

WHEN ARCHAEOLOGY GOES PUBLIC – THE WORK AND THOUGHTS OF AN PUBLIC COORDINATOR OFFICER IN COMMERCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

July 29, 2016 Amanda G. Azzopardi Commercial Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2016, Excavation, Historical Archaeology, Medieval, Public Archaeology Archaeology in Sweden, Gothenburg, Nya Lödöse



Photo: Markus Andersson

Not long ago I became involved in a major archaeological excavation project at Nya Lödöse, Gothenburg, Sweden. The project is an urban excavation and for the first time in the west of Sweden, it is planned to

excavate a whole medieval town. Nya Lödöse (1473-1624), the forerunner of modern-day Gothenburg. The opportunity to carry out this large excavation is due to a massive city transformation. Before the contractor starts building, the archaeologist needs to go in first and save all cultural heritage that survives in the area. This is due to the [heritage law](#) in Sweden that protects everything pre-dating 1850.



Photo: Markus Andersson

THE TASK

What makes this project unique when compared to any other ongoing archaeological project in Sweden, is not only that we plan to excavate a whole city, but that the budget includes an amount of money devoted to working with the public. Since the project is supported by the state, it is only right that the public are informed how the money is being used during the process of work in their neighbourhood.

From its beginning in 2012, a small group of the project archaeologists have worked on communicating with the public. A number of questions were raised from the outset. What do we want to do, how we

should spread the word, what we are up to here, how can we 'sell' archaeology, how can we academics reach out to the inhabitants of Sweden? Most importantly, we asked: Should archaeologists disseminate information about the excavation based on provisional and inconclusive results?

THE FEAR

Archaeology is a real scientific subject and not only a hobby built on fantasies. The archaeological process is long and involves a lot of tests, analysis, interpretations of the results, discussions etc. Archaeology is not as simple as it may sound or look at first glance. The last years there have been a fear of telling the general public the truth about how 'complicated' archaeology really is, for the simple reason we fear losing the respect of being treated as a serious scientific subject.

So on one hand we need to demonstrate that archaeology is a real scientific subject, on the other, we need to reach the public faster and more often than ever before. We need to adapt to a digital information time period without compromising our discipline or losing respect with the public. So how do we do that on the Nya Lödöse project?



Photo: Markus Andersson

THE PUBLIC PATHS

With the need to achieve a balance, satisfying both the general public and academia, the project focused on five main chains of communication.

THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Facebook and Twitter are tools being used directly from the field to show how archaeologists, archeobotanists, conservators, find specialists and osteologists work. In the mud, in the rain, in the strong sun, all year around. What do we do and what we can find during an excavation are subjects raised on these particular forums. The posts are simple and most of the time include a photo and a short text explanation of our initial interpretation. It is from these forums we, as archaeologists, get a direct contact with the interested general public. They ask questions and we answer. Quite often we do not have a specific answer of what we have found, but that gives us a good opportunity to explain the process of archaeology.

Forums like these are what many academics are afraid of, because they are instant (and not proof read), But they need to be exactly that, to be interesting to the public. The photos used are not professional, the text is not always grammatically correct, and the interpretation might change by the minute. Digital forums are used not to show off how professional an excavation is, but to increase public interest, to cultivate a seed of interest in the multidisciplinary subject of archaeology and hopefully to encourage people to continue their search for more information on the project website.



Photo: Markus Andersson

THE WEB

It is on the [project website](#) that a more 'professional' approach to archaeology is adopted, with more detailed articles about the work itself and about the finds found during the excavations. It is on the website that information is grammatically corrected, where professionally taken photos are shown and

where specialists have double checked the facts. It's also here that articles are published about the excavation as seen from different perspectives, from a gender perspective, from an ethical approach and with comparative articles – where was this medieval town in comparison with towns in Great Britain during the same time period etc. In contrast to the Facebook posts, it is here that a deeper context is applied regarding what the finds can tell us, how we know, and what we will eventually be doing with the finds.

VIDEOS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

On the website you also find links to information [videos](#) which show different aspects of the project. These videos are intended to increase interest in commercial archaeology, to show the complexity and reality of the archaeological process. The videos are professionally recorded, but the people we meet in the video are untrained video subjects, normal people, who show the general public their main work and passion. There is also a professional photographer hired to take impressive work [photos](#) and good find photos. These photographs are being in everything the project takes part in, seminars, conventions and of course on the website, in the articles and in the printed public magazine. The photographs are an important tool to change the picture that an archaeologist's work involves merely sitting down in the summer dust and sun with a small brush in their hand!



Photo: Markus Andersson

THE PRINTED WORD

Every season the project publish two magazines focussed for the general public and including short articles about the excavation work. These magazines are handed out free and can be found in the city museums, the City Library, in letter boxes at the excavation site and also in a [pdf format](#) on the website. The demand from the general public for the magazines increases every season and the magazine has become a nice tool to involve project archaeologists and specialists, ahead of the main excavation report.

THE TALK

All the public tools mentioned so far result in a demand to hold guided site tours and to give seminars at various institutes. The guided tours are limited to two a day. On one day a week, during the time that the excavation is taking place. The joy in the visitors faces when taking them around is amazing. They look so amazed, not only at the general mess that an excavation site usually entails, but also in the way the excavation process take place and how in the end we can find out so much from so little. The tours are almost always full and the visitors often ask when they can come again. Some of the visitors have been on the tour every year and their questions become more complicated every time. That triggers the guide to find answers outside the box and to focus on what is intriguing to say to the enthusiastic general public. It is at this moment an archaeologist truly learns how to sell archaeology, despite the mud, the rain, the cold, the heat and the dirtiness.



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