

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; Obluski 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-

ties inevitably involves a political dimension. Past experiences, especially in the Middle East, have seen ample involvement of archaeologists in the unfolding of contemporary events, often in subordination of wider political agendas. Past attempts to promote local development through cultural heritage have sometimes inadvertently perpetuated the subordination of local populations to Western specialists. This has often involved the imposition of external perspectives and problematic practices, such as the excessive bureaucratization of preservation efforts (Meskell and Luke 2021). Such situations can lead to renewed forms of subordination and marginalization and even be exploited to advance the political agendas of foreign powers seeking to

use heritage as leverage in implementing their international interests.

Finally, community projects may not always be beneficial and can even result in unintended consequences. Engaging the local community can exacerbate pre-existing conflicts within the community, with archaeology inadvertently promoting the interests of certain groups at the expense of others. In cases of pre-existing tensions, choosing a narrative and promoting a shared view of the past can marginalize dissenting voices or advance the political interests or claims of specific community segments (Supernant and Warrick 2014). In such cases it might be better to abstain from any community involvement or from any archaeological project at all.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AT OLD DONGOLA: LEGACY AND NOVELTY

In the complex panorama sketched above, Old Dongola represents a unique case. Sixty years of an almost uninterrupted presence of Polish researchers there created an exceptional and complex relationship between the local community and the researchers. Since 1964, the arrival of the Polish expedition has gradually become a sort of annual event for the modern communities settled in the proximity of the site of Old Dongola. Through a host of significant changes and developments in the society and political circumstances of both countries (Larsen 2021: 85–86), the research at Old Dongola evolved and expanded under the leadership of five consecutive directors. A multitude of specialists, in-

cluding archaeologists, iconographers, epigraphists, conservators, architects, and engineers contributed their expertise to the research done at Old Dongola and guaranteed the conservation of the site and the findings.

At the same time, every year, many inhabitants of the modern villages of Ghaddar and Bokkibil would be directly involved with the Polish expedition. The remarkable discoveries and the significant effort made on the entire site would not have been possible at all without the contribution, through time, of hundreds of local workers. Employed as site workers, cooks, drivers, and providers of many other services necessary for the successful execution of each season

of fieldwork, the local community became an indispensable partner in the execution of the research. Likewise, during its sixty years of seasonal presence, the Polish expedition at Old Dongola became deeply embedded in the local community. With time, the threads of this relationship ran deeper than mere work-related relationships, with many long-standing bonds of friendship and support forming through time. In the words of Stefan Jakobielski, director of the Old Dongola expedition from 1966 to 2006, “We come to the village, and we have to live there. The inhabitants are our neighbors, and we get along with them. They invite us because hospitality in Sudan is infinite” (PCMA UW 2022: 04:32–04:52). This longstanding collaboration has unfortunately been interrupted by the ongoing conflict in Sudan, whose devastating violence has prevented the continuation of research at the site and is inflicting unimaginable suffering on the Sudanese people.

During this prolonged period of co-existence and cooperation, the relationship between the parties has evolved into complex associations. While personal relationships have always been very cordial, formal relationships with the mission and its directors have seen alternating periods of easy or more tense relations. This is naturally understandable for such a long-term project and, partly, results from the government policy on cultural heritage that in the past was inclined to offload heritage preservation and decisions on the holder of the concession, with little direct involvement from the Sudanese authorities (Larsen 2021: 86) and none at all from the local population.

Only recently, the local community started to be involved in the research process, and they engaged in the decision-making processes related to the conservation and management of the local heritage. This development aligns with the ongoing refinement of the methodological approaches employed at the site, which run parallel to the broader advancements within the discipline and the increasing recognition of community archaeology as outlined above. The first attempt at participatory research in Old Dongola saw the realization of specific training opportunities for some of the employees of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) within the context of a conservation and valorization project of the Mosque building on the site (Obłuski et al. 2013).

