Ten Years On: The Community Archaeology Project Quseir, Egypt

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Abstract

The Community Archaeology Project Quseir (CAPQ), Egypt, celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2008. The longevity of the project is a testament to its success. In this paper I shall outline the history of the project and detail the various developments that have enabled the project to grow together with the local community.

Developing a clear methodology and acknowledging education as the cornerstone of community archaeology have been at the heart of the project from the very beginning. Receiving the first academic grant awarded to a community archaeology project in which determining a methodological strategy for community archaeology was the explicit aim, the CAPQ provides the most explicit methodology for community archaeology published to date. Helping to establish community archaeology as a research topic in its own right, the CAPQ demonstrates the potential for collaboration and reciprocal learning between seemingly distanced cultural and geographical, archaeological and local communities.

Keywords: Community archaeology; Methodology; Education.

Resum. Fa ja deu anys: el projecte d'arqueologia i comunitat de Quseir, Egipte

El projecte d'arqueologia i comunitat de Quseir (CAPQ), Egipte, va celebrar el seu desè aniversari el proppassat 2008. La llarga durada del projecte fa palès el seu èxit. En aquesta presentació explicaré breument la història del projecte detallant els diversos processos que han permès el creixement conjunt del projecte amb la comunitat local.

El desenvolupament d'una metodologia clara i el reconeixement de l'educació com a pilar central dels projectes d'arqueologia i comunitat han format el nucli del nostre projecte des de l'inici. El fet de rebre el primer finançament acadèmic per un projecte d'arqueologia i comunitat, amb l'objectiu explícit de determinar una estratègia metodològica per a aquest tipus de projectes, fa que CAPQ proporcioni la metodologia més desenvolupada publicada fins a l'actualitat. De la mateixa manera, demostra el potencial de col·laboració i d'aprenentatge mutu entre les comunitats arqueològiques i locals, aparentment distanciades culturalment i geogràficament, ajudant a establir els projectes d'arqueologia i comunitat com a camp d'investigació per dret propi.

Paraules clau: arqueologia comunitària; metodologia; educació.

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Resumen. Hace ya diez años: el proyecto de arqueología y comunidad de Quseir, Egipto

El proyecto de arqueología y comunidad de Quseir (CAPQ), Egipto, celebró su décimo aniversario en 2008. La longevidad del proyecto es el testimonio de su éxito. En esta aportación esbozaré la historia del proyecto y detallaré los diversos procesos que han permitido el crecimiento conjunto del proyecto con la comunidad local.

El desarrollo de una metodología clara y el reconocimiento de la educación como el pilar central de los proyectos de arqueología y comunidad han conformado el núcleo de nuestro proyecto desde sus inicios. Gracias a haber recibido la primera financiación académica para un proyecto de arqueología y comunidad con el objetivo explícito de determinar una estrategia metodológica para este tipo de proyectos, CAPQ proporciona la metodología más desarrollada publicada hasta ahora. Asimismo demuestra el potencial de colaboración y aprendizaje mutuo entre las comunidades arqueológicas y locales, aparentemente distanciadas cultural y geográficamente, ayudando a establecer los proyectos de arqueología y comunidad como un campo de investigación por derecho propio.

Palabras clave: arqueología comunitaria; metodología; educación.

Introduction

The greatest challenge confronting the modern discipline of archaeology is to develop a balance between «expert» and «public» in order to maintain relevance to the lives of people today. This paper aims to address this issue through the examination of community based strategies for the exploration and representation of the city of Quseir on the Red Sea coast, Egypt. Although focusing of a specific example, the groundbreaking work at Quseir has implications for the wider future of archaeology. Incorporating collaborative, community based methodologies, cross disciplinary knowledge and addressing the general invisibility of «nonspecialist» communities in archaeological and historical narratives, Quseir demonstrates the potential for archaeology to find relevance with new audiences and engage with current debates concerning identity, citizenship, heritage and beyond.

Since the end of World War II we have seen a considerable shift in the global order. The role of archaeology in the discussion of human history is changing (MacDonald 1996). It is now acknowledged that archaeology and its associated practices «construct the past» (Moser 2003: 3). Over the last two decades those working within the cultural fields of archaeology, museology and anthropology have, therefore, begun to consider the powerful role that their disciplines play in the creation of knowledge and thus, their impact on the formation of modern identities (e.g. Karp and Lavine 1991, Ames 1992, Coombes 1994, Bennett 1995, Dean 1996, Lidchi 1997, Moore 1997, Roberts 1997, Hein 1998, Herle 2000, Hooper-Greenhill 2000, MacDonald 2002).

