

Hard times to plan: Challenges to restructure a working plan during the pandemic, and other stories of #pubarchMED

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Abstract

Ethnographic fieldwork requires careful planning, even being with professionals as #pubarchMED project is. With a schedule of trips, visits and interviews six months ahead, the irruption of travel restrictions with the Covid-19 pandemic has been disruptive in the project to a high level. First cancelling and postponing, then struggling with the uncertainty of the recent future and finally assuming the new reality, adapting to a virtual solution has not been easy. This paper will delve into the specifics of the experience, the solutions taken and further reflection on the reach of virtual (public) archaeology from other experiences of the project.

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“After reviewing your voucher request for the XXXXX booking, we regret to inform you that your voucher cannot be processed because it falls within one of the following circumstances...” (Iberia)

Friday, close to noon. I'm sitting in the annual internal meeting of my institution, paying more attention to the news than to my colleagues. Starting to feel nervous about the imminent lockdown the Government is about to announce. Some days before I had just come from Italy, with Milan in lockdown and several hours of uncertainty in Rome airport due to a technical issue with the plane. I have already preventively canceled a trip to Algeria, expecting trouble. I lost the money. A few minutes after noon, the news come through. Lockdown starting on Saturday. My flight back home (I did not even have time to find a flat in Santiago since I came back from my placement in Greece) is on Sunday. I call Iberia, there is place in the flight at five this same afternoon. After saying goodbye, the race to my friend's house to take my things and go to the airport leaves my desk in the Institute as it was a couple of days before. New challenges call to my door. Contradictory feelings cloud my mind. A new

chapter for #pubarchMED starts and managing it will not be easy.

This article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the project, directly on fieldwork and results, but also on mental health. Furthermore, it explores some of the preliminary results and conclusions to be learned from these months.

What is #pubarchMED about?

Public Archaeology in the Mediterranean Context is a project conducted under my postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute of Heritage Sciences (CSIC, Spain) as part of a regional program for science from the Galician regional government (Axencia GAIN). Originally funded for three years, it got a six-month extension due to the pandemic and will certainly stay around for a while due to the huge amount of information collected. All the results will be available in open access in the repository of CSIC (<https://digital.csic.es/cris/project/pj00216>).

The project is based on a simple premise: Archaeological Heritage Management (AHM) is a crucial element of our society, transversal to many current topics. Even though for Southern Europe the weight of Italy in the tradition

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of heritage management is large since the Franceschini Commission (1967), literature is dominated by guidelines and approaches from countries that differ from the legal and social realities of most of the world (i.e. Benetti & Brogiolo 2018). The Mediterranean basin is one of these areas, sharing similar challenges, but approaching them from very different backgrounds. We lack a good knowledge of the details and a comparative study of the region could provide some light and tools for the future of our professional practice and a better protection and sharing of our common archaeological heritage. Within this context, public archaeology is (or should be) crucial.

From there, the objectives revolve around three main lines of research:

- Literature: Trying to collect and review what has been written from the region (a first bibliography can be downloaded from, Almansa-Sánchez 2020a)
- Perception: Scoping how professionals understand archaeological practice, from the knowledge of the models to the priorities of intervention.
- Impact: Developing a strategy to better evaluate how archaeological sites affect the surroundings beyond the basic economic approach.

This is a challenging venture that required very different methodologies and provided a large amount of data that will take more than expected to review and publish. The transdisciplinary approach of the project is extremely interesting, but also difficult, as sometimes it seems to involve different projects within the one. From a general ethnographic approach (Hamilakis & Anagnostopoulos 2009), fieldwork consisted of observation, interviews, collection of interpretative materials or visitor studies, having to adapt from case to case depending on the circumstances of each trip and the types of data foreseeably available.

Within the data collecting time, traveling across the Mediterranean was basic. I had no specific budget for this, so paying trips from my salary made it more difficult to plan destinations and times. Travelling was an essential part of the project, as I needed to interview colleagues and see the different details and realities with my own eyes, in order to enrich the perspectives provided by professionals and the literature. As a result, one of the first consequences of the project has been a large carbon footprint

that I expect to compensate. However, as I will explain later, there were not many satisfactory alternatives for this.

