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Amiternum Project: Archaeology as Social Development's Engine

The contribution aims to describe the "Amiternum Project," one of the points of the University's Strategic Plan. The aim of this project is to transform the archaeological area in a short time into a virtuous example of cultural welfare. Archaeology, therefore, conceived as a form of salutogenesis, would be transformed into a useful tool for the prevention of social and cognitive decay, as well as a means of overcoming the cultural divide, through the tools of culture, inclusion and active involvement of the population, leveraging the "founding myth" that the city of Amiternum has always constituted for the entire L'Aquila area, surrounding towns and small villages. The most relevant aspect of the project is the promotion of active participation of citizens in the enhancement of the territory in an exercise of identity self-representation, the peculiarities of its heritage and culture.

Keywords:
Archaeology; digital humanities; enhancement; dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

The “Convenzione di Faro”, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe on October 13th 2005, declares that cultural heritage “holds a key position regarding the identity process and social development of communities and territories. Museums, archaeological sites, and remnants of the past in both urban and rural areas are often at the core of important projects wherein remembrance, belonging, and economic growth acquire a particular relevance, showing how cultural assets can intervene and fulfil the needs of the present.” It is in view of this that L’Aquila University’s project of making a creativity lab out of “Campo Santa Maria” ad Amiternum began: a 1500-year-old archaeological site with seven buildings thus far identified, in an area rich in archaeological and monumental findings and high in historical and cultural value.

For this purpose, it was essential to implement every useful tool for proper historico-archaeological research, conservation, protection, and, lastly, for the site’s promotion, with functional and efficient didactical and educational tools to “narrate” the story that we are rediscovering.

Through specific settings and promotion strategies, our ultimate aim is to promptly turn it into a virtuous example of cultural welfare.

Archaeology, conceived as *salutogenesis* [1], would therefore turn into a useful tool for the prevention of social and cognitive decline, and aid for overcoming the cultural divide, through cultural tools, the active inclusion of members of the public, playing on the “founding myth” that the city of Amiternum has always represented in the territory of Aquila and its smaller neighbouring burghs.

KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE EDUCATION: A MATTER OF LANGUAGES

An archaeological project, designed to enhance knowledge about a territory and to subsequently promote and educate, can only work if the com-

munity to which it belongs is at the centre of the project itself.

Italian archaeology has spent many years deeply pondering the critical moment it is undergoing regarding its communication and inability to transform scientific skills into public engagement that sufficiently valorises the territory studied (Valenti 2018, p.7) and nourishes a healthy sense of local pride.

This communicative inadequacy is probably the result of a cultural delay that is been troubling Italian archaeology for several decades, caused by an elitist conceptualisation of the discipline, that still considers education as a peripheral activity to scientific research (Volpe, De Felice 2014, p. 402). Often, this cultural delay is the result of a significant lack of methodological and technical preparation to face the communication issue with a mature and appropriate attitude on the part of archaeologists, who frequently indulge in narcissistic exhibitionism and mediatic presenteeism.



Fig. 1 - Archaeological area purchased by L’Aquila University.

Fig. 2 - Archeological issues rediscovered during the investigation

Lo scavo: Le emergenze archeologiche



Salvatore Settis, when the Riace Bronzes were discovered, condemned this phenomenon and referred to the archaeological community's "disregard for the public and the inability to find a language to truly communicate with them" (Settis 1981, p. 25).

