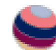

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Managing Contemporary Archaeology in the Mediterranean: Challenges Observed from #pubarchMED

Jaime Almansa-Sánchez

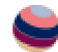
Contemporary archaeology was one of the topics addressed within a large study to improve understanding of archaeological heritage management in the Mediterranean basin by the pubarchMED project. While 19th and early 20th century contexts are often studied, contemporary archaeology in the Mediterranean (especially post World War II period) still represents a challenge both for practitioners and heritage managers. This article delves into some structural issues of archaeological heritage management and archaeological practice of the contemporary world, disentangling the main challenges they reveal and the interesting questions they raise for archaeological practice.

1. Introduction: #pubarchMED

Between 2017 and 2021, the Galician Innovation Agency (GAIN) funded a postdoctoral project focusing on the management of archaeological heritage. The pubarchMED project (Public Archaeology in the Mediterranean Context) follows three main lines of work, with the objective to better understand how archaeology (and its relations with society) happens in a very interesting region such as the Mediterranean basin. The premise is simple. With an archaeological record spanning over a million years, encompassing remnants from many major civilisations in human (pre)history), and bearing witness to a rich historical development that has given rise to at least several legal and political traditions evident today, the variety and richness of archaeological heritage management models offer fertile ground for research. Exploring this territory can provide valuable insights into different dynamics and structural challenges in archaeology.

The project (see video) has three main lines of work:

1. Bibliography: Public archaeology already has an extensive body of publications worldwide, and the Mediterranean basin is the origin of many interesting works. The project compiled a database of bibliographic resources in Zotero with over 1000 references in its first version (Almansa-Sánchez 2020a).
2. Ethnography: The project explored a way of defining fieldwork to gather information about archaeological heritage management practices and their relation to society.



This work combined the critical analysis of over 150 interviews with practitioners at different stages of their careers and from different stakeholders with a review of legal and technical literature, and visits to sites and museums to document actual practice (Almansa-Sánchez 2020b).
3. Impact: In close connection with (1) and (2), this part aimed to delve into the actual impact of archaeological heritage on its surroundings beyond the traditional economic approaches (e.g. Gould and Burtenshaw 2014). For this, I selected a total of nine sites in Spain, Greece and Morocco, although the pandemic affected some of the work, allowing completion of only the Greek cases (a brief review is provided in Almansa-Sánchez 2023).

Although most of the data still need to be analysed, some results have already been published and updated in the project's repository, but all in all, many ideas can already be shared, including some interesting aspects of creative mitigation (Almansa Sánchez 2020c) and the main challenges that emerge from daily practice.

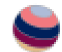
YOUTUBE VIDEO #pubarchMED project - Public Archaeology in the Mediterranean Context

2. Addressing contemporary archaeology in the Mediterranean

When thinking about archaeology in countries like Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey or Egypt, it is rare to consider any contemporary asset. Indeed, for the general public, archaeology is rarely about the contemporary world. As Cornelius Holtorf (2005, 150) has already debated, it is perhaps popular culture that drives *archaeoappeal*, and popular culture is mostly about adventure, treasure and lost civilisation. This project is therefore probably the first to address contemporary archaeology in the Mediterranean. However, there is a subtext to this story that we can date back to the mid-1960s; development-led archaeology.

With their disparate histories, most Mediterranean countries have some sort of management model that involves intervention in the event of construction works. This happens mainly, but not only, in the north of the Mediterranean owing to the strict regulations of the European Union concerning environmental impact (responding mainly to the *Council Directive 85/337/EEC of 27 June 1985 on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment*; Council of Europe 1985). Given this article is part of the European Archaeological Council (EAC) symposium, I will focus on the European side of the Mediterranean.

Development-led archaeology is usually likened to commercial archaeology, although there are very different models and approaches that do not necessarily involve a commercial approach. Nevertheless, the privatisation of archaeology is gaining ground around the world (Aparicio 2016; Gnecco and Schmidt-Dias 2015; Zorzin 2015; 2021). This is a matter for a different article, but becomes relevant when understanding the positive impact it has had in the growth of contemporary archaeology in southern Europe (Bengoetxea 2017; Almansa-Sánchez and Corpas-Cívicos 2020, 114). Academia still lacks proper programmes on the topic and most projects focus on conflict (19th and 20th century wars) and industrial heritage. Yet, the number of professionals devoted to contemporary archaeology in the region is

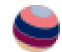


rapidly increasing, and the topics they study bring fresh methodologies into play (see Kiddey and Caraher 2023).

