

Data managers as storytellers: Possible futures for archaeological data reuse

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TODAY'S PRESENTATION



Provide general overview of aims and intended outputs of TETRACHS



Familiarise you with our metadata methodology, and reactions to it from archaeological specialists & digital repositories



Provoke constructive debate around findings from experiments with simple digital data (*photos): What's possible if we nurture systems & skills that foreground storytelling

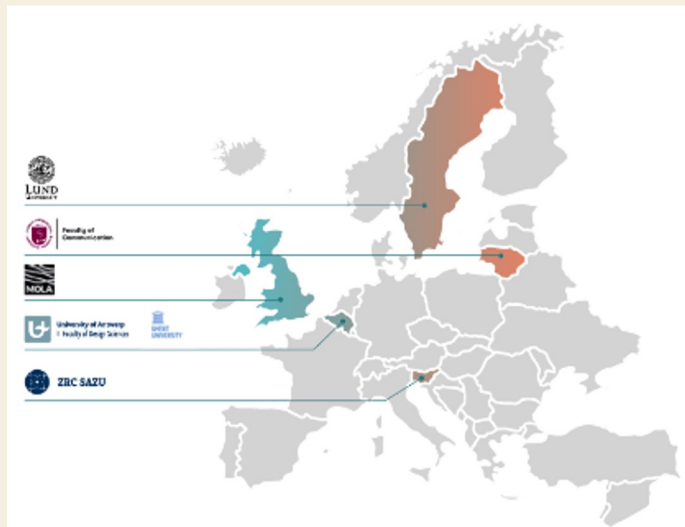
WHAT DO I MEAN BY STORYTELLING?



- No specific definition – people have responded to the term however they understand it.
- This decision to keep things open has been productive: the term is widely accessible and highly malleable (e.g., easy to fit to different contexts).
- Our experiments demonstrate that there is no singular understanding of the term, & it doesn't force a narrow focus on linear narrative.

TETRARCHs

Transforming Data Reuse in Archaeology



- 3 year project (Oct 22- Sept 25)
- 5 countries (30+ colleagues):
 - MOLA (Lead)
 - University of York: ADS + Department of Archaeology
 - Lund University
 - Vilnius University
 - ZRC SAZU
 - Antwerp University
 - Ghent University
- 3 creative residents across EU
- Half dozen 'visiting scholars' supporting different teams and work packages

TETRARCHs' Premise:

Gaps in archaeological data reuse

- Colleagues create vast amounts of specialised data.
- These data are **difficult** to access, even for archaeologists themselves.
- The data are usually **stripped** of their complexity and nuance as they are collected and structured.
- Artists and other creative practitioners are **excluded** from accessing and being inspired by these data.
- Local communities become **alienated** from the cultural heritage they may wish to protect and benefit from.
- Policy makers are unable to deploy the data to **meaningfully** impact the welfare of their constituencies, e.g., to inform urban design.



Journey of the photographic shoe* data...

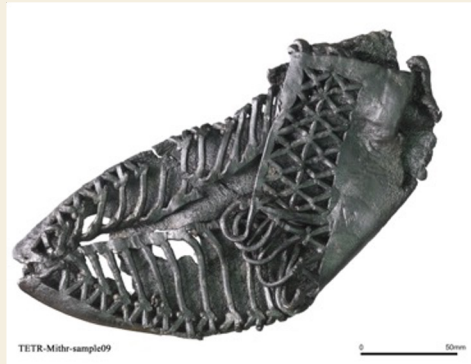
* different shoes, same context



Site photography: # 55813037

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Database metadata entries



Studio photography: # 48513002



Museum display:
Bloomberg
Mithraeum



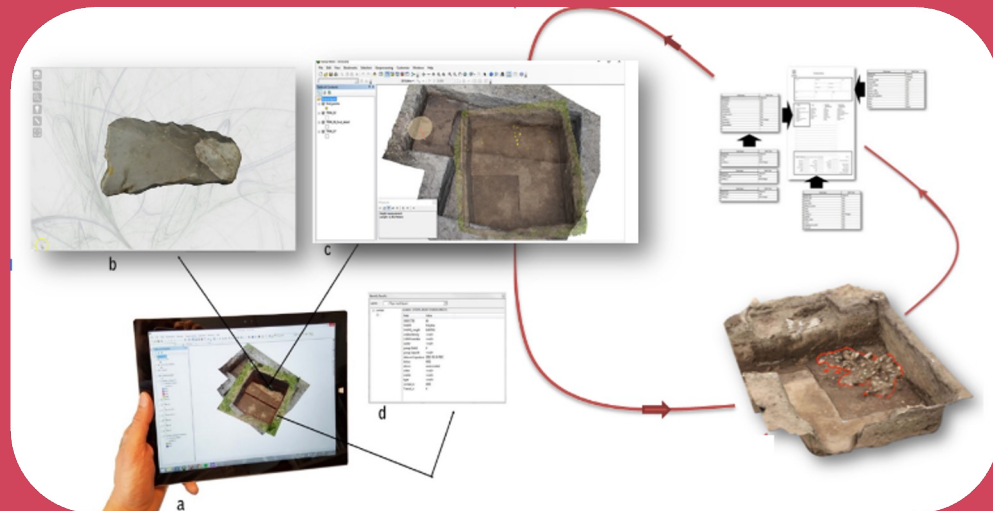
Creating new data workflows & models

TETRARCHs works across a range of communities to come up with ways in which we can make data use and reuse easier for cultural heritage storytelling.

To do this, we focus on **four key types of data...**

...and three types of audiences...

We do experiments, ethnography of archaeological practice and of reuse outside archaeology to reconceptualise and redesign data workflows, from generation to curation and reuse, and models.