Post-war, post-modern theories propose a relative concept of history. Recognising the impossibility for one person or culture to «decode» fully another (see e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1987, Tilley 1991, Hodder and Hutson 2003), and that history is re-written every generation, does not however necessitate the acceptance of complete cultural relativism. By taking a critical stance, mediating between diverse competing narratives and accepting the fact that meaning is «produced» by present day societies within specific contexts, we can begin to engage in meaningful dialogues within and between cultures. Thus, by considering community based approaches, the changing needs of audiences and by taking a more reflexive stance, archaeology has begun to see beyond the tunnel vision of its imperial roots.

Coinciding with the ideological shift taking place within all realms of heritage ethics, we have also witnessed archaeology take a step away from a narrow focus on «things and places» to a greater consideration of anthropogenic issues (Barker 2003: 71) and the social relationships —public and professional— that revolve around locations and objects (see Lynott 2003, chapters in Zimmerman et al 2003, Smith 2004). It has become clear that any form of heritage based discussion of ethics cannot be encompassed by an explicit set of rules. If the discourse is to maintain credible ethical awareness, ongoing negotiation, critical reflection and debate are essential between all those (people and things) affected by the exploration and presentation of the past. This means that change is slow as, whilst practitioners readily acknowledge the necessity for innovation and collaboration, few explicit methodologies have been proposed. Community based, collaborative archaeological approaches

therefore offer one such inclusive methodology and highlight the potential of the subfield to address current issues of heritage, identity and citizenship. The CAPQ is an ideal platform for discussions of this type, as diverse, ongoing collaboration between archaeologists and local community members not only address issues of ownership and knowledge production, but also geographical distance and the divisions of politics, language and culture. Aiming to expound upon these issues, I begin my discussion by detailing the broad framework of the CAPQ: location, history and methodology. Building upon the foundations of the 2002 publication, Transforming archaeology through practice: strategies for collaborative archaeology and the Community Archaeology Project at Quseir, Egypt (Moser et al), I proceed from the contextual to outline the specific Quseir sub-projects which have developed from, and alongside, this methodology. Helping forge a more rigorous, socially relevant discipline, this paper brings the CAPQ up to date and demonstrates the potential for «lived», collaborative archaeology to challenge the hegemonic roots of the discipline and find real value in the world today.

Locating Quseir

Situated in a dry, inhospitable environment, sandwiched between the Red Sea and the mountain foothills of the Eastern Desert, the modern city of Quseir has a rich and turbulent history. Located some 600 kilometres south of Cairo, 150 kilometres from the banks of the Nile (fig. 2), Quseir is building a new identity as it transforms itself from a fishing village into a tourist hideaway. Approximately eight kilometres

to its north, now opposite a stretch of modern hotels, lie the remains of Quseir al-Qadim (Old Quseir). The site, a Roman (1st Century BC to 3rd Century AD) and later Mamluke harbour (13th-15th Century AD), is of considerable archaeological significance (see Peacock 1993: 232, Blue and Dix 1999, 2000). First excavated in the late 1970s by a team from the University of Chicago (see Whitcomb and Johnson 1979, 1982), it was concluded that the site constituted the remains of the small Roman port of Leucos Limen (the white harbour) (fig. 1). Further investigation, however, conducted by David Peacock and a team from the University of Southampton, revealed Quseir al-Qadim to be of much greater archaeological importance.