Due to my personal interest in contemporary archaeology, one of the questions I usually ask in the project interviews (mainly with professionals working directly in daily management in administration or museums) is: How is contemporary archaeology addressed in daily practice? More than a systematic approach to the topic, I aimed to use this question as an exploratory chat to gain first impressions and innovative ideas. Responses ranged between 'that is not archaeology' from a few purist prehistoric or classicist archaeologists to 'we do record this also' from most colleagues. It became more interesting to delve into this topic, as depending on the law and the model, the responses varied a lot.

There are two main trends in legislation, a) those laws that define contemporary archaeology as starting from *c.*100 years ago (with a moving starting point as time passes), and b) those laws that define it from a specific date (usually related to one of the major wars at the beginning of the 20th century). Furthermore, some laws detail the type of remains that count as contemporary archaeology (e.g. fortifications from a recent war, or representative industrial buildings), although in some cases, the law leaves cataloguing to the interpretation of local administrations or practitioners without giving clear guidelines. Every law has grey areas, and introduces interesting contradictions that, in some cases, led to premeditated destruction of heritage-to-be. Nonetheless, archaeology is mainly defined by its method, so anything can be studied from an archaeological perspective, an idea which started an invisible revolution in the Mediterranean: archaeology of the most recent past (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Excavation of the film set of *The good, the bad and the ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966) in the north of Madrid (Spain) by Jesús Alonso-Martín in May 2023. After discussions with



the regional Administration to issue the permit, the materials will be treated archaeologically. Photo by the author

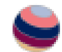
In this sense, Spanish archaeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal is a world-recognised expert (González Ruibal 2006; 2008; 2019), and other Mediterranean colleagues are slowly showing an increased interest in the most recent past. With this interest comes new challenges for archaeological heritage managers. I have identified three challenges from the interviews.

Archaeology is now easily dealing with the recent past (*c.* 100 years old) as supermodernity has broken the direct link with the pre-industrial world that we still maintained until the second half of the 20th century. In many cases, new generations (people born from the 1950s onwards) did not even witness the profound changes in Western society that led to our current reality (and that other regions are experiencing at different levels currently). This has opened a gap with the recent past that made it old enough to be understood as clearly archaeological. The number of projects about post-medieval archaeology, alongside developing practice in development-led archaeology, increased considerably and we can normalise analysing archaeological features that only fifty years ago would have been regarded as heretical by the discipline. Moreover, this tendency opened a door to the more recent past, and questioning the traditional matter of archaeological practice will challenge the discipline and especially archaeological heritage management. If everything is archaeology, how can we deal with it?

3. Challenge 1: The vast amount of 'proper' archaeological heritage

The resources allocated to archaeological heritage management beyond development-led archaeology are scarce. In the Mediterranean, no administration has enough human and material resources to properly deal with all the needs of the archaeological heritage sites that they manage. Indeed, managing development has become the main activity for some administrations, having to find creative solutions (Almansa-Sánchez 2020c) and developing different models (Alexopoulos and Fouseki 2013; Martínez-Díaz and Castillo-Mena 2007; Olivier 2016). This is especially serious when the archaeological record in the region extends for over a million years and there is a large amount of traditionally 'valuable' heritage (Carman 2011) that administrations need to oversee, as Carman (1996) discussed in *Valuing Ancient Things*. Indeed, the destruction of pre-modern archaeological heritage has become the norm in archaeological heritage management and common with contemporary sites, despite recognising the loss of social memory that this implies (Connerton 2009).

How many archaeological sites have we scheduled in the Mediterranean? We are probably speaking about a six-figure number. Unfortunately, exact data is lacking to delve into this issue, as in many countries absolute numbers are recorded by region and under different criteria. In any case, many of these sites (thousands) have been excavated to some extent and are open to the public or safeguarded in some way. More have been excavated and are now either fully/partially destroyed or buried



under different sorts of infrastructure. Many others have been located, but have had little or no intervention as they wait for some threat to trigger further work.