Contacting colleagues you do not know is difficult. In the first trips I planned, I waited for a positive answer of the contacts and then planned the trip. However, this delayed the process and made me expend extra money in tickets I did not have. Then, I changed the approach. Searched for cheaper flights and “forced” the meetings in those days, even going in person without an appointment to places that did not answer. This strategy worked well, and the efficiency of the trips increased.

I needed a wide range of professionals from different institutions to gather complementary perspectives of the broad reality. This feeds from the concept of *perspectivism* in Ortega y Gasset’s philosophy: “the notion of perspective as something acquired as an individual enters collective conversations” (my own translation from De Salas 1994, p. 51). This way, my own conversations with different actors in the ecosystem of archaeological practice provided the scenario to share different views and perspectives on the same topic. The number and diversity were essential, as we all have partial and subjective views of our work. In some places, an optimum of 8-10 interviews was reached. In others I was lucky to find one or two. Anyhow, as we will see later, in person interviews proved to be essential for good results, especially in certain countries.

Another reason travelling was essential had to do with the third leg of the project, impact. While there were nine specific case studies in Spain, Morocco and Greece, I visited over three hundred archaeological sites and museums across the Mediterranean, with a clear intention to critically see their contexts. Also, as a way to see with my own eyes the examples provided by interviewees. The goal of drafting a methodology to measure the impact of archaeological heritage in local communities needed an extensive effort in mapping places and comparing circumstances. While sometimes there is a possibility of doing some work with the documentation available online and offline, as well as the technological tools we have (e.g. Google Street Maps), the ethnographic approach, speaking with different stakeholders and exploring more in depth the area, needs an in person approach.

Said this, the project cannot offer an

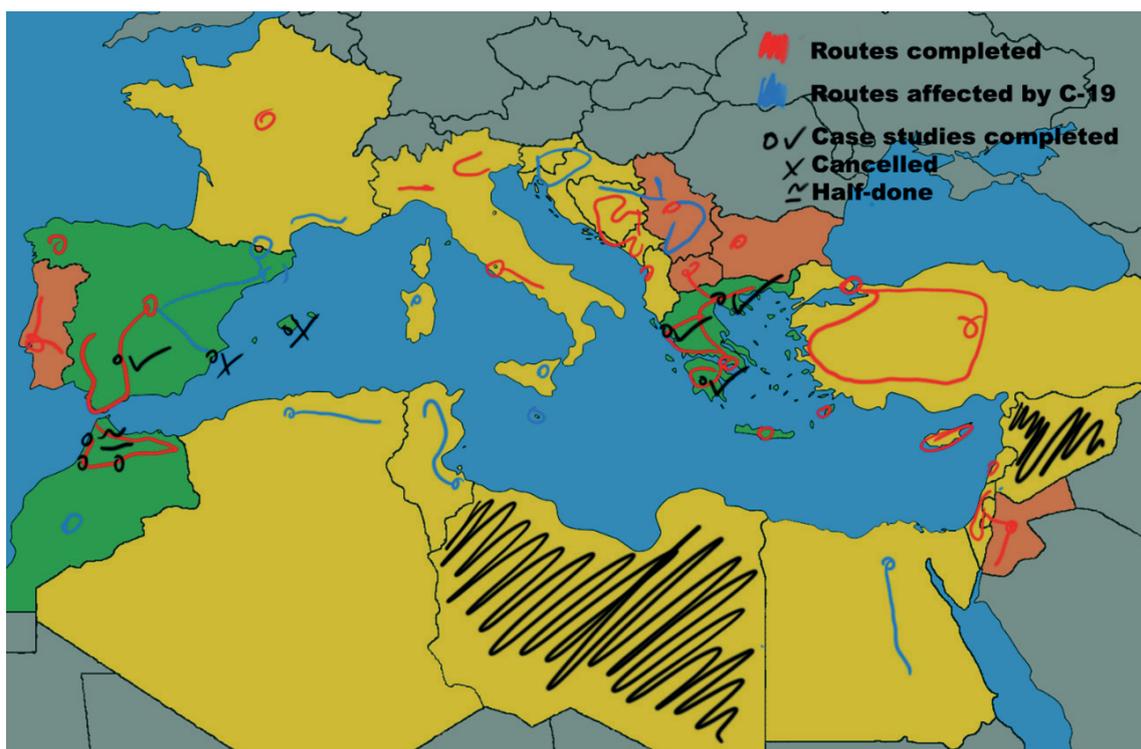


Fig. 1. A map with an overview of the travelling plan, as affected by the pandemic (in blue, trips already organized and cancelled since March 2020).

experience in public engagement or community participation but delves into the current reality of the sector and the possibilities to improve practice and positive impact.