In five field seasons held between 1999 and 2003 (see Peacock et al. 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003), the wealth of artefacts (see www.arch.soton.ac.uk/research/quseir), including the discovery of a papyrus fragment, dated 25th March AD95, almost undoubtedly confirmed the site to be the Ptolemaic and Roman port of Myos Hormos. Alongside its sister port Berenike, some 300km to the south, the port was central in trading networks between Rome, the Mediterranean and the East. Abandoned and then reoccupied sometime in the 13th century, the site then became an important Mamluke centre and waqf port, acting as a hub for trade and place of passage on the pilgrimage route to Mecca and Medina.
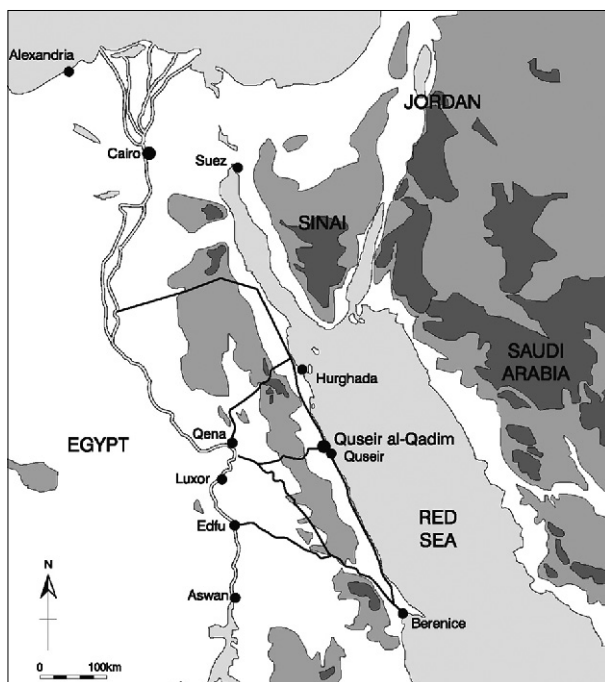

Figure 1. Egypt map with the location of Quseir al-Qadim.

The history of the modern settlement of Quseir is of equal interest. Developing since the early 16th century, the town continued to grow under a succession of rulers: Ottoman, French, English and Egyptian. Shifting in primary role from a trading post, to a Hajj port, phosphate centre and, at present, tourist hub, Quseir presents a distinct environment for collaborative archaeological practice (fig. 3). However, whilst on the one hand the city, embedded in a wealth of archaeological and historical narratives, appears ideal for the community approach, it simultaneously poses significant challenges to the collaborative ethos due to the diverse cultural backgrounds, identities and interests represented. Under the invitation of the director of excavation, David Peacock, Stephanie Moser initiated the community archaeology project in order to explore the role of the past in the present within this unique context. Therefore, developing an understanding of what and who comprised and comprise the ever changing modern community of Quseir was, and remains, essential.

The Community of Quseir

There is no one definition of community. On a basic level «community» can be defined as the group of individuals living in the vicinity of the area being investigated. Implying a sense of cohesion and solidarity, created through a common interest in a shared locale (Gilroy 1987:247), this notion of community cohesion, as with the notion of identity, is however «created» as opposed to «authentic» (see Anderson 1983, Gilroy 1987: 247, Urry 1995: 71).

The community of Quseir is as inhomogeneous today as it was in the past. Quseir is multifaceted and supports as many internal differences as similarities (Hall 1990), thus it is important to avoid essentialism in the representation of the contemporary views of the community, just as with narratives of the past. Following the work of CAPQ team member Darren Glazier (2003), a location based context was found to be most appropriate in regard to the specifics of Quseir. Glazier defined the local community to refer «solely to the people who live within, or close to, the modern city of Quseir» (Ibid. 2003: 15). This particular definition, as opposed to a community classification based on length of familial ties or roots, makes it possible to talk about the community without enforced homogenization, since the multiple, intersecting identity constructs of class, gender, religion, economic status, ethnicity and sexuality, can be addressed.

Overcoming the archaeological tendency to ignore present-day, non-Western communities that are not considered to be «biological descendants» (Singleton and Orser 2003: 144), a greater appreciation of diaspora within a modern, localised community enables the sub-discipline to move forward. Avoiding the danger of encouraging individuals to locate their own identities within a particular past, this approach also reveals how this past is perceived in relation to the present. Therefore, the important factor in the Quseir case is that the community is unified through location (the city itself), sharing the history and experiences which shape individual, everyday notions of local culture, heritage and identity.

Figure 2. The archaeological site of Quseir al-Qadim. Photograph: Gemma Tully.

Figure 3. The beach front in modern Quseir. Photograph: Gemma Tully.