The implementation, since 2018, of two large-scale research projects at Old Dongola (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021) brought elements of significant novelty in the research process, impacting both the people working in the field and the wider community. The Dialogue community project (DIALOG Grant 0298/2018: “ArcheoCDN Archaeological Centre of Scientific Excellence” project, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Republic of Poland), focused specifically on Old Dongola and related surrounding areas. The project aimed at fostering collaboration and partnership with the local community to achieve mutual benefits. Departing from the colonial approach that views the community as a mere research subject, the project engaged the local partners in the research. The primary objective was

to understand and strengthen the relationship between the expedition and the local community through a series of collaborative actions (Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019: 174–175). Additionally, the Dialogue project explored alternative approaches to tourism to support local development through heritage. At the same time, the ERC Starting Grant “UMMA – Urban Metamorphosis of the community of a Medieval African capital city” (Grant ID 759926) proposed for the first time a systematic exploration of the post-medieval phases of Old Dongola (Obłuski 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021), with a specific focus on the transition period from the late Makurian to the early Islamic (Kingdom of Dongola period) phases of the city. Further details about both projects can be found in the contributions by Fushiya (2025) and Radziwilko (2025) in this volume.

The simultaneous implementation of these two large projects entailed a considerable number of changes that involved archaeological practice at large and impacted both archaeologists and local laborers. It comprised an update of the excavation methodology to modern scientific standards (Dzierzbicka 2021; Dzierzbicka et al. 2024) as well as changes in the finds collection methodology (Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2022: 5–8). For the first time, a comprehensive program of community archaeology targeted at the local communities was planned and executed along with the usual fieldwork (Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019; Larsen 2021; Fushiya 2021a; 2021c), meaning that the community was included in the research process since its

onset and engaged with specific actions implemented by the community archaeology specialists. As an example, in addition to school programs and “open day” site tours that provided opportunities for the local population to interact directly with archaeologists, the project, for the first time, offered community engagement activities targeted at the site workers.

The changes in fieldwork organization were necessitated by the imperative to implement modern scientific standards of archaeological research, which had become essential for pushing forward the research agenda of the site. Consequently, these changes impacted the organization of the work and required a period of adaptation for both the locally hired site workers and the archaeological team. The people engaged in field activities had to (re)learn how to work together, shifting from old paradigms into the new system within this transition period. Some of the locally hired collaborators had been working with the Polish expedition continually for an extended time (Fushiya 2021b: 59–63). While their knowledge of the site and their historical memory of past discoveries have proved useful on more than one occasion, all the people working in the field required a period of adaptation, as the old practices were deeply internalized, or they lacked any considerable experience.

It was also for the first time that the local community was invited to be part of the process of archaeological interpretation. During the digging seasons, a few events were organized that allowed the local population to visit the

site while the fieldwork was ongoing, to take guided tours, and to engage in the interpretation of the archaeological finds. Furthermore, local knowledge holders, such as Sheikh Mohamed Sati Babiker Hilali and Sheikh Abo Bakr

Khalifa Mohamed Zyada (also locally known as Sheikh Babiker Khalifa), shared their expertise and local knowledge of the site's history, enriching the final interpretation of its Islamic heritage.

COMMUNITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AT OLD DONGOLA

A community is a complex, diverse entity that can be challenging to define both in community archaeology practice and from a legal perspective, particularly when determining heritage status (Ozawa et al. 2018). Communities are composed of diverse individuals who may identify with multiple social groups based on factors such as age, gender, occupation, social status, and cultural background. Moreover, individuals often belong to multiple overlapping communities simultaneously (Pyburn 2011; Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019: 173). This complexity can make it difficult to accurately assess and represent the needs of all community members, especially when dealing with sensitive historical issues or potential conflicts of interest.

In the case of a site with complex histories, where the local heritage spans across centuries and different religions and social groups, the choice of which historical phase should be privileged in conservation and research, or which heritage to protect, can be a very divisive factor (McAnany and Hodder 2009: 21). In the case of the communities living near Old Dongola, a significant obstacle to mutual trust was the belief that the archaeologists' primary interest in the site's Christian past might be linked to a desire to proselytize the local population. The

team's efforts to dispel this misconception, particularly through the presence of Sudanese team members who could directly refute such claims, have successfully addressed this issue (Fushiya 2021a: 105). As a result, reciprocal trust, especially with local community leaders, has significantly strengthened. As a general impression, the shift of the primary research focus to the Islamic period seems to have contributed as well to improving the relations with the local community. The choice to concentrate on the Islamic period was made in order to address the existing gap in previous research, which focused mostly on the medieval (Christian) period. Recognizing and exploring this more recent past also aspired to encourage greater community participation in the project.

Certainly, the Islamic heritage is perceived as more relatable, making it easier to engage with the research, but it has to be noted that such relationships might be very complex and personal, while not easily understandable from the point of view of someone who is not part of the community (Näser 2019; Fushiya 2021a). Focusing the research on a previously understudied period also helped to address the bias inherent to much colonial-era archaeology: the prioritization of the distant past of subjugated populations over

their recent history. This prioritization implicitly suggested a cultural inferiority of contemporary populations and their cultures, thereby justifying colonial approaches and policies (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019: 94–95). This perspective affected the field for a considerable time, informing much archaeological research conducted by European archaeologists, even those belonging to nations unrelated to past colonial experiences.

The sense of renewed trust paved the way to an effective cooperation in planning, joint management, community rights, community-based tourism development, local economy, and empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Larsen 2021: 92). Additionally, it was agreed that a collective effort toward a UNESCO World Heritage nomination would be pursued and that the site would be designated as a cultural landscape. This decision effectively unites tangible and intangible heritage, such as oral traditions, ethnicities, languages, Islamic cemeteries, and the so-called “Abandoned Village” (Hillat Dongola), within a broader framework of Dongola’s protected heritage (Larsen 2021: 87–88). This approach aligns with the community leaders’ perspective, which historically has prioritized more recent heritage, even though it may have been marginalized in previous outputs of the research. It also acknowledges the local residents’ interactions with the landscape as a place not only where a significant part of their daily interactions is deployed but also as the container of places of particular personal or spiritual significance. Moreover, this major shift reframes Old Dongola from a mere collection of past structures and artifacts to

a dynamic space that engages present-day actors, including all the stakeholders at the site (Fushiya 2021a: 95).

COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY WITHIN THE TRENCHES

Historically, contributions of local laborers to archaeological projects, including those conducted in Sudan, have often been overlooked or undervalued (Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019: 172). Community engagement projects typically do not prioritize involving site laborers in archaeological discourse, and their knowledge and skills are often regarded as distinct from mainstream archaeological knowledge (Mickel 2021: 29–31). Despite being the community members most directly involved in archaeological research, these individuals are often, paradoxically, overlooked by community archaeology initiatives, occupying a liminal space between the archaeologists and the wider local community. Local workers can face further marginalization due to the disconnect between their contributions and the benefits they receive. While they can contribute significantly to the project, they often do not share in the benefits such as academic degrees, career advancements, and job opportunities that are typically available for other expedition members (Fushiya and Radziwilko 2019: 175; Mickel 2021: 36). They can also be impacted by limited access to the produced knowledge. In the great “colonial” excavation projects of the past, site workers were intentionally kept uninformed about the project’s goals and even removed from the site during significant discoveries to maintain their marginalized status and prevent demands for better economic

treatment (Mickel 2021). Even in contemporary contexts, workers may still experience a lack of knowledge about the ongoing work and exclusion from opportunities to contribute their own perspectives and interpretations. Another significant issue affecting the field team can be the reciprocal lack of trust. On the one hand, archaeologists may not always be willing to accommodate the call of participatory research to inclusiveness and multivocality or even simply entrusting the local laborers with any degree of autonomy related to the execution of their own work. On the other hand, there can be issues of what Mickel (2021: 91–113) has defined as “lucrative non-knowledge”, where experienced workers refrain from revealing their experience and knowledge because they think that this could affect them negatively.