The impact of the pandemic

In a project with such a dependence from travelling, a global pandemic that affects mobility to an extent like this (global lockdown for weeks) had disastrous consequences.

As we can see in figure 1, the impact has been large. Only one of the red lines corresponds to fieldwork conducted during the pandemic in July 2020, the only window I had to carry on with the project (in person) in the Iberian Peninsula. There are three ways to measure this impact. From an economic approach, regarding research per se and in terms of mental health.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been important. In the beginning I feared to lose several thousand euros in plane tickets, cars and hotels. For example, the Algerian trip was over 600€ on its own, and it was only the first of many, scheduled weekly until September 2020. However, either in cash or in vouchers I was able to recover everything else, and the prorogue of my contract for six months was

extremely helpful to balance my finances.

In terms of the research conducted, the balance is clearly negative. Around a 40% of the total fieldwork plan was affected to some extent, with around a 30% being fully cancelled, including the completion of three of the six remaining case studies and the inclusion of two of them at all. This affected the line of “Impact” considerably, and forced me to find digital alternatives to the remaining interviews and different approaches to the planned analysis of the data gathered.

Even with its flaws, I believe the information collected is enough to reach interesting conclusions and offer valuable information and resources. However, my personal expectations were far higher before the pandemic. Beyond the stress of the situation and the general climate of uncertainty extended in this period, the loosing of expectations was especially hard. Therefore, regarding mental health, the analysis deserves a special section.

A rollercoaster of feelings and difficult decisions

One of the main goals of public archaeology (at least from my point of view, Almansa-

Sánchez 2018, p. 200) has to do with the better knowledge of our discipline in context. This includes an understanding of our working conditions, as this is something that deeply affects practice and is still in the verge of our interest. During the last few years, the focus on mental health extended in Academia (e.g. Evans et al. 2018) slowly permeated in archaeology too (e.g. Almansa-Sánchez & Díaz del Liaño 2019; Canosa-Betés & Díaz de Liaño 2020; Díaz de Liaño, Moral & Corpas 2020; Eifling 2021) in hand with other important issues like harassment (Coto-Sarmiento et al. 2020; Voss 2021), that made us realize we were not working in the safest environment and we had naturalized certain practices that were clearly harmful. Even knowing it, the pressure of the system provoked a sort of structural failure in wellbeing and care that maybe the pandemic brought to light.

My personal experience with this project may serve as a cry out for help, not for me but for the whole collective of archaeology. One of the issues archaeology is addressing now is degrowth (e.g. Flexner 2020; Zorzin 2021), however it currently focuses on practice itself more than other relevant consequences amongst which mental health is surely crucial. Beyond the reduction of the carbon footprint of the project in the last months of the pandemic, the abrupt change of routines, the frustration with the situation and the uncertainty about the future, made me realize I needed to stop and reconsider certain dynamics.

From over 80 flights per year, the lockdown started a period of sedentary life for me. Gaining weight, sleeping poorly, focusing only on work. By the summer, I had been depressed or anxious most of the time. My first problem was uncertainty, not knowing if continuing with fieldwork was going to be possible or not. This led to some sort of chronic frustration about the failure of the project, mixed with impostor syndrome. The beginning of summer came with some hope and more planning. However, it was clear that international travelling to the destinations I needed to go was going to be difficult unless summer ended the pandemic. Of course, it did not. Before the summer I had started and tested three forms of digital approach: written email, voice call and video call. Although the third was the better, the limitations of access to a good internet, language barriers and difficulties to establish the

first contact made it very difficult. Voice call was not the worst solution but faced similar problems. Therefore, I opted for written emails. I designed a version of the interview that could be easily answered by email, with an option to contact later on by other means if the interviewee wanted. The results were not perfect but provided enough information to cover the file. Again, the rate of answers per email sent was very low. A raw search of emails in my inbox shows over 3,300 emails with the keyword 'pubarchmed' (to have an idea of the volume across these three years). I have not calculated the specific number, but I usually write to, at least, 20 people and it is rare the place I get over 10 positive answers, falling close to nothing in some cases and usually through secondary contacts, not the original ones. Also, I have identified a severe issue with the email, going straight into the spam folder or not even arriving, which made me think about the actual sense of continuing with data collection at all, given the circumstances. This situation, clear by fall when I had already given up on hope about any further fieldwork, brought a new wave of negative feelings.