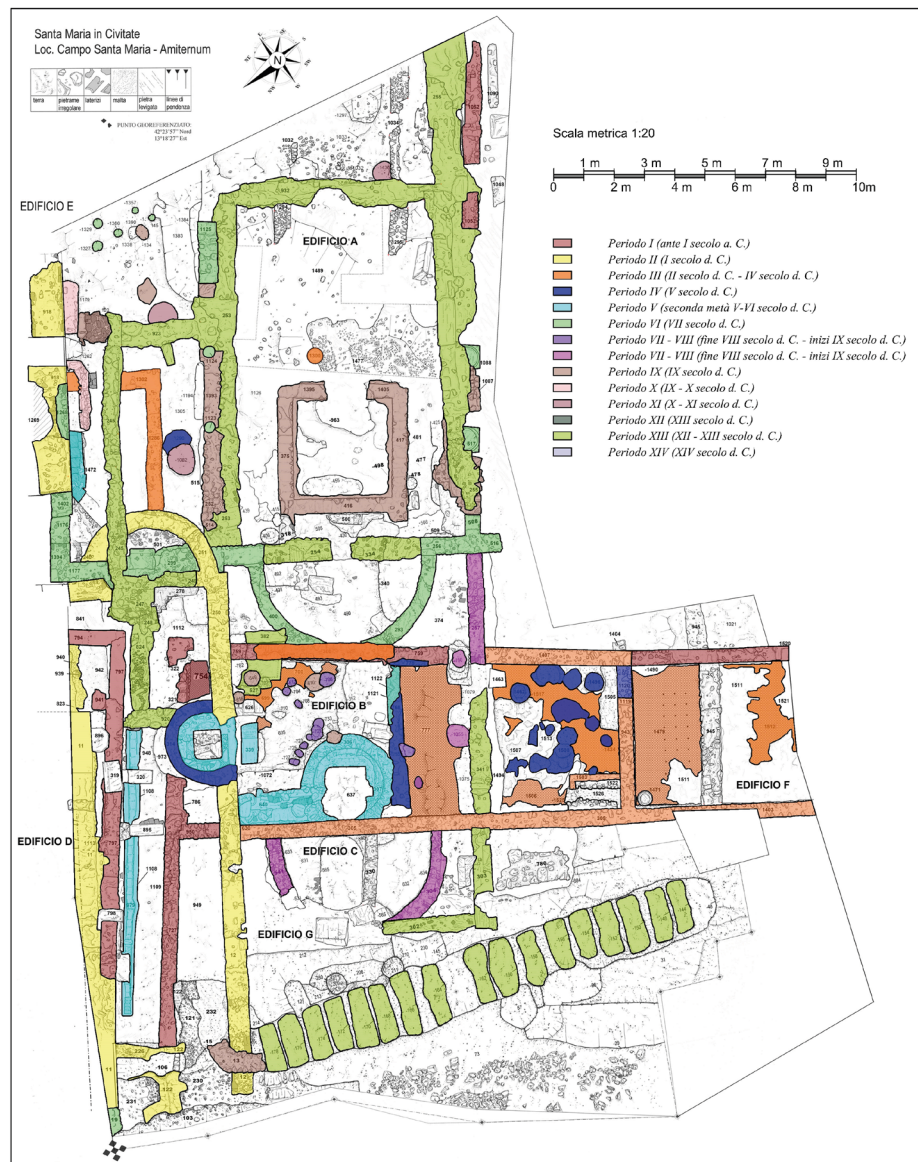
Before dealing with the issue of communication, even if it seems obvious, one should clearly ascertain the concept according to which it is necessary to reach an extremely exact interpretations, so as not to falsify history or create impressions that are misleading or too subjective. It is clear, therefore, that the entire communicative and educative issue cannot be overcome if one overlooks an accurate analysis of the historical and archaeological context.

As Giuliano Volpe asserted, "first there is knowledge, there is research, there is study. Being a good researcher certainly does not mean that one is able to communicate with everyone, not only regarding the scientific community (and sometimes not even!) as we have pretentiously believed for a long time as professors, supervisors, and officials. In the same vein however, the work of museum communicators cannot overlook its vital relation to the world of research" (Volpe 2018, p. 8).

Finding a global approach to the matter—not restricted to the single building, historical moment, or archaeological find—is necessary for success (Volpe 2014, p. 406).

Having established this need for deep research, the job of an archaeologist cannot and should not be considered complete after the data are analysed and published in the scientific community: "the final part is without a doubt to convey the results of the archaeological research to the wider audience, and to turn them into educational, didactical tools for everybody's cultural enrichment," (Valenti 2018, p. 9) calibrating the language used, whether visual or "material," in a suitable way.

Fig. 3 - Chronological map with the several buildings rediscovered during the investigation.



Hence, the communicative strategy of an archaeological site, museum, or point of cultural interest, cannot be achieved without following a line of communication that is efficient, empathic, and, above all, conscious of its public audience, without expecting from its members expertise in historical, artistic, or archaeological matters in a culturally elitist way.

Indeed, archaeological areas too often appear to visitors as exclusive places, intended for experts who, with the task of safeguarding and protecting these places in an immutable manner over time, prevent full fruition, too frequently by resorting to methodologies that are incomprehensible for the audience (Manacorda 2014, p. 359).

Archaeologists, historians, and art historians, keep using, without reason, extremely select and niche terminology in the description tags of findings, artworks, and archaeological remains (Volpe 2018, p. 8).

This point of view of archaeological sites reflects an outdated concept, by which only a well-educated elite, that is to say a well-read and interested segment of the population or subject-matter experts, can understand specific and complicated tags (Volpe 2018, p. 8).

AMITERNUM PROJECT

Taking all this into account, this project, aims to bridge the gap between the audience and the archaeological site, taking care especially of anyone who may be worried or intimidated by a lack of specific knowledge, or by those who “consider the “archeologish” lingo to be a sacred and unalterable ancient language that—like bureaucratese—prevents one from thinking “with” the people and, rather, reinforces unconscious self-preservation mechanisms” (Garrubbo 2018, p. 230). L’Aquila University’s firm belief is to make the archaeological site a place that may be visited by all, where everybody may feel at ease as participants in, and integral parts of, history and knowledge, to the point of leaving with the desire to discover new sites and areas of cultural interest (Dal Maso

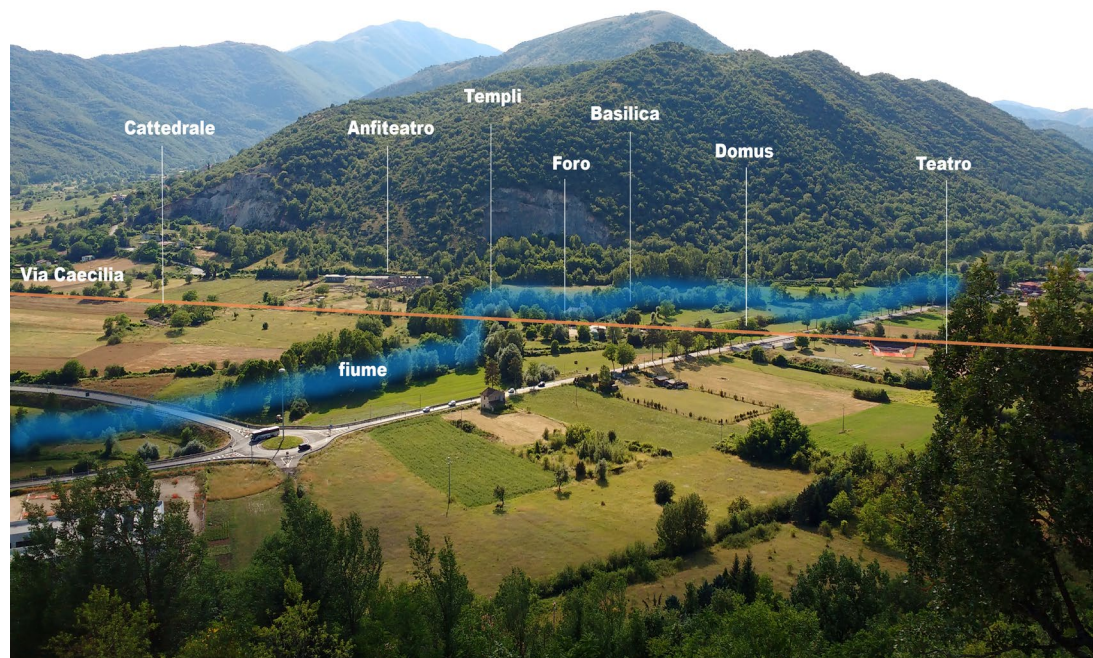


Fig. 4 - Picture of the Amiternum' urban area with the locations of some archaeological issues.

2018, pp. 18-19).

In order to do this, one should not overlook the social, productive and educational value of the project: in some areas of the country considered “marginal,” like the one we have taken into consideration, the educational issue (whether archaeological, historical, humanistic in general) should have as its main objective the cultural growth of people, aiming for cultural “democratisation” and, eventually, the overcoming of the social and cultural gap, which remains prevalent across various segments of the population. Communication and education regarding sites like the ones in question should finally be considered

as topics of extraordinary strategic importance, not only for the promotion the cultural and environmental heritage, but also for their contribution to its safeguarding and protection and, of course, for the creation of new employment opportunities (Volpe, De Felice 2014, p. 402).

It is crucial, therefore, to revive a dynamic relationship with the audience, putting them into real life contexts and involving them in the territory’s history (Valenti 2018, p. 15).

All of this, obviously, is only possible by implementing profound and well-thought-out communication strategies, overcoming a passive and unidirectional communicative method through

audience involvement (Volpe, De Felice 2014 p. 406), without indulging in sensationalistic and exhibitionist language.

The best technique for achieving this goal is to “seduce” (Dal Maso 2018, p.79) the audience in order to make them feel confident and involved in history, whilst at the same time allowing their exposure to new knowledge: the art of storytelling. Nevertheless, audience should not be considered “a whole shapeless crowd, but a cluster of different audiences, with different needs and interests” (Boracchi 2018, p. 204). It is important, therefore, to shape as many distinct communication channels as the number of targets one wishes to reach. The duty of every cultural institution must be to communicate clearly with the wider audience (Garrubbo 2018 p.230); creating a bond and sense of harmony between the artwork, the artifact, the history, and the audience must be the purpose of anybody who is wishing to highlight people’s cultural identity (Di Russo 2018, pp.170-171).

A central role in this area is played by social media, the protagonists of the 2.0 web revolution: the creation of unreal hypertextual spaces has led to an interesting and involving rediscovery of common historical, artistic, and archaeological heritage.

The presence of social media on mobile devices has permanently changed the ways in which we communicate, turning Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, Meta (and every other remote form of social media) into the most valuable sharing and communication tools. Only by exploiting their potentiality, will cultural institutions be able to maintain or take back their role of, and image as, wardens of safe and reliable content (Bonacasa 2011, p.119), so as to not leave this task to improvisatory and, certainly, inadequate operators.

Many, if not almost all, cultural entities and institutions have created and manage pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles, where they “post” pictures, details, and useful information for the benefit of “the remarkable share of “non-public,” that is, the roughly 70% of Italians that do not usually visit museums, but spend at least 2 and a half hours every day—alongside

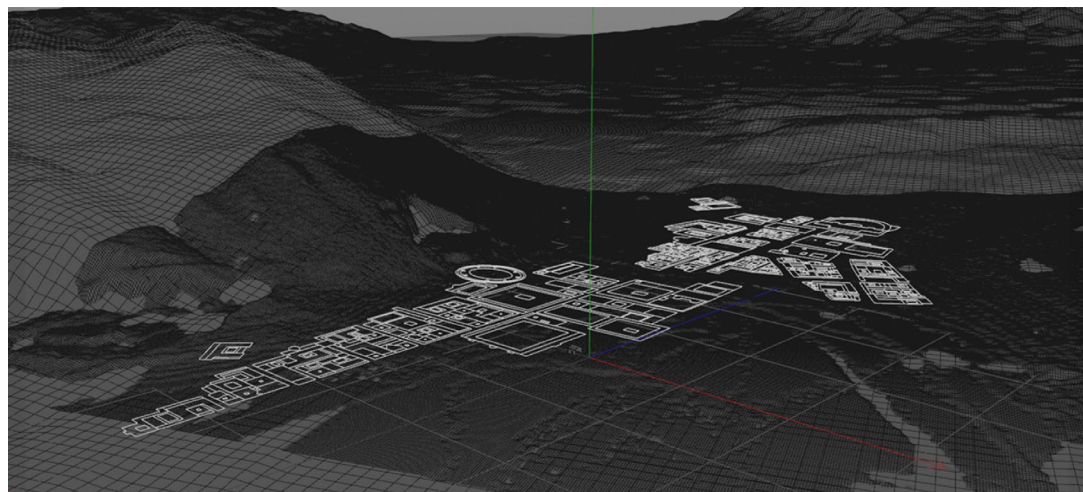


Fig. 5 - Reconstructive hypothesis of the city of Amiternum.

many others—on Facebook (more than 30 million) looking for interesting information” (Garrubbo S. 2018, p. 231).

Making the audience a part of the process, not only by showing them the results obtained after the research is complete, but by involving them from the very beginning of the research itself and sharing everything step by step, could draw the audience closer and create a participatory culture that is suitable for everybody (Revello Lami 2017, pp. 145-146).

Lastly, in order to create a project that is useful for the community, all the segments of population should be reached, making the area an accessible and easily understandable place, also for people with physical and sensory disabilities: to make this possible, three-dimensional tactile models for blind people, Braille texts on the tags, LIS³ video-guides, and special outdoor wheelchair tours have been organised, in order to tear down every kind of communicative or mobility barriers.

AMITERNUM PROJECT: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY LAB FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

L’Aquila University’s investment in the purchasing of the plot of land⁴ upon which rise the ruins of the ancient cathedral of Amiternum, in the heart of Roman city at the gates of L’Aquila, was been carried out for the purpose of turning the site into a truly multidisciplinary laboratory for every facet of the University, not limited to humanistic studies.

The eleven archaeological excavation campaigns led by the Medieval Archaeology team of the Department of Human Sciences, in the “Campo Santa Maria” area of Amiternum, started in 2012, unveiled the monumental remains of what, in all probability, was the first cathedral of Amiternum’s diocese (a summary of the results of the archaeological investigations in Forgiione, Savini 2019).

The stratigraphic investigations and analysis of the considerable materials found has significantly contributed to the discovery of at least 14 periods of activity, in which the structures, ranging between the 1st century BC and the late 14th century

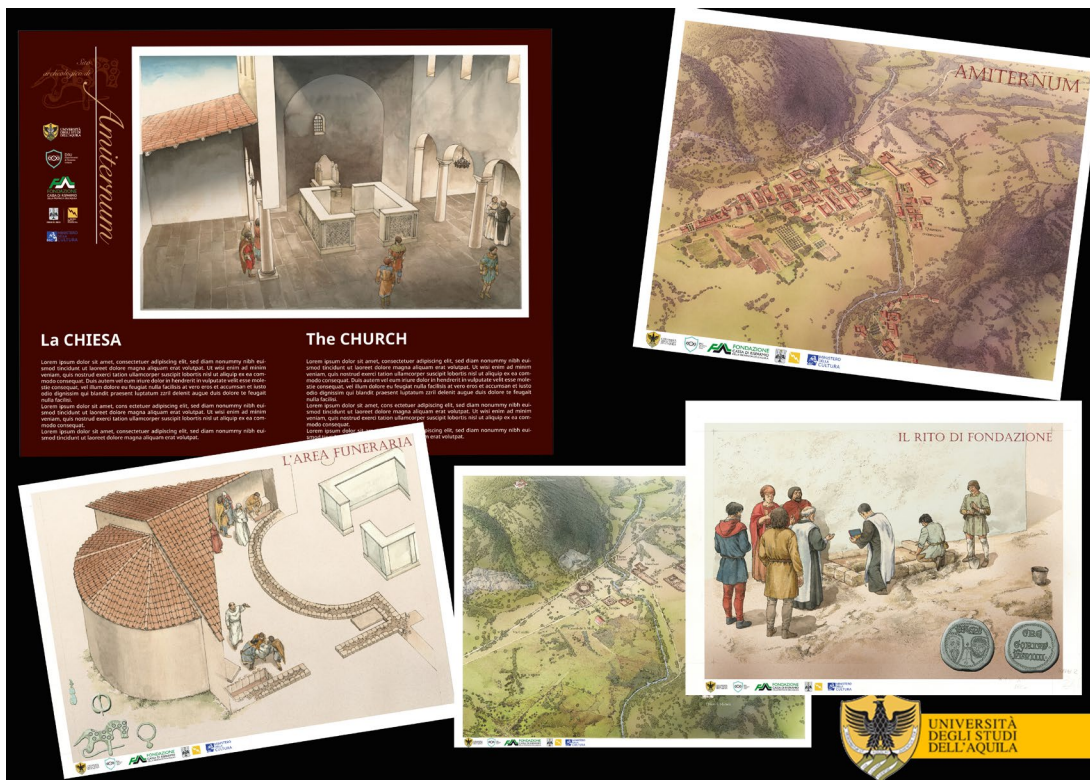


Fig. 6 - The educational-disclosure panels for the new archaeological area.

AD, belong to at least 7 different buildings. The factories identified thus far, products of later additions and overlays, occupied the excavation area several times, only partially incorporating or re-using the earlier structures, thus confirming the centripetal role of the cathedral in the city fabric starting from the late 5th century. The oldest settlement discovered during the investigation consists of a Roman structure from the Republican age that evolves and transforms in the imperial age. During the phases of territory's Christianisation, the site became an object of interest for the bishop, who decided to establish

there the first religious settlement (5th century AD). In Late Antiquity, the site changed into the most important settlement area of the territory—a veritable centre of political and economic power in the region, whose baptismal building has already been located. After the Langobardic conquest of the region, a large cathedral made with 3 naves, measuring 18x27m was built, which then transforms during Carolingian and Ottonian domination, when it loses its episcopal rank to the advantage of the nearby city of Rieti. After the arrival of Normans and during the Suevian domination, the ancient cathedral evolves even more, trans-

forming its structures once again. The history of this site is therefore closely connected to that of the entire territory and particularly to the administrative capital of Abruzzo, which will inherit the diocese and the position of political centre. As already mentioned before, in order to valorise the area and make it a valuable example of scientific communication, a deep knowledge of the site is necessary, and for this reason the project has been included in the Strategic University Plan 2020-2025⁵, creating a specific organisational structure and a Research Team⁶ composed of 15 professors affiliated with L'Aquila University and 7 external experts from the Superintendence, the professional realm, and foreign research institutes. Obviously, the professionals involved do not concern only the humanistic field (which entails the collaboration of historians, museologists, and archaeologists), but also the scientific area and the new technologies applied to cultural heritage: zooarchaeologists, architects, engineers, industrialists, topographer, cartographers, telematic engineers, computer technicians, biologists, geneticists, materials engineers, etc. Moreover, in the interests of a smoother integration of the project into the territory, specific research and external cooperation plans have been activated, in order to widen the breadth of knowledge and the technologies required for the project⁷.

