

Visions, needs and requirements for (future) research environments: An exploration with ERC Grantee Richard Hodges

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Researchers are at the very heart of the EOSC: So what do researchers really need to do outstanding research, and produce high-impact research results? Moreover, how do they think could the EOSC support them in their research endeavours? Let's see what archaeologist Richard Hodges has to say.

“Telling new stories to the public”

TU Wien: What does your work currently focus on?

RH: My ERC project is concerned with a big issue in a small area. The issue is a historical one, using archaeology to understand what happened between the Mediterranean and Central Europe in the period between the 7th and the 11th centuries. In other words, historians believe that they have all the answers from written sources, but we as archaeologists have long since known, that if you can assemble a great deal of archaeological evidence, you can look at these historical sources from a different perspective. In particular, we have been looking at major resources within this period, namely silver and the use of coinage, in the context of a study of a fluvial valley between the metal-bearing hills of western Tuscany (the Colline Metallifere) and the Mediterranean Sea (at the place called Follonica on the Tyrrhenian Sea). We have analysed this area, using an array of archaeological and scientific tools over the last five years, with a view to rewriting the history, not just of this area (the Maremma of Western Tuscany), but also the history of the Mediterranean of this time and its relationship with central Italy and, beyond, Central Europe – the Carolingian world and Ottonian periods.

TU Wien: Which tools and services exactly are you using for your research?

RH: So, we have a big team based at the University of Siena. This essentially consists on

the one hand of young historians who have looked at the documentary resources (which is fairly straightforward), and a team that has done pure archaeological work. Where we really made a huge difference (thanks to the ERC grant) is to use a team of scientists of different kinds, to analyse all the materials that we have excavated. In the valley, we have looked at all the geomorphological issues, the palynological issues (that is the pollen) and all the buried carbon residues to reconstruct the environmental history of this area and its changing importance for this time. Then, at the excavated site of Vetricella, we have used a full array of tools to understand the nature of the metals that have been made, used and worked there. We have analysed all the ceramics to try to look at their relationship typologically and spectrographically, in terms of the minerals they contain. We have examined all the animal bones that we have found and equally we have analysed all the human remains in the same way. No one in the history of Italian archaeology has ever done this before. That is all, thanks to the ERC grant, which has allowed us to bring in all these scientists, not just to excavate and understand the contexts of the history, all on which is fairly familiar, but also to really drill down on the detail of the material culture in a way which frankly is fantastic.

TU Wien: How do you think research will look like in 5 to 25 years and what would be the impact to research environments?

“That will be the lasting impact, to have new stories that will give us a new sense of what we are and were”

RH: So, the EU through ERC has given a new life to archaeology in Europe. It has done brilliantly and in 25 years, the stories we were told as students will come to look like fairy stories. Fairy stories compared to the new research that has been made possible from the Palaeolithic to the modern era, thanks to archaeology and thanks in particular to being able to pursue material analyses in such a detailed way. That will be the lasting impact, to have new stories that will give us a new sense of what we are and were. If you want to do real research in archaeology you need not just to understand that a certain building was constructed at a certain time, but much more, how society was constructed. To do this, you need to understand who those people were in those times: how they ate, how they lived, and how they died.

TU Wien: What is the biggest barrier for a researcher to open his data in your field?

RH: The biggest barrier that archaeologists face is actually the ongoing management of the datasets afterwards. Because museums and institutions are not keen to do this without the resources necessary. That is why getting the datasets (the material) into the public domain; in particular, institutional public domain (like a region, like a commune, in a museum) is a key step forward. Traditionally, when you go to Rome what you will see is the very tip of an iceberg of its museum collections. Underneath, in storage, there are millions of objects that are uncatalogued, because no one has ever looked at them since they were discovered as far back as the Renaissance – and that is a metaphor for the challenge we as archaeologists face. In addition to that, our discipline requires the resources to do the level of interdisciplinary field research possible at our project in the

Maremma. The only way we can justify the money to undertake such inter-disciplinary research is to have public support. The public is very interested in archaeological research. They love the idea that we can tell new stories, new narratives from archaeological research. They love the minutiae of it as well. In my particular case, the stories need to be accessible to the local public and there is a strong will in my team to do this. We have been working with the region of Tuscany and with the local commune in the Maremma to develop trails and museum exhibits, which are based on the data, where the public can actually access and work with the data we found. So before the pandemic came I was very optimistic that our data would be accessible.

TU Wien: A topic that often comes up is that researchers need a better reward system and more recognition. What are your thoughts on that?

“The biggest barrier that archaeologists face is actually the ongoing management of the datasets afterwards”

RH: It is very hard to judge who should win these grants. I think the criteria by which the EU chooses its grant winners are fairly transparent, but publication of results is absolutely fundamental and that has to be scrutinized at the beginning, during and afterwards. I can tell you honestly, we have published more than we need to have done because I am so insistent on getting it out there. But I am insistent, not because of the teaching and academy (which I see as a function of our society), but because I think that the impact on local economies is enormous if you get the stories right. What we are learning now from this pandemic is that the tourist industry is bigger than almost every other industry we have. I am a great believer that we as scientists have to move beyond just thinking “gosh, when we meet our fellow

colleagues, we are going to talk about what the carbon dates are”, but rather “how the hell we keep our society alive? - So that we can give some future to the students we teach.” Many (students) of whom, in the case of our project, I hope will end up in projects around this very area helping economic development. What is needed are discrete successor projects (with resources that amount to more than 100.000€ in size) and to try and get the particularly young scientists into other networks (other systems), so that there is capacity built on this enriching experience. The danger at the moment is that the (ERC) experience will die with the end of the project, which would be really sad. Yes, the proof of concept idea (which we will apply for) is good, but it is not enough to take the dozen graduate students or postdocs in the different fields (from history through to analysing charcoals) onwards and into the larger academic arena. That is a sadness for European university research. I know, these are tough times, but I hope that some of our experiences will filter back to Brussels in a way that will help, in particular my young associates.



Richard Hodges is President Emeritus of the American University of Rome since 2020. He studied archaeology and history at Southampton University where he completed a doctorate on the archaeology of Dark Age trade.

In 1976 he joined Sheffield University as a lecturer and launched excavations and cultural heritage projects in England and Italy at Roystone Grange (Derbyshire), Montarrenti (Tuscany) and San Vincenzo al Volturno (Molