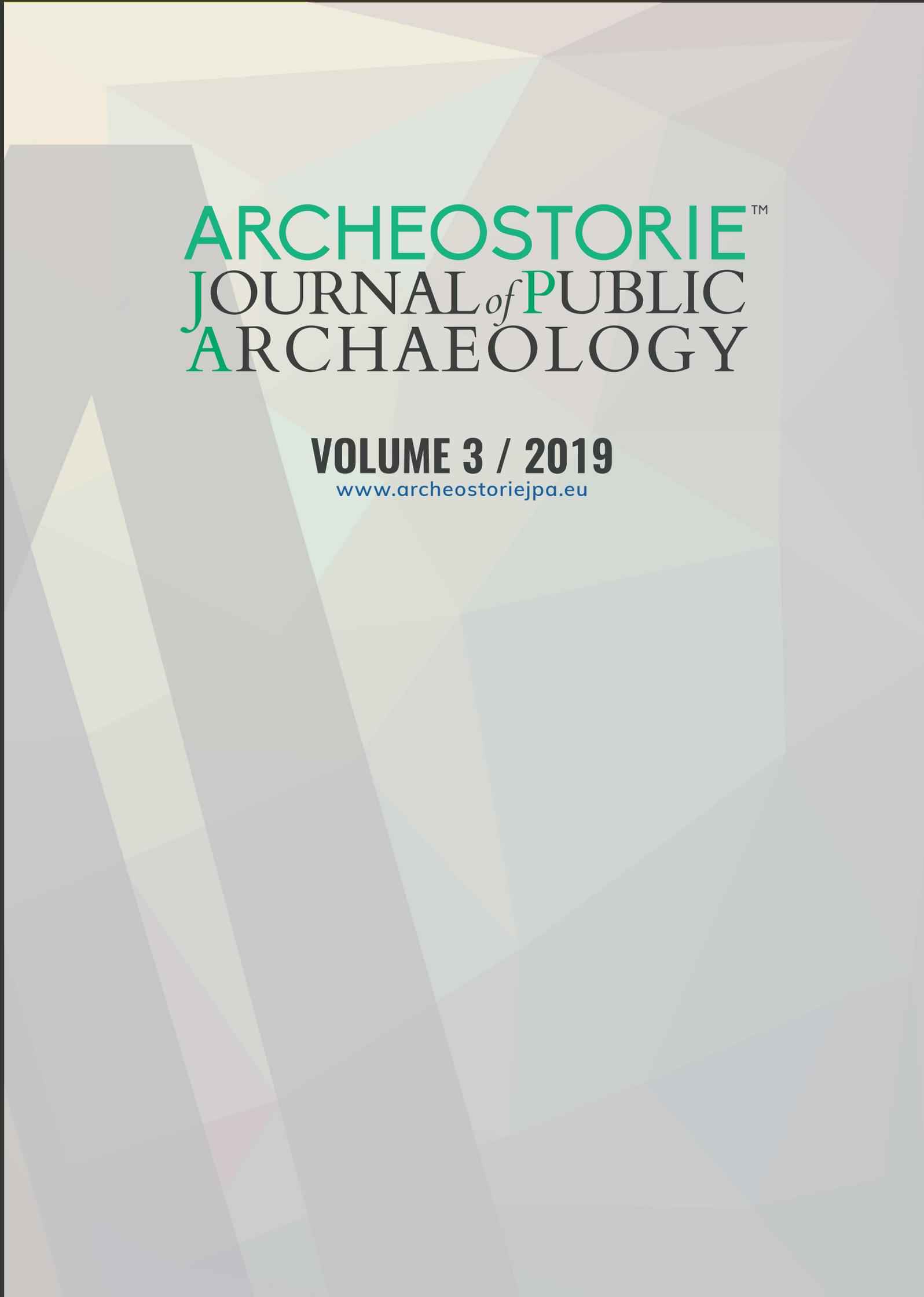




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Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology



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In Jordan, public archaeology is a solid reality

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Abstract

Public archaeology was the protagonist at the recent International Conference on Jordan's History and Archaeology.

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Fig.1. The booklet of the conference
(photo: Marta Lorenzon).

The 14th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan (ICHAJ) has just finished in Florence. For a whole week a fantastic and heterogeneous group of Jordanian and foreign researchers, gathered together by the University of Florence and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities (DOA), have been discussing aspects of Jordan's archaeology, and the conservation and development of its cultural heritage.

Culture in times of crisis

The conference's title, *Culture in Crisis: Flows of People, Artifacts and Ideas*, prompted the participants to consider both the current political reality and the progressive drying up of cultural debate – which we cultural heritage specialists often have to confront and fight against.

In the opening session, held in the Salone dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio, the discourses

of the speakers – including the organizer Guido Vannini, professor of medieval archaeology in Florence, the authorities and Prince El Hassan Bin Talal, under whose patronage this event is being held – highlighted how cultural heritage enhancement represents an interdisciplinary and multicultural job opportunity that is often underestimated.

At the conference, the interventions concentrated on four main areas: Jordan's history and archaeology, public archaeology and sustainable development, scientific methods applied to archaeology, and Jordan in history. The sessions presented the recent developments of ongoing projects, numerous perspectives on the interpretation of archaeological finds, and different methods of analysing and developing historical and archaeological heritage.

Some of the sessions were particularly striking for their innovative approaches to the contemporary cultural landscape. In particular, the presentations regarding 'dark heritage' and the relationship between public archaeology and sustainable development struck me as emblematic and concrete examples of archaeology's importance for moving beyond the boundaries of 'cultural heritage' to deal with matters of social and economic importance.

Italian archaeology in Jordan

The conference was also the occasion of the inauguration of the exhibition *The Land of*

Jordan: an Italian Perspective, which presents Italian archaeological projects in Jordan, with panels explaining their importance and history, archaeological finds and 3D reconstructions. The display was designed as a travelling exhibition, and after Italy it will begin its journey to Jordan.

I was delighted to see the progress of the numerous Italian missions in Jordan, especially (as a former student of Florence University) the Florentine ones, continuing the long tradition of collaboration between our two countries. In addition, I was impressed by the 3D reconstructions of some of the finds on display, which are designed to be used also by visitors with disabilities.

Cultural heritage development

The conference was attended by archaeologists, art historians, architects and conservation specialists, some who have been

working in Jordan for decades and others who have only recently started projects in the country. The 14th ICHAJ was a valuable experience both for me and for my current research centre, CoE Ancient Near Eastern Empires of the University of Helsinki, as a forum for sharing ideas and projects, and identifying possible future research directions.

Notwithstanding the great variety of presentations, the interventions were linked by a clear common denominator, namely the enhancement of Jordanian heritage as a starting point for integration and overcoming the cultural heritage crisis. Probably, given the continuing cuts in culture funding, not all projects will achieve significant success, but together they can hope to tip the balance in the right direction.

It will be interesting to see in three years time, at the next ICHAJ conference, whether culture will still be 'in crisis' or whether we are slowly overcoming these difficulties.

