

# Archaeology with and within the community at Old Dongola: a view from the trenches



**Abstract:** This paper explores the implementation of community archaeology at Old Dongola in Sudan from the point of view of the author as a field archaeologist. Focusing on recent efforts to actively involve local communities in archaeological practices, this contribution reflects on how participatory methods can foster mutual trust, address the historical marginalization of local labor, and enhance collaborative interpretation within the trenches. Drawing on the experiences of the UMMA and Dialogue projects, the paper reflects on methodological adaptations that honor local knowledge and address complex community dynamics, including the delicate balance between cultural narratives. By positioning community engagement as an essential, integrated practice rather than a peripheral approach, this case study illustrates the broader potential for community archaeology to bridge the gap between academic research and local heritage, ultimately advocating for its role as a standard in modern archaeological methodology.

**Keywords:** community archaeology, field methodology, theory, collaborative interpretation

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## INTRODUCTION

Community archaeology has become an increasingly influential approach within the broader field of archaeological practice, emphasizing the active engagement of local communities in the research, interpretation, and preservation of their heritage (Oldham 2017: 215). This participatory approach moves beyond traditional methodologies, which often positioned archaeologists as sole interpreters of the past, towards a model that recognizes local knowledge as integral to both fieldwork and heritage management. At sites with complex histories, community archaeology presents unique challenges and opportunities. These challenges include negotiating between historical narratives, addressing local social dynamics, and balancing diverse stakeholder expectations.

In this context, the experience of community archaeology that has been developed at Old Dongola (Fushiya and Radziwiłko 2019; Fushiya 2021a; 2021b; Larsen 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021) stands out as a unique case of a longstanding relationship between archaeology and the local community. Recent archaeological initiatives at Old Dongola have sought to bridge the historical and the contemporary, engaging local laborers and community members

in various aspects of the project. By working closely with local residents, the Old Dongola project has implemented strategies aimed at fostering trust, enhancing knowledge exchange, and creating a collaborative environment within and beyond the excavation trenches.

This paper explores the process of integrating community perspectives into archaeological work at Old Dongola. It considers challenges and complexities that arise when engaging with diverse local identities, as well as practical outcomes of participatory approaches. By concentrating on the perspective of the author as a field archaeologist, this paper reflects on the ways in which community archaeology can foster a more inclusive approach to heritage, while recognizing the potential risks of over-theorizing community involvement. In doing so, it frames community archaeology not as a specialized subfield but rather as a best practice essential to contemporary archaeological research. Through this lens, the Old Dongola case study provides insights into the evolving role of community participation in shaping a shared cultural landscape, one that respects and empowers both past and present narratives.

## COMMUNITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY: A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Over the past five decades, archaeological practice has witnessed a growing emphasis on engaging the general public and local communities in the process of

archaeological research. This shift has evolved from a mere acknowledgment of the need to communicate research findings to a more active involvement

of communities in the design and execution of archaeological projects. Driven by the opening of interpretative possibilities offered by the affirmation of post-processual archaeological theory, the discourse on the public and communities in archaeology has progressed from a growing awareness of multiple potential audiences for archaeological research (McManamon 1991: 123–127), through advancement in the legislative framework of nations impacted by settlers' histories, up to the full realization of the ethical issues involved in the archaeological practice and the necessity to involve the local communities in participatory schemes.

From local heritage management to the participation in the research and interpretation processes, a host of theoretical reflections and practical experiences have affirmed community engagement as a widely acknowledged best practice (Oldham 2017: 215). However, its implementation remains inconsistent across different fields and geographic regions. While certain subfields, particularly those affected by colonial and settlers' pasts, frequently incorporate some form of community engagement and may even be legally mandated to do so, many others still view it with varying degrees of interest, ranging from misunderstanding to full adoption.

Wright's (2022: 278–285) recent survey of archaeological literature highlights how, despite an increase in the number of specialized publications, community archaeology remains underrepresented in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals that shape the general archaeological discourse. This disconnect —between the actual impact of public and community

archaeology and the theoretical perspectives held by practitioners— is underscored by propositions such as Grima's (2016: 55) assertion that “all archaeology is public archaeology”, implying an obligation for all archaeologists to engage with the field. Yet, this ideal is far from reality, and a significant gap persists between core practitioners of community archaeology and the broader spectrum of the discipline. Based on the author's experience within European archaeological contexts, a general unawareness of the fact that any archaeological work involving public interaction inherently requires active engagement still prevails (Schadla-Hall 1999; Oldham 2017). Public engagement is often reduced to a superficial site tour, appeasing public curiosity momentarily while allowing archaeologists to return to their work with as little bother as possible. This approach reflects the persistence of an “ivory tower” mentality within the field — a mindset that disregards the negative consequences of minimal public involvement, such as declining public interest in archaeology and the reinforcement of power imbalances that enable the exploitation of cultural resources (Grima 2016). This disparity between recognizing the benefits provided by community archaeology and its actual successful implementation can be attributed to a multiplicity of factors.

First and foremost, public and community archaeology have not yet reconciled the duality between theoretical reflection and practical activity (Richardson and Almansa-Sánchez 2015: 194–195), with the latter often struggling to adhere to a standard framework because of the wide spectrum of archaeologies,

countries, and social realities where it is practiced (Tully 2007: 155–156). Another critical aspect comes from the way community archaeology is often implemented into research agendas. In many cases, community archaeology is still not part of the original planning of project activities and becomes a later addition that is difficult to integrate with the rest of the project. Conversely, if community participation is planned from the outset, it becomes easier to manage expectations, integrate community contributions into the project's outcomes and interpretations, and, ultimately, ensure everyone's contribution to the final results (Humphries 2019: 53).

Integrating community knowledge into scientific results can be a significant challenge in community-based approaches. Transitioning from a deficit model (Merriman 2004; Richardson and Almanza-Sánchez 2015), where archaeologists hold the sole authority over interpretation, to a more inclusive approach can be difficult. The deficit model is still deeply ingrained in higher education systems, and acknowledging the theoretical potential of community-produced knowledge (Cipolla, Quinn, and Levy 2019) requires a significant mental shift of paradigms. Furthermore, within the constraints and requirements of the scientific publishing system, it can be difficult to integrate community contributions into the final results of the project and to properly acknowledge them (Wright 2022: 285). Equally challenging can be the effort to work toward integrating multiple epistemologies into the archaeological discourse in order to counterbalance the bias inherent to Western perspectives

and foster opportunities of a constructive dialogue with different epistemologies (Stahl 2020).

Creating a genuine collaborative environment within a community can be challenging for archaeologists, especially without the support of a specialist. Issues such as surrendering decision-making autonomy to address potential exploitation and power imbalances (Emberling and Davis 2024) can be particularly difficult to reconcile with the constraints of externally funded projects with rigid timelines and requirements. Additionally, conflict resolution and fostering a participatory environment can be demanding for project leaders, who often find themselves burdened with the additional responsibility of actively managing individuals, mediating personal agendas, and addressing potential conflicts within the community (Chirikure and Pwiti 2008; Young 2015).

Furthermore, the coming of age of the discipline starts to highlight potential pitfalls of community archaeology, such as misunderstanding, misuse, and even harm to local communities. Particular caution is necessary when engaging with marginalized communities, as sensitive topics like historical injustices, traumatic events, and other delicate issues may arise and require ethical handling (Sayer 2022). Projects should prioritize building local capacity and agency for long-term sustainability (Spencer et al. 2024). Ensuring sustainability and autonomy of community-led initiatives is crucial, as initial benefits can potentially turn into harm if not managed carefully. Moreover, recent scholarship (Meskell 2019; 2020; Meskell and Luke 2021) has highlighted how engagement of the local communi-