The stress of having to change plans every few weeks, not meeting my deadlines and other external ones, plus a growing fatigue of the alternatives to conferences that we were living, made it more difficult to focus. This was a clear example of the circular dynamic in which the guilt about not advancing made it impossible to feel well enough to advance. Still, I cannot say it was an unproductive year, but most of the work had to do with other unfinished business not directly related to the project. As a way of procrastinating working, many other things came out, but #pubarchMED was further from closing up than ever before... even today.

On the bright side, I have to be thankful for the positive environment at work, even in a virtual way, as well as in other spaces like CHAT (Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory), which is always a fresh and stimulating environment. Still, a professional environment, even with relations of friendship or camaraderie, is not always enough. Mental health is complicated and the networks of care we must build at work need further confidence among colleagues. I do not even want to think about it if work environment was toxic, as it is in many cases. This made me think about the classes of Prof. Almudena Hernando (see

in English, Hernando 2018), and the need of emotional support as essential for the modern individual. Living alone did not help at all, and the experiences shared by many colleagues on social media, especially ECRs with non-stable contracts or unemployed, point to a generalized situation of unwellness. Pending publication, the results of the survey conducted by the ECR Community at the EAA (Brami et al. 2021) show some intriguing and disturbing data.

Still, the acceptance of the new situation during fall and the decisions made about the final steps of the project helped to recover balance and focus on advancing with work again. This meant abandoning all hope for further fieldwork, closing up some pending issues and renouncing to meet all deadlines. The impact in my mental health has been positive, although some things will not finish as I wished. I will not be able to deliver all the promised results and resources in 2021, and #pubarchMED life will surely extend for several extra months.

Lessons learned and unlearned...

All this situation made me question the whole model of academic career we are forced to follow. Ultracompetitive, precarious, biased and heading towards failure in a (too) large percentage of cases, neoliberal academia is a perfect breeding ground for toxic feelings, still stigmatized (Brunila & Valero 2018; Jaremka et al. 2020). Being a structural situation, learning to stop and put life before work usually has consequences. My first lesson has been to confront them and accept the possibility of leaving academia at some point. My colleague Pablo Guerra explored this in his novel *El hallazgo* (Guerra 2011), and I have to say that taking this step brought me peace.

But focusing on the project, the experience of the past months, and the preliminary analysis of the data gathered, especially the interviews, offer some interesting insights that could open a discussion about crucial aspects of our discipline:

Risk assessments: Although they are required in many proposals, public archaeology is not usually focusing on this. We never know what will happen. Only in the last years, natural and human disasters have affected the possibility to travel several times, but we still see this as punctual and far away. We need to have a plan B adapted to the reality of our project in

the scenario of a major disruption. And the Internet can also be affected, so this planning needs to anticipate different scenarios and have a mitigation plan ready for them. Expect the unexpected.

The digital fallacy: These past months digital solutions were perceived as a panacea for everything. Still, they do not always work. First, with a survey about the digital offer during the first confinement (Almansa-Sánchez 2020b), and later on with my own experience, I realized two important issues. Digital networks are usually a reproduction of our previous ones. Therefore, building new audiences becomes difficult when a sudden event like COVID-19 happens. This might not be important when we already have connected with the audience we intend to engage with, but it is problematic for new projects or those aiming to expand their reach. The extensively discussed digital gap (e.g. Hargittai 2011), is still an issue that the pandemic has (re)exposed and I have suffered with the project. Difficulties with access burdened my mitigation plans and I ended up having very few successful cases. Not to mention the digital approach was not enough to cover for the physical one. Furthermore, the infamous “Zoom fatigue” of these months, is probably having a negative effect in the success of many activities.