Some of these issues were longstanding also at Old Dongola. Within the framework of the UMMA and Dialogue projects, the community archaeology team addressed them through various community engagement strategies, such as conducting interviews with workers to gather their experiences and organizing events specifically for the local collaborators, like site tours and public lectures, aimed to explain the project’s goals and share its findings. Other issues remained within the trenches and their resolution, or lack thereof, depended exclusively on a mutual effort to renegotiate expectations. This ultimately led to some positive outcomes. As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to note that these observations are based on the author’s firsthand experience as a field archaeologist in the UMMA project and may not

reflect the views of the entire archaeological team, including the community archaeology specialists.

The changes implemented by the Dialogue and UMMA projects significantly impacted all aspects of the archaeological research conducted on the site, raising critical issues and offering valuable insights into engaging the community within the trenches at various levels. While these experiences are specific to this context and largely anecdotal, they are presented here as a reflection on the possibilities of more inclusive approaches to field archaeology. The trench represents the primary and often most intensive point of contact with the local community. It is the place where conflicts can arise and where constant negotiation is required, but it is also the place where participatory knowledge production can first take shape.

From the point of view of the daily work practice, the most significant changes for the field team were the methodological shifts. Initially, these changes caused misunderstandings between workers and archaeologists, with many experienced workers experiencing conflict because of their previously acquired expertise being suddenly devalued and their difficulty adapting to the updated standard of work that was being introduced at the site. For example, the shift in archaeological focus from the structures alone to also their stratigraphic context required extensive, sometimes unsuccessful negotiations on how to conduct the fieldwork. Similarly, the newly implemented practice of collecting all materials from each stratum, rather than only a selection chosen by the archaeolo-

gist, also necessitated clarification. However, after a transitional period, many of the tensions were resolved and most of the experienced workers reaffirmed their previous status within the increased documentation requirements of the new excavation practices.

Reaching common ground on the new requirements of the fieldwork opened up an opportunity to address problems of mutual trust, thus enabling a more participatory approach to work management, knowledge production, and the site in general, as this extends to issues of knowledge access and sharing, social status, and personal views and motivations regarding the local heritage. The first positive change in this regard was to entrust the site workers with the capacity to manage the work under loose supervision and participate more actively in the decision-making process regarding the excavation. This shift from a command-and-control approach toward a supervisory role allowed local workers to gain trust in the archaeologists and find greater satisfaction in their work. By outlining tasks and allowing workers to organize themselves, it was possible to account for the social hierarchies and existing dynamics between the site workers, consisting of a composite group of men of different ages, personal and social relationships, and attitudes. Furthermore, this let the archaeologist concentrate on other aspects of the work without having to micromanage every single activity going on at the site. Establishing stable groups of collaborators, including local workers and archaeologists, improved the execution of fieldwork. Consistent engagement within the same sector allowed workers

to develop a greater familiarity with the context, resulting in higher-quality work, increased autonomy due to an improved understanding, and greater satisfaction from observing progress and appreciating the results of their efforts. Further changes, such as entrusting workers with collecting and packaging the excavated materials and consulting them on the best approaches to specific excavation challenges, fostered mutual trust and facilitated open discussion and shared decision-making. This increased engagement and provided workers with a sense of fulfilment beyond the earning of their daily wages as site laborers.