The purpose of all of this is to create scientific supports that are useful for the organisation of immersive and original tours of the archaeological site: the conventional didactic and educational tools, such as inclusive and immersive panels, capable of clearly and easily narrating something complex—without trivialising the matter and data collected—through re-enacted images, Plexiglas panels to recreating volumetry, environments, etc. These kinds of supports should be used alongside highly innovative ones, such as three-dimensional reconstructions, augmented reality, Virtual Reality, to render the tour even more immersive and engaging, turning the archaeological site into an incentive for the local community to actively participate in the activities that are, from time to time,

organized there. The main objective, beyond historico-archaeological research, is to continuously encourage the active participation of the local community and tourists, positioning once again the person at its centre, and make them the protagonist, while limiting technologic innovation, though essential part of this project, to its essential role in this project.

Sure enough, the dangers of excessive detachment—due to the wrong utilization of virtuality and augmented aseptic contents, through which the user approaches the cultural heritage—would bring about the opposite outcome. For this reason, Marco Valenti affirms that “the spasmodic APP research, a typical communicative miracle-cure, now seems to be a syndrome,” so much so that it makes us look trite, even if spectacular, with result of keeping visitors away from the archaeological site (Valenti 2018, p.5).

At the same time, however, a proper application of the new technologies, like the project hopes for

and which will be later described, can provide a crucial contribution in finding the best and more effective communication strategies. Is still essential, though, to always to put the individual at the centre of communication, without necessarily resorting to the ephemeral spectacularisation of history, considering the visitor, tourist, or citizen of their own territory, a mere “consumer” and not a beneficiary.

In the light of this, a right application of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) is essential in the “Amiternum Project.” Keeping in mind that, since 1994, with the launch of the World Wide Web, and during its evolution, users have changed their approach to it. The “first web” user looked for, and read, information, maintaining a passive role and simply absorbing the data from the web (De Notaris 2010, p. 2), whereas now they participate by interacting with “clicked” topics (Oguz, Kajberg 2010, p. 4).

Hence the correct application of new education-

al methods and the openness to a non-elitist or highly-educated audience, heterogenous with a more open and participatory culture of education, is necessary to reaching our goal: that is, the involvement of a wider audience and cultural diffusion on many levels.

Aware of the risks posed by an excessive virtualization of the historical and archaeological heritage, is also important to consider the usefulness of “ [...] widening the catchment area of possible cultural consumers, facilitating new forms of active learning for the community of remote users,” (Kvan, Affleck 2007, p.278-279) with the purpose of bringing people closer to the heritage and history of the territory, creating new forms of participation to reach a wider audience than the one that usually visits these places.

Therefore, ongoing research aims to obtain the effect of cultural addiction, considering ICT as “[...] facilitators, since they can convey immediately, not only the visible heritage for the human senses, but also—and above all—the immaterial, enhancing the appeal of the cultural offer and activating actual interaction mechanisms between the museum, institution, and the user” (Magnelli 2018, p. 194): keeping in mind the copious remains found in the site and elsewhere⁸; this technology would allow the visitor to contextualize the finding (before visiting the museum that holds it) and attend to the details, features, and information through VR, without trivialising or denigrating the scientific research and the contents for the audience” (Magnelli 2018, pp. 190-191).

This way, the visitor will be able to access a thorough historico-archaeological vision, admiring and learning about those findings that have been “discarded” from the display for space- or cost-related reasons.

Furthermore, through digital surveys made with laser 3D scanning equipment, as well as topographic, photogrammetric, and photographic surveys on the already discovered ruins, a philological reconstruction of reliable 3D digital and



Fig. 7 - Examples of immersive visits to the archaeological area

interactive models is already underway, allowing for a virtual tour of the site in loco.

This kind of technology will permit the visitor to understand the original volumetry of the visible ruins, as well as the details (furniture, decorations, etc.) that are not visible anymore or that are concealed by a protective screen.

Only through a well-calibrated application of these instruments, conceived as help for learning and additional information containers, and never as attractions, can the project yield optimal prospects of success to become a truly virtuous model of the valorisation and dissemination of knowledge.

Finally, specific attention has been paid to that portion of population that is seldom happy about visiting museums: children and teenagers. Video-game teaching has been addressed through an educational videogame about and the Sabine city of Amiternum's history and evolution before Aquila's foundation.