The History of the Community Archaeology Project at Quseir

Like any nation with a colonial past, the Egyptians have suffered under the hand of Western appropriation (see Reid 1997, 2002, MacDonald 2000, Meskell 2001). However, whereas indigenous populations in Australia (e.g. Field et al. 2000) and North America (e.g. McDavid 1997, 1999, 2000) have increasingly been involved in archaeological research, Egypt, like many other recently independent nations, has been neglected. This oversight stems from differing social and political climates. Whereas, both Australia and North America are regularly faced with the juxtaposition of «indigene» and «coloniser», modern Egypt, now independent[2], falls largely outside the daily concerns of Western powers. Even though «The West' still lays claim to much of Egypt's ancient past (Mitchell 1991, Reid 2002, Moser 2006), the lack of direct communication between Egyptian and Western archaeological communities explains why the community approach has been neglected in Egypt and in other, similarly placed, socio-political contexts.

The CAPQ, conceived in 1998 and set in motion in 1999, represents the first attempt of its kind to bridge the gap between the traditional archaeological boundaries of «expert» and «local» in Egypt. Dealing with modern Quseir as much with its past, the CAPQ also received the first academic grant awarded to a community archaeology project in which determining a methodological strategy for community archaeology was the explicit aim (Moser et al 2002, Tully 2007 see also Gero 1989, Meehan 1995, Field et al 2000). Providing the most explicit methodology for community archaeology published to date (Moser et al 2002, developed in Tully 2007) and helping to establish community archaeology as a research topic in its own right, the CAPQ demonstrates the potential for collaboration and reciprocal learning between seemingly distanced cultural, geographical, archaeological and local communities. Suggesting not only what needs to be done, but how and why such practice would be beneficial in strengthening archaeological knowledge and community identities, the CAPQ methodology is not intended as a «recipe» but more as a means of facilitating and offering ideas for effective collaborative involvement in the study of the archaeological resource (Ibid.: 220, 229). The seven key components proposed for the conduct of community archaeology include (Ibid.: 229-242):

1) Communication and collaboration
2) Employment and training
3) Public presentation
4) Interviews and oral history
5) Educational resources
6) Photographic and video archive
7) Community controlled merchandising

Numerous research projects have been carried out which, between them, discuss and combine all aspects of the CAPQ methodology (see Philips 2001, Conner 2001, Conner et al. 2002a, 2002b, Earl 2002, Glazier 2003, Slack 2003, Jones 2003, 2004, 2008, Tully 2005, forthcoming, Smith 2006). It is to these vari-

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2. Egypt gained full independence from British control after the 1952 revolution which led to the formation of the Egyptian Republic in 1953.

ous research projects that I now turn. Demonstrating how a community archaeology project can become truly inclusive on the local scale, I also expand upon the traditional boundaries of the sub-discipline to address the potential role for collaborative, heritage, culture and identity debate in the wider national and international arena.

Communication and Collaboration-Employment and Training

Communication and collaboration represent the foundations upon which all other aspects of community archaeology are built. Similarly, though not the focus of an exclusive set of research at Quseir, employment and training for both archaeologists and community members are integral to the success and sustainability of a project. All of the CAPQ research projects have developed from the core principles of communication and collaboration and have necessitated various levels of employment and training, from the hiring of a full-time community archaeologist within the city to the development of community led merchandising. These two methodological aspects are therefore implicit in the discussion of the five remaining elements of the CAPQ methodology below. Naturally, one needs to keep in mind the fact that collaborative research carried out in Quseir encompassed not just two or three of these methodological factors but most, if not all, of the seven points outlined. However, for the sake of

clarity, I shall work through each of the remaining methodological points to outline the projects that worked most closely within each.

Public Presentation

Numerous collaborative projects have explored strategies for the presentation of Quseir, ancient and modern, for both the local and visiting audience. Building upon interview and oral history, these projects aimed to represent equally both the local and the archaeological narratives. James Phillips (2001) looked at the way in which archaeological «objects» are created and the tradition through which archaeology classifies objects as solely «of the past.» Working collaboratively through interviews, Phillips proposed local interpretations of the objects found at Quseir al-Qadim as a means through which different «object life-ways»[3] could be incorporated into the proposed Quseir heritage centre. As part of a wider methodology aiming to construct museum displays that look at the whole life of an object and the role that both archaeological and subaltern perspectives can play in the creation of different ways of «knowing» objects, this research promotes a view of objects that is not just «of the past», to reveal their importance in the continual development of meaning in the present.

Alistair Jones' work spans over six years of collaborative research with various members of the Quseir community (2003, 2004, 2008). Considering the rep-

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3. Phillips uses the term object life-ways in a similar sense to that of object biographies (Kopytoff 1986, Appaduari 1986, Gosden and Marshall 1999, Holtorf 1999). The term «life-way» is however preferred as it implies a less linear object narrative which is more suitable to collaborative strategies for the discussion and presentation of the past.

resentation of Egyptian heritage in the museum environ, Jones suggests community based strategies for the development of exhibitions, ranging from the specific context of Quseir to the wider «retelling» of the Egyptian past in British museums (see also Tully forthcoming). Through collaborative work with individuals from the Quseir community, alongside findings from numerous literary, political, archaeological and anthropological sources, his work discusses the potential of folkloric and «performative» narratives to weave together the ancient and the modern in the communication of more representative perspectives of Egypt. Egyptian approaches to the structure and content of exhibition messages are also central to this goal. Challenging the «museological distancing of the "other" by actually seeking to drive elements of the display of Egyptian archaeology with the narratives and memories of modern Egypt« (Jones 2008: 69), Jones represents a truly revolutionary approach to the issue of public presentation within collaborative archaeological practice.

Interview and Oral History

Essential to the sharing of knowledge, interview and oral history represent the main format through which community archaeology can begin to establish effective modes of communication. Drawn from 170 interviews conducted with both local residents and archaeologists in the city of Quseir, Darren Glazier's Ph.D thesis (2003) examined the relationship between archaeology, archaeologists and members of the local community. The work provides a unique insight into the role of the past in the construction of contemporary community identity within Quseir. Reflecting a local identity that is simultaneously defined by the area's archaeology, history and folklore, Glazier demonstrates the «richer texture» of an archaeological narrative that incorporates the oral history of local communities. Glazier's work complements both collaborative practice and socio-political analysis in archaeological scholarship, but goes beyond the limits of these studies to push the boundaries of the sub-discipline by demonstrating the potential of collaborative archaeological partnerships to generate research questions and data of interest and relevance to all parties.

Educational Resources

In 2001 Andrew Conner submitted his Masters thesis, Sharing Stories, Drawing on the Past. Detailing strategies for the production of educational resources for the CAPQ, Conner focused on the development of collaboratively written children's books about the Roman and Mamluke eras at Quseir al-Qadim. Aimed at developing history resources for children of primary age within the Quseir community, the books also went towards community controlled tourist merchandising. Examining the most effective way of presenting the past to young children in the collaborative archaeological context, this research also took into consideration other elements from the community project, such as excavations, local modes of learning and daily life experiences. With this community informed understanding in place, Conner developed working strategies for archaeological programmes which took into account education in the context of cultural difference, for example

between Egyptian and British groups. The result was the creation of a resource that was both educationally and commercially viable whilst remaining fully collaborative and the product of communication with all relevant groups: children, school teachers, local people and archaeological specialists.

With the aim of furthering educational resources, in 2004 I began work on the Quseir Schools Learning programme (QSLP) (see Tully 2005) (fig. 4). From the work of Conner (2001) and discussions with the Quseir teachers it became clear that traditional, Westernised education programmes, such as those used in most museums (e.g. The Ashmolean Ancient Egypt Resource Pack n.d., Lloyd et al. 1991, Watson 1991, 1997, contributions to Hooper-Greenhill 1994), were not suitable for discussions concerning the past in the Egyptian context, nor within the collaborative framework of community archaeology. Such teaching methods would merely impose archaeological perspectives on the local children rather than discovering their thoughts pertaining to Quseir's past. Therefore, a creative learning project, the QSLP, suited to both the cultural environment and the community archaeology ethos, was developed. Building upon the earlier success of children's books co-authored by two of the project members and the local community archaeologist (see Conner et al. 2002a, 2002b), the QSLP tailored resources and activities to the story telling, folkloric and imaginative way that many Egyptians learn about the past (see Glazier 2003, Jones 2003, 2004, 2008). Developing active, imaginative, people centred, culturally relevant methods of communication (see Hari and Akos 1988, Rogers & Freiberg 1994, Nanzhoo 1996, OECD 1996, Delors 1996, Christal

et al. 2001, Jarvis et al. 2003, Jarvis 2004), the QSLP has since produced collaborations that are both popular and relevant to local children, adults, visitors and the archaeologists (fig. 5).

Photographic and Video Archive

The work of Graeme Earl (2002) and Nicole Smith (2006) represents a combination of public presentation and the production of photographic, video and digital archives for the CAPQ. Whereas Earl used 3D modelling to deal with the issue of «reconstructing» Quseir's heritage, Smith, after a request from the Quseir community, formed a web based recourse to present the dataset from the CAPQ to the World Wide Web community. Created in total collaboration with a focus group from Quseir, Smith's project involved a consideration of the ways in which community archaeology has been applied online in the past, and how internet multimedia resources can be used to enhance the future communication of community archaeology as a whole. The project also produced a downloadable advice pack to aid other such projects in the creation of an effective, community based, collaborative online tool.

Aiming to bridge the digital divide between nations and create a community driven forum for discussion, positioning Quseir residents as «participants» rather than «audience», Smith combined advances in internet communication with the need for effective, organically evolving internet resources within collaborative archaeological practice. In this case, representing Egypt's multiple pasts in the present, the research reveals the potential for an online resource both to store an archive

Figure 4. Local children involved in the Quseir Schools Learning Project (QSLP). Photograph: Gemma Tully.

Figure 5. «Swaping Stories» Local Bedouin children tell the history of their tribe through song. Photograph: Gemma Tully.

of information and reflect the multiplicity of meanings surrounding such data in order to avoid static representations of culture.

Community Controlled Merchandising

Working within the collaborative context, Kathryn Slack (2003) developed a methodology to facilitate the production of a range of souvenirs inspired by the discoveries at Quseir al-Qadim and the history of the modern city. Combining community archaeology with the anthropology of tourism, theories of museum shop marketing and research carried out in British, North and Central American and Egyptian museums, Slack worked with members of the Quseir community to promote a series of objects «inspired by» not «copied from» the local past . Working with the local community in all aspects, from the design of items through to production and sale, the proposed merchandising methodology would both enhance the sustainability of the wider CAPQ and offer a locally relevant alternative to the Pharaonic souvenirs that dominate the Egyptian market.

Conclusion

All of the projects outlined above discuss the potential for their underlying principles to be employed, where appropriate, in community archaeology projects elsewhere. More importantly perhaps, the diverse components that contribute to the success of the CAPQ demonstrate the need for equilibrium between the study of the past and its use in the present. Representing «living» elements of an ongo-

ing project, these resources are not finite but part of continuous collaborative involvement and development. Addressing identity, heritage and citizenship, the Quseir example therefore highlights how archaeology can «become a relevant social science that says something about culture, selves and difference both in antiquity and in a contemporary setting» (Meskell 1999: 224).

People need to find «common ground» to engage meaningfully with past dialogues. Playing a vital role in maintaining the balance between the past, the present and the future, community archaeology therefore offers, at present, the best way to meet the needs of diverse cultural and intellectual communities. The research, however, also highlights a yet unsolved problem within the sub-discipline, as, although promoting collaboration at all stages of community archaeology practice, archaeologists, partially due to the epistemological background of academia, still struggle to escape the role of the professional. Leading to the propagation of community marginalisation, which this form of discourse is ultimately trying to challenge, the sub-discipline still needs to readdress the unification of individuals with common interests in the past on an equal level.

One way of addressing the paradoxes implied by the collaborative ideal is to emphasise that academic output is only one (small) part of the process; it is the longer term outcomes that are most important. The CAPQ addresses this issue through the diversity of elements, beyond the academic, involved in its subjective, self-reflexive projects, which challenge the divide between expert and non expert in the shaping of knowledge. Following the lead of CAPQ team member Alistair Jones

(2008: 15-18), we therefore need to promote the term «collaborative archaeology» as it is does not epitomise the archaeology led, aid giving connotations of «outreach», «public» and even «community archaeology». Jones suggests «collaboration in archaeological practices is about rehabilitating fiction within non-fiction, realigning centre and periphery; it is about being prepared to study the myths, the fictions people live by and seeking to include them within empirical enquiry, even if it means that this enquiry is irrevocably changed in doing so» (Jones forthcoming: 16). Admittedly, it is difficult to escape «expert» led, collaborative archaeological practice, especially as we have the power to represent communities through publications like this, for example. However, balance can be achieved if community members play a more active role. Rather than being simply «informed» by the archaeology or asked opinions on exhibitions only to be ultimately over-ruled, communities need to be fully involved, positioning archaeologists as «stewards» (Zimmerman 1995, Lynott and Wylie 2000) as opposed to «leaders» to enable true compromise and the negotiation of multiple identities and heritage narratives.

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