Another significant issue is the role of local workers in knowledge production. It is generally recognized that local collaborators should be encouraged to contribute to the organization of the project and interpretation of its results. Beyond the benefits of participatory research and diverse perspectives, this approach can foster mutual trust and bridge the gap between researchers and the local community (Mickel 2021: 131). However, challenges including communication difficulties and fundamentally different understandings of the work and its objectives remain. Language often poses a significant barrier. Workers frequently discuss artifacts and site features among themselves, sometimes engaging in debates, but they may not feel comfortable or inclined to involve archaeologists in these discussions. However, spontaneous instances of participatory interpretation and collaboration have occurred, benefiting both parties, and the workers have occasionally played a crucial role in identifying puzzling artifacts or defining the function of specific

spaces. Overall, fostering a more inclusive participation in archaeological interpretation within the trenches would allow future projects to overcome the unilateral interpretation of the local past while clarifying the objectives and intentions of the archaeological team. Many workers express curiosity about the archaeologists' rationale and the purpose of the project. Many of the younger or newer recruits often find it difficult to believe that people would travel from Europe to their village to excavate broken pottery and other "valueless" artifacts. Like in other countries, most assume that archaeologists must be searching for something more valuable. To address these misconceptions and foster a sense of ownership, it is essential to engage the workers in the project. Once they understand the goals and significance of the work, they often take greater pride in their contributions and become more motivated collaborators. It is significant, from this point of view, that in the very beginning of the project the participation in the excavation was often driven by motivators beyond economic gratification, with the site being a place offering opportunities of social connections. In the words of Stefan Jakobielski: "Did they have to? They did it to earn money but, at a certain point, we discovered that many people came to work only to socialize" (PCMA UW 2022: 05:11–05:23).

There is also the issue of social status within the local community that can significantly influence the workers' willingness to participate in knowledge production. Engaging in manual labor, such as working on an archaeological site, may be perceived as a lower-status occupation, potentially impacting their

social standing within the community. This perceived social disparity and the abovementioned risk of further marginalizing the site workers due to their being pushed to a liminal position between the archaeologists and the community can further widen the gap between the workers and other community members, such as religious leaders or teachers, creating in this way a sense of detachment, which, in turn, may discourage the workers from sharing their insights or interpretations. All these intricacies may hinder the collaborative potential of community archaeology projects and limit the valuable knowledge and perspectives that local workers can contribute.

Finally, individual interests and attitudes play a crucial role. Some older workers, while taking pride in their work, primarily perceive working at the site as physical labor. Their satisfaction is often linked to the amount of excavation completed, and they frequently inquire about daily targets. While this partly reflects past work evaluation systems, it also highlights a potential disconnect with the project's broader goals. In some cases, workers have explicitly stated that they are not interested in the past and are solely motivated by the work itself. Regardless of their true motivations, it is important to respect their perspectives and understand that their participation is valuable. They may hold their own opinions and insights about the past, but they may not feel comfortable sharing them. Ultimately, their primary motivation may simply be to earn a living through their labor, and this is their right that we must respect and protect.

While the improvements in engagement and collaboration have been encouraging, there is still a significant potential to enhance the collaborative process within the trenches. Traditionally, archaeologists have been the primary interpreters of the past. While the community has its own perspectives and knowledge, these two interpretations have often remained separate. Although the situation has improved at a broader community level in Old Dongola, there is still room for increased collaboration at the site level. Given that workers often play a crucial role in stratigraphic investigation, their involvement in the discussion is vital. This issue could be addressed by increasing the presence of local archaeologists in the trenches. Their participation could help to overcome cultural and language barriers and facilitate the sharing and integration of experiences and specific know-how from everyone (Fushiya 2021c: 550–551).

While the Sudanese past is mostly a foreign land to us, one where our interaction is characterized by a looming dimension of reciprocal strangeness (Cipolla, Quinn, and Levy 2019: 131), it might be less so for our local collaborators. What may appear completely alien to us could still be part of their daily experience or be within their realm of knowledge, mediated by a less estranged past. By involving the local community more in the interpretive process, we can all share the burden of understanding the past. Engaging within the trenches with local archaeologists and with local workers can be an occasion to reflect on our practices and address the critiques that see field archaeology as

being “over-described and under-theorized” (McAnany and Hodder 2009: 1; Roskams 2020: 267–270). By bringing participatory practices into the field, we can also increase the level of theoretical engagement within the trenches. However, assuming that modern communities are the faithful and static continuators of past societies documented archaeologically can be problematic and even harmful. This perspective overlooks the dynamic and evolving nature of local communities, potentially leading to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of both past and present cultures. It can end up marginalizing the contemporary local communities and imposing external narratives that do not align with the community’s own understanding of their heritage (Cobb 2005; Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010; Croes 2010; Marín-Aguilera 2021).