In recent years, advances in the public presentation of archaeological sites have been made. Many of these sites, including contemporary remains, and, on occasion, the results of public presentation are quite controversial (see Figure 3). Furthermore, some interventions recognise the importance of maintaining the connection between contemporary archaeology and more traditional remains, e.g. in Rome, the recent works in San Giovanni metro station (see Figure 2) or the exhibition in Centrale Montemartini, which combines the restoration of the old power station with classical archaeology. Big metro developments are becoming a great opportunity. In Madrid, Buen Suceso church (destroyed in the mid-19th century) was recovered in an unprecedented effort during the construction of the new station in Sol Square.

Many administrations are already taking advantage of opportunities to preserve and enhance contemporary archaeology, but in the context of a chronic shortage of resources, any action that is not based on a development-led intervention becomes difficult. Moreover, once an archaeology of the most contemporary world is commonly accepted (see Figure 1), everything becomes archaeological. Closely connected to Challenge 3, clear criteria are urgently needed to deal with contemporary archaeological heritage for administrations used to a more traditional definition of archaeology.

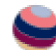
VIDEO – online only

Figure 2: Descending to San Giovanni metro station in Rome (Italy). A full stratigraphy of the excavations in the station shows the history of this quarter to the present day. The cases hold material from early prehistory to the contemporary era. Video by the author. Length: 7 secs [View static image]

4. Challenge 2: Dealing with difficult pasts and daily conflict

Excavating a prehistoric mass grave is interesting, as it helps to explain the social relations and even the daily life of a period for which we lack any written record. In Europe, this is hardly controversial unless it is associated with high-profile construction work. However, the late 19th and 20th centuries have been very traumatic on our continent with wars, totalitarian regimes and other conflicts. Furthermore, different categories of heritage that we are starting to consider from an archaeological perspective e.g. graffiti, also give rise to conflict in urban environments.

Additionally, contemporary archaeological heritage has a deep political component (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022). Within the recent surge of the new radical right in Europe (Mudde 2017), and their interest in history and archaeology (Gathercole and Lowenthal 2004; Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez 2021), some periods and remains became of special interest in the political arena. The Mediterranean is full of such examples The open conflict between Israel and Palestine, the division of



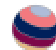
Cyprus and the hidden conflict between Greece and Turkey, the recent Balkan War and ongoing disputes between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as pending tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are some examples current today. But coming further to the west, we can see how former fascist regimes are still affecting contemporary politics involving heritage (Italy and Spain as major examples). Furthermore, refugees have become a focus of interest for archaeology, documenting a tragedy that is happening right under our noses every day (Hamilakis 2018; Kourelis 2023).

Given the strong link between politics and archaeology, political interference in archaeological heritage management is normal (especially in a Mediterranean context). Here I do not mean a political viewpoint from the professional side (Falquina *et al*. 2006; McGuire 2008), but the direct intervention of politicians in office. The context of development-led archaeology is the common root, with famous cases like the M-30 works in Madrid (Spain), where the project was cut to avoid environmental assessment (with millions of EU fines for Madrid city council afterwards) and the subsequent controversy over the archaeological salvage campaign (Almansa-Sánchez and Corpas-Cívicos 2020, 113), or the metro project for Thessaloniki (Greece) and the constant political interferences between different administrations and archaeologists (see the Europa Nostra appeal). Nevertheless, contemporary conflict archaeology and the management of dissonant heritage are the prime examples of this sort. We can find different strategies observed within fieldwork in the Mediterranean: 1) 'apolitical' record; 2) political record; 3) oblivion; and 4) active destruction.

'Apolitical' record is an unbiased conservation through recording of contemporary remains. The duty cannot be avoided and archaeology happens, quietly and by the book. Of course, this path of action is also political and usually tries to avoid any transcendence of the work conducted while also justifying the destruction of the remains. Figure 3 is a good example, but it is an extensive practice in the post-Ottoman nations.