Cooperation and communication: Another consequence of the pandemic has been the reveal of weak networks and the isolation between teams, and regions we still suffer. There is a lack of awareness about the work of other colleagues, within and nearby the discipline, home and abroad. The interviews of the project show this clearly, and it is crucial for a more fluid communication. Furthermore, a side study of citations in public archaeology materials (Almansa-Sánchez & Suárez-López 2021) offers a glimpse about the persisting colonial practice we suffer. As the document is still embargoed for another publication, I will just offer one number: half of the papers published about non-Anglo countries are authored only by Anglo researchers (no collaboration or acknowledgement) and hardly quote local sources. Public archaeology should be the less guilty of all archaeologies in these practices, but the reality is different (slowly changing for better) and we need to encourage collaboration and communication in order to have more inclusive and effective networks,

especially when we are working in different regions or countries to our own.

Conflict: There are still too many internal conflicts within the sector. Some of them can be personal, but others are structural. With the interviews, some common ones appeared, but there are surely others. A united collective is essential for a better practice, both within archaeology and towards a better communication and valorization of our work. Maybe we need mediation (conflict resolution) within the collective (the PEPA, a new national association of archaeologists in Spain needed it during its creation process) and with other collectives (e.g. Corpas 2020, for looting). In any case, this is a clear burden we need to get rid of.

Arbitrariness: This is probably one of the more serious conclusions of the project so far. Laws are wet paper that frame general action, but the shape of the models and daily practice are set by individuals and constantly (re)interpreted. This creates climates of uncertainty and legal insecurity. The solution is difficult, as overregulated environments do not seem to solve the problem, and collective self-regulation is rare in the Mediterranean, but would also face certain burdens with the administration. Here, the definition of models and standards of practice seems essential as a first step, as we are trying to walk towards solutions without really knowing the nature of the problem.

Impact: All this has an impact in daily management, and this is probably the most important aspect of all our work. The way we make decisions, usually puts heritage before people at all costs, or (indirect or third party) economic benefit before everything else. This comes with a paradox: preservation is usually a mandate but can affect negatively the image of archaeology and its impact. We do not lack creativity for integration and protection solutions, but usually focus on unsustainable or invisible ones (more in Almansa-Sánchez 2020c). Indeed, the direct impact to local communities of archaeological sites is unequal and widely poor. I have identified very few examples of local revitalization (social and economic) of urban or rural environments fostered by an archaeological site (i.e. Consiglio, Flora & Izzo 2021). The main direct impact in the discourse has to do with tourism, and this deserves its own debate.

Tourism: Years ago, while working in

Ethiopia, I defined the concept of the “ghost tourist” (Almansa-Sánchez 2015). In short, it referred to the oddity of not finding in the streets the tourists visiting a World Heritage Site in the city we were working at the moment. This model of tourism usually implies a very low economic impact in local resources. Pending proper calculations, barely a quarter of the money invested in the trip stays locally, especially in developing countries and tour-pack-based models. Of course, many individuals benefit from it, but there are also negative consequences, like gentrification and the decay of historic centers that we have seen during the pandemic.

Each of these topics (and other related ones) could star their own feature article, even by region, and hopefully some of them will be written soon. Still, I would like to finish highlighting the two aspects I find essential for the future of the discipline in relation with the events of the past months.

First, we need to reconsider the dynamics of work and research in archaeology. Beyond the traditional calls to know our audiences and design tailored projects to improve successful positive impact, we need to look into our own practice and work towards better networks of care and the development of healthy working environments that can ensure our balance work-life and work-health, especially mental. This means we need to reconsider the structural core of academia and some other structural aspects of our work in the commercial context (when applicable) or, more generally, in the preventive context (even if saying “preventive” is still utopic in many cases). This means prioritizing people over work, and this involves “others” and us.

In direct relation, the second priority is to rethink our intervention model and include public archaeology in the process. This is a complex scenario that affects several moments and actions in a large process, but again links with the previous idea of prioritizing people, in this case, within work. We need to evaluate the actual impact of archaeology in society beyond vague numbers, and integrate management in daily life, so the co-design of solutions can really benefit the surroundings and go beyond the immediate economic benefit of a few. Conflicting interests will make this difficult, but still possible given we still have some technical control over the process.

All this basically resumes the core principle of public archaeology: a people-oriented practice. In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals proposed by the United Nations (2015), this can certainly help, not only to build a better world, in line with the more activist trends of the discipline, but also to clarify our relevance for society.

“Is trying to save the world with archaeology what we want to be doing?”
(Jeppson 2010: 63)

“Perhaps is the world of archaeology which needs to be changed in order to be saved”
(Little 2010: 154-155)

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