The player's target will be to plan the economic and political development of a newly emerging civilization, managing it from the *vici* and *pagi*'s age, through the classic age, to eventually reach L'Aquila's foundation in the Suevian age, in an effort to make this settlement financially and militarily solid.

The videogame features a single-player mode, where it will be possible to join gaming sessions about the narration of Amiternum city's historical phases.

Occasionally, a voice-over will describe to players the unique traits of a historical age in which they find themselves; thus, the player will be able to learn about history through the cross-referential language of videogames, deepening their historic, archaeological, and naturalistic knowledge of L'Aquila's territory and environmental characteristics in a dynamic and interactive way.

The objective of this project is to create a useful didactic tool for elementary and middle schools, making use of gamification's features (using game design's languages and techniques to extrapolate knowledge from a videogame context) to enrich and deepen the knowledge of the territory's

history through the didactical and educational potentiality of a graphic language, which is as attractive and interactive as the one of videogames. The game, furthermore, will "force" the player to visit the archaeological site in order to overcome certain levels, using specific QR-codes placed next to archaeological artifacts.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the above, "Amiternum Project" aims to become a dynamic and inclusive archaeological site, which is able to stirring curiosity and emotions, both through the direct relation with the items and via the mediation of interactive and efficient didactic supports (Manacorda 2008, pp. 238-244; Volpe, De Felice 2014, p. 409) to raise questions, rather than just giving answers.

The most relevant element of the project entails the promotion of citizens' active participation in the territory's valorisation, in an effort towards the self-representation of identity, and of the peculiarities of heritage and culture. Archaeology, together with the other humanistic disciplines, fulfils an essential role in this regard, as it contributes to the enrichment of "social memory" (Manacorda 2008) and to the creation of a "local project" and of "the consciousness of a location" (Magnaghi 2010). It would thus be possible to plan new forms of compatible development through the connection between local identity and alterity, "because only through the knowledge and the full awareness of the complexity of stratified history in the territory is it possible to create openness and curiosity towards other stories, cultures, and other identities" (Volpe, De Venuto 2014, p.412).

NOTE

[1] As science of health's evolution, salutogenesis focuses on the causes of human welfare, instead of the causes of the disease.

[2] A virtual boundary caused by cultural differences that burdens interactions and harmonious sharing between people from different cultures.

[3] The acronym means "italian signs language", a natural language conveyed through the channel of sight and gestures, used in Italy by the deaf community, and it can be used by native deaf people or by people who became deaf afterwards.

[4] There are 5 cadastral units (263, 439, 218, 353 e 278 Page 104 of "Comune dell'Aquila"), about 1 hectare, bought at the end of the year 2019 and now part of the real estate property of "Università degli Studi dell'Aquila")

[5] Section, "Culture and territory" project named «Amiternum e la sua cattedrale».

[6] The organizative structure and the Research Team have been established with the specific Rector Decree:D.R. 588 14/05/20121.

[7] Framework agreement for "Cooperation in the institutional activity concerning study, valorisation and cultural scientific promotion of the site in "Loc. Campo Sant Maria ad Amiternum (AQ), between L'Aquila University and the archaeological arts and landscape Superintendence of L'Aquila and the towns of the area (12/09/2019); Cooperation agreement "Archaeologic maps of L'Aquila municipality project" between Scienze Umane Department of L'Aquila University and the

archaeologic arts and landscape Superintendence of L'Aquila and the towns of the area (29/06/2021).

[8] Specifically, is a matter of more than 30 thousand ceramic fragments, about 230 architectural fragments from the classic age, 21 early maedieval liturgical furniture's fragments, 107 coins (only 65 are clearly readable), 900 glass fragments (only 200 have been dated with certainty), and several metal findings of uncertain attribution, among which some are ascribable to clothing and able to give us useful informations about early maedieval clothing habits.

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