Political record is the opposite, trying to make the archaeology visible and raise awareness about the interventions conducted. This would be the approach to investigating archaeology related to the Spanish Civil War under a socialist government. In contrast, a right-wing government would usually adopt an oblivion strategy of active forgetfulness of certain periods or categories of heritage. No intervention but no destruction either, as this would trigger protests. However, the best example of this oblivion strategy, as it applies to most countries, is the existence of 19th and early 20th-century buildings in development areas. Some of them are protected by law, should require archaeological intervention before any refurbishment, and are in private hands. They are left abandoned until collapse allows a new development, and here, instead of a difficult past, we have a political conflict tightly intertwined with economics.

The active destruction strategy is rare nowadays, but still happens. It occurs in the context of development-led works where weak administrations cannot effectively mitigate every potential threat or are obstructed by other departments with more power within an administration. In this case, all archaeological heritage is under threat, not only the contemporary, although that is usually the most affected. Here, the main 'sub-challenge' is strengthening heritage administrations under the

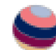


structural precarity of archaeological heritage management. As long as there can be political interference in technical decisions and managers do not have enough tools or resources to enforce them, there is little hope. However, there is also an underlying issue with nationalism that cannot be solved this way either.

Figure 3: Remains of an Ottoman gate in the centre of Belgrade (Serbia). Can you see them? The footprint of the gate and the wall has been engraved in the pavement with no further interpretation at the time of the visit (October 2019). The Ottoman past of the region is still traumatic and conflicted and one can suspect a conscious intervention to minimise the visibility of the site. Photo by the author

5. Challenge 3: What to preserve and how it affects the definition of archaeological heritage

The mantra of preservation by record that expanded with development-led archaeology appears to be a magical solution. However, the criteria to actually preserve *in situ* (and protect) an archaeological site are not always clear and can result in arbitrary and sometimes politically-driven decisions. Here, the concept of value again becomes essential, with a direct connection to popular culture. In any case, the underlying question remains. How can we properly manage all the archaeological heritage we have with the resources allocated to our heritage administrations? And how does contemporary archaeological heritage fit into all of this when we lack clear criteria? The first is a matter of expectations and commitment. The latter is trickier.



Safeguarding archaeological heritage is still understood as the main task of heritage managers in the Mediterranean (according to the interviews, in which most professionals working for a heritage administration stated 'conservation' as their main duty), well above public benefit or actual management (though it is part of it). Development, climate change and looting are probably the main threats to safeguarding heritage, but only the first is efficiently addressed (although we can also discuss the actual success of any management model). Indeed, we set the bar of expectation so high that in the current archaeological ecosystem any result will seem like failure. We have been educated in using an intrinsic value model that makes it very difficult to apply clear criteria. This model is usually based on monumentality, attractiveness, or uniqueness, values that decline as we move towards the present.

Museums probably have clearer guidelines to deal with archaeological archives and with deaccessioning (Vecco and Piazzai 2015), as controversial as that seems. Indeed, Mediterranean countries tend to be more conservative about these ideas. But the pressing matter of exponentially growing archives and curation is the subject of debate. As we speak, millions of artefacts already produced in the 20th century are becoming archaeological. For museum collections, catalogues and well-preserved samples (one of each kind) might be a solution. For the built environment the situation becomes a bit trickier, mainly in habitable areas.

Furthermore, there will always be (as there is now with other historical periods) a conflict between contemporary features and older ones. Which are more relevant? The remains of popular but temporary housing that show a commonly forgotten reality of the urban migration in the mid-20th century or the [place your period of preference] feature beneath which might be interesting but does not explain anything new? What if it is a beautiful Roman mosaic? The foundations of a medieval wall? A Palaeolithic hunting spot? A Bronze Age burial? This dilemma is not new in archaeological heritage management, but so far, in most Mediterranean countries, decisions are arbitrary, and we are far from etablishing clear criteria. Maybe contemporary archaeology can help to reach an agreement by redefining archaeological heritage.

In this sense, the expanding practices, temporalities and remains are themselves a challenge for archaeology (Kiddey and Caraher 2023). Issues like the aforementioned archaeology of forced migrations, the very recent archaeology of Covid-19 (e.g. Magnani *et al.* 2022), or current graffiti archaeology (Frederick 2009; Schofield 2009) question traditional practices with an enormous potential to engage other disciplines and society in a fresher way (Figure 4).

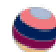


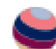
Figure 4: Graffiti in the centre of Athens (Greece) depicting classical motifs. Graffiti archaeology is a growing topic with very different approaches and great potential to understand links between contemporary societies and archaeology. Photo by the author

6. Some concluding reflections

An archaeology of the most contemporary era alters the very fabric of archaeology as a discipline, questioning methodologies and temporalities. Far from a threat, it is an opportunity to rethink our practices and approaches toarchaeological heritage management. In addition to the traditional challenges we face on a daily basis, contemporary archaeology brings new difficulties that are already affecting practice. Some would say we are too far from overcoming some of the structural problems within archaeological heritage management to start thinking about these new challenges, but I believe they can actually help to improve the overall situation.

Some conclusions of the fieldwork conducted by #pubarchMED show that it does not matter what the law says: most of our problems stem from miscommunication and the generally precarious situation of our administrations. In the end, it comes down to individuals responsible for archaeological heritage management to take action, now that the academic sector is already actively engaging with the contemporary world. We are living through a generational change that is also affecting this perspective, a change that is opening up the discipline and its administration. However, the tools are limited and substantial effort is needed when we have to face the general challenge of managing contemporary archaeological heritage using the traditional directives of archaeology.

Will we change the definition of archaeology now? At the moment, any materiality present on our planet (and beyond) can be studied under the scope of archaeology



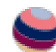
and, therefore, is archaeological (whatever the law may recognise). However, treating everything as archaeology from the point of view of archaeological heritage management seems odd (as odd as setting an arbitrary 100 year limit). Therefore, we might need to change some of the fundamental ideas within archaeological heritage management rather than trying to change archaeology itself.

Figure 5: The Old Mole Head in Gibraltar (United Kingdom). In use until the end of the 19th century, it became absorbed by the city and somehow protected after the construction of a new secondary school over it. The creative solution in a place lacking construction surface would not be very satisfying elsewhere, but seems good enough under the circumstances of Gibraltar. Photo by the author

We can find an extensive bibliography from over the last 30 years on significance assessment, archaeological values and practical management (e.g. standard works like Cleere 1993; Deeben *et al*. 1999). Dozens of case studies exist from different countries that deal with these issues in various ways (see Benetti and Brogiolo 2020 for a comparative study between Italy and England). Yet we still struggle with decisions when the moment comes to intervene in a specific scenario, especially in contemporary archaeological contexts. Indeed, for the most recent contemporary archaeology, we even struggle with the administrative issues.

Within the goals of #pubarchMED, the design of a toolkit for effective management (in process) aims to help decision-making under a range of circumstances. But there are two aspects that we can start working on now.

First, communication between actors. Most of the problems we face in daily practice have to do with misunderstandings and miscommunication. The gear that moves archaeological heritage management is not too complex, but different actors usually lack the whole picture and even have competing interests. Improving communication

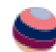


can help to ease procedures and find creative solutions that involve all interested parties. While these solutions are usually invoked for some important archaeological findings, it is rare with contemporary archaeological heritage.

Second is the assumption that public archaeology practices will be used in archaeological heritage management. These two lines of work are deeply entangled but rarely associated in many countries (no, outreach is *not* public archaeology). In short, this means that we need to think not only about the preservation of archaeological heritage, but its impact in society too. Contemporary archaeology is an exceptional environment for this practice due to the live link it has with the surrounding communities. This not only helps to unpack social values and preferences, but can also improve preservation and monitoring enormously (Almansa-Sánchez 2021).

Figure 6: The family house of opera singer Maria Callas in Neochori (Greece) seems to be a place of interest in the small village, but the excellent work conducted in the management of nearby ancient Messene or the surrounding monasteries, seems to be absent from this contemporary heritage site. Photo by the author

Coming back to the original challenges, I do not have an answer. What seems clear from the research conducted is that no single proposal will apply to every circumstance, and we need to be flexible under some common criteria. Many of the structural problems that affect archaeological heritage management are difficult to address without political intervention. Therefore, the main challenges of contemporary archaeological heritage management will probably be with us for some time. In any case, we need to stay open-minded and have something clear: archaeology is not (only) about the past anymore and the opportunities that contemporary archaeology brings, as in the Mediterranean context, should encourage us to continue rethinking and experimenting with better practice.



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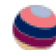

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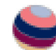

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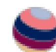

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