- 2D photography
- airborne LiDAR
- 3D scanning
- digital field drawing
- Archaeological Specialists
- Creatives
- Memory institutions & their constituencies

Benefits of the research

- Open, transparent archaeology as a public good - socially and culturally relevant in today's world.
- Different perspectives can be used to inform/invigorate/shape research, innovation and policy agendas.
- Archaeology recognised as a player in digital and cultural transformations, rather than as a reactive follower of disparate developments.
- Communities more included, connected, caring for cultural heritage.



Audiences & Outputs

- For **heritage professionals, including archaeologists**, new methods for gathering and structuring (or not structuring) archaeological data in ways that are more just and equitable and therefore conducive to generating more just and equitable narratives about the past.
- For **cultural institutions**, reference materials to support them in integrating these data and narratives into their everyday practices, ensuring that archaeology is actually used - as it should be - to think more critically, complexly, and in evolving ways about the world around us.
- For **creatives, media & content creators and local citizens**, a platform – and providing incentives for them to use this platform – to search for and create more meaningful narratives from archaeological data.



photos

researcher data



06814016

numbers

metadata

Archive extension: 16; Archive no: 68; Archive year: 14; Work type: L; Sitecode: BZY10; Appt date: 1/27/2014; Photographer: MC



publications, if applicable

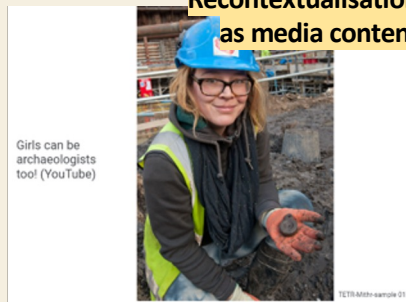


own data

1. Annotations based on put reaction



2. Recontextualisation as media content

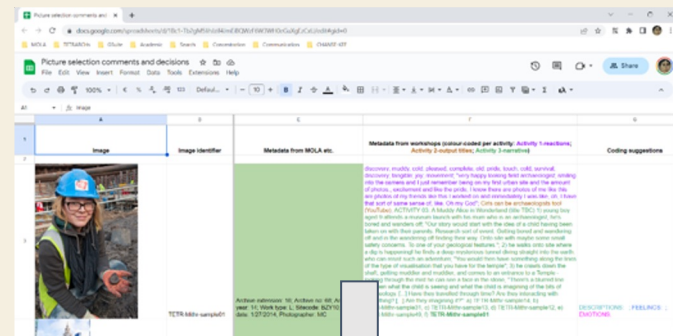


3. Multiple data points woven together into extended story



user data

Experiments (MOLA)



- new workflows for field, laboratory, and archival practice
- world's first controlled vocabulary for cultural heritage storytelling
- first assessments of how effectively data are reused, following ISO Standard 25022: Measurement of Quality in Use
- first best practice recommendations for trusted digital repositories to optimise archaeological data for re-use in storytelling.

Experiments (MOLA + Antwerp + Lund) → Metadata Method

- This work is driven by our colleagues in Belgium - please stay tuned for their own presentation of the data model (November 2024).
- Generally positive reception from data managers; concerns around the limitations of structuring data (is this actually going to be useful?)
- Fringe benefits: interrogating data collection processes/prompts/systems + wider storytelling landscape in archaeology allows us to identify gaps in professional skills and understanding

Other critiques that we've heard many times...

Who's going to do this? "It's impossible in commercial archaeology."

Of course it's possible: storytelling happens all the time already. A lot of data is being collected unnecessarily or wastefully, causing frustration & hopelessness.

Others have tried many times to profoundly revise field methods (in research / non-commercial contexts) and they've generally failed. "Why's this different?"

Focus on 'data lives' post-excavation as much as (more than) in excavation contexts.

Why are you focused on structured data and standardisation? "This is irrelevant in the age of AI."

Understanding the nature of storytelling in archaeology is even more important today.

What about bad actors? "People will abuse the data, appropriating it for their nefarious aims."

Happens already – all the time. We are usually 100% reactive to people trying to fill the void left by our empty data landscape.

50 photos used in 6x experiments with 91 people*

*23 specialists, 18 creatives, 50 school kids



The experiment

Site: Bloomberg excavations of Mithraeum in London in 2012-2014. Site previously excavated post-WWII and preserved in situ.

Data: Digital photos as a proof of concept

- Finds with people | Finds without people | Other historic references | Stratigraphy with built context | Stratigraphy with people | Stratigraphy without people

Method: Three activities progressing from individual engagement (Activity #1) and pair work (Activity #2) to full group work (Activity #3) to explore storytelling **contexts**.

Progression from instinctive reactions to the photos (Activity #1) to semi-structured conditions conducive of creativity with individual photos (Activity #2) to storytelling with multiple photos (Activity #3). Focus here not just on content of stories, but on **devices and effects used by storytellers to communicate**.

Preliminary Findings

Our presentation entailed discussing some of the earliest findings from our research. These have been removed from the slides as we continue to refine our analysis.

Please stay tuned! We will be presenting at EAA in Rome in August 2024, and in a free online lecture later in 2024 or early 2025.

Intervening in data's life to enrich archaeology for storytelling

1. What does the storytelling 'workflow' look like for data collection in different contexts? E.g., post-ex, archives, museum, etc.
2. How can we revise archaeological practice guidelines to support data being captured in ways that better fit the needs of storytellers (or worldbuilders, per Colleen Morgan)?
3. Can we reprogramme the tools being used so that certain types of storytelling-focused interventions are automatically added to the data or prompted in users?
4. What would new/updated infrastructures entail which privilege storytelling?
5. How can we improve and elaborate training and skills of data creators to nurture storytelling habits in their practice?



Get in touch

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