome, Marco Valenti, Poggibonsi*

No way around it: whenever 'public archaeology' is mentioned in Italy today, the Poggibonsi Archaeodrome is front and center. A successful example of historically accurate reconstruction and re-enactment, this ongoing replica of an early Medieval settlement hits the news, features in radio and TV programmes, and visitors are flocking. Francesco Ripanti attended the opening ceremony of a new peasant's family hut.

A second lot of the Poggibonsi Archaeodrome was inaugurated on Saturday, January 16th, 2016. For those unfamiliar, the term 'archaeodrome' indicates a place where archaeology becomes alive and narrates itself, allowing people to interact with a past scientifically re-created according to the methods of experimental archaeology.

Here two solemn funerary ceremonies take place, a few minutes apart from each other. A Lombard first, then a Frank: two different stories developing under the eyes of the same clump of silent, attentive people. The deceased are kindly laid in their final resting place, the objects that accompany them in the afterlife carefully arranged on their sides, the last rites celebrated. When the ceremonies are over, we got back to the present: the two celebrants are Gabriele Zorzi, President of La Fara Association, and Vittorio Fronza, Research Fellow in Medieval Archaeology at the University of Siena. The audience is on their side, yet it is not easy for them to discuss the scene that had just ended using simple but engaging words, nor to convey what difference made the about 150 years separating the two funerals or to further inform on the respective objects. But a glance to the near village is all it takes to dive again and further into the past.

Supported by an Arcus grant of 39,000 euros (Arcus is a joint-stock company entirely owned by the Italian Ministry of Finance), the archaeologists of the University of Siena, in partnership with the Municipality and *Archeotipo* Ltd (<http://www.archeotipo.it/>), are recreating in Poggibonsi a full-scale 9th century village. The 9th century is the Carolingian Age and the village is a replica of the early Medieval settlement that was unearthed by archaeologists between the 1990s and the early 2000s. The campaign, aimed at bringing to light the later settlement of *Podium Bonitii*, also revealed that the site was occupied much earlier.

So far, the reconstruction has concerned two of the seventeen structures that were identified during the excavation: the so-called

longhouse, which represents the large (140 sq.m.) dwelling of the village's *dominus*, or landlord, open since October 2014; and a second hut housing a peasant family. A henhouse, a fence, olive and fruit trees (coming from the plant genome bank of the Siena Province) are also included in the second lot, whose reconstruction required a team of four people, all archaeologists, to work for a month.

The people of the Carolingian village are re-enacted by archaeologists, too. Anyone can become familiar with them by visiting the Archaeodrome's website (<http://www.archeodromopoggibonsi.it/>): each of them has a name, a job (attested by the material remains of the village) and specific skills. Razo is the village's *dominus*, Teupala is the saddler, Johannes is the carpenter, and so on. They are not all present at the same time in the village, but rotate according to the events scheduled and the days on which the structure is open to the public. The characters travel ideally in Medieval places, and when they 'get back' to the longhouse they sit around a fire for a moment of storytelling. The stories they tell are supposed to engage and inform the visitors about events that, although they never truly happened, are very plausible.

The idea for an Archaeodrome arose from the archaeologists' will to give life to the very site they had excavated. They believed that historical re-enactment and living history are effective and engaging means of communication between professional archaeologist and non-specialists, and also that the Archaeodrome can be a driving force of local economy. And they are not going to stop. "The Archaeodrome appeals to a broad audience," says Marco Valenti, Professor of Medieval Archaeology at the University of Siena and Scientific Director of the project. "We counted around 20,000 admissions in a year, not including the school trips. The Archeodrome has become a reason to reach Poggibonsi even from outside Tuscany. Between the end of 2014 and 2015, the Valdelsa overnight tourism has increased of 1,8%, while the number of visitors in Poggibonsi has gone up by 10-11%."

One of the strongest points of the project is the close cooperation between Marco Valenti's team and the Municipality of Poggibonsi. They share the same mission and work in synergy, helping one another with issues ranging from the administrative and bureaucratic management, to fundraising activities aimed to build new lots. Both the Mayor David Bussagli and the Councillor for Cultural Activities Nicola Berti attended the Archaeodrome's inauguration ceremony and emphasized the structure's centrality for Poggibonsi, confirming their support for the project. Likewise, the Dean of the University of Siena Angelo Riccaboni and Valentino Nizzo, representing the General museum division within the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, have highlighted the importance of the Archaeodrome as a new, promising path to the development of local cultural enterprises. They stressed the structure's role in promoting a relationship between people and territory and answering the local community's demand for culture and identity-building initiatives. Beyond the speeches, the visitors' interest and emotional involvement were openly expressed by their facial expressions, the curious questions they asked to the inhabitants of the village, and the many comments they posted on the social networks.

Considering the wide success and support the project is enjoying, one question arises quite naturally: why shouldn't the public be involved more directly in the village's expansion works as well as in the reenactment of the everyday life of the long-gone past? Under strict rules and the archaeologists' supervision, of course, this would perhaps be the last hurdle to climb in order to achieve a full involvement of the public in the project. Their role would go beyond that of mere spectators, and they may become the true protagonists of the village's life, each with their own 9th century name. It would be a good challenge, one to be engaged perhaps in the near future, when the village will be larger and more inhabitants needed for the reenactments.