As a way to extend the community participation in archaeological interpretation beyond the trenches, the community archaeology team organized regular sessions of knowledge exchange (heritage *wanasa*) to discuss finds and involve members of the local community in their interpretation (Fushiya 2021a: 98). These sessions proved to be of particular interest to the whole archaeological team, from the finds specialists to the field archaeologists, and presented an opportunity for everyone to be involved in participatory research. The sessions fostered a genuine exchange of ideas, with both archaeologists and community members engaging openly with each other’s perspectives while remaining open to all possibilities, including that of admitting one’s lack of knowledge on

a particular matter. In many instances, these discussions were instrumental in clarifying the function of various objects recovered during the excavation, such as pottery, wooden tools, and basketry artifacts. More importantly, they created an inclusive space for a broader project involvement, enabling archaeologists to share and refine their findings in collaboration with the local community members. This collaborative approach was especially insightful when engaging with individuals still practicing traditional crafts or possessing knowledge rooted in local traditions, thus bridging past and present through shared expertise.

On a wider scale, the regular organization of open days provided the local community with an opportunity to visit the site and interact with the archaeologists. These events proved useful in building trust within the community by offering a first-hand experience with the site that was instrumental in dispelling misconceptions and fostering transparency. The positive response to these events, including the high attendance and enthusiastic participation, demonstrated the community's interest in their heritage, highlighting the potential of heritage in serving as a catalyst for social events and community building (Fushiya 2021a: 102–103).

CONCLUSIONS

Community archaeology compels practitioners to confront ethical and political issues that are often overlooked. By engaging with the modern world and moving beyond the confines of academia, community archaeology helps in dismantling outdated and potentially damaging approaches while bringing in new dimensions of usefulness and tangible public benefits to archaeological research. While the idea of usefulness can be instrumental to illustrating the importance of archaeological research and to securing its funding, archaeology should probably strive for a higher level of “effectiveness”, as advocated by Stahl (2020). This effectiveness lies in its ability to challenge the established norms and expand our understanding of the past. By acknowledging the biases of our own epistemology and engaging in constructive dialogue with epistemological systems perceived as “other”, we can effectively decolonize

archaeological practice and construct historical narratives that recognize the non-neutrality of their foundational concepts and acknowledge potential alternatives (Stahl 2020).

As Moshenska (2018) insightfully observed, the over-theorizing of community archaeology often advances the careers of archaeologists more than it benefits the communities they aim to serve. This tendency can unintentionally reinforce colonial power dynamics, as theoretical frameworks imposed from outside may not align with the values or needs of local populations. To counter this risk, our experience suggests a stronger emphasis on practical engagement in the trenches. Community practice is essential at every level: we need dedicated community archaeology specialists to coordinate broader outreach and ensure meaningful community involvement. Equally important, however, is training all field archaeolo-

gists to integrate participatory research into their daily practice. As Grima (2016) proposed, community archaeology should not be isolated as a specialized subfield but rather established as a standard of best practice.

While community archaeology must be rooted in local perspectives, it is also vital to remain aware of relevant theoretical and political contexts. It may seem daunting to expect archaeologists to engage with politics, policy, and community development, but these are crucial aspects of modern archaeological practice. Archaeological research is never separated from the social

and political context of its practitioners (Trigger 1984) and by acknowledging the broader societal implications of our research, we can make archaeology more relevant and impactful. This does not necessarily mean adopting a partisan stance but rather recognizing the ways in which our work intersects with the wider world. The field has evolved to a stage where these considerations are unavoidable; whether or not we consciously address them, they shape our work. Neglecting these broader contexts can hinder our goals and negatively affect the success of our archaeological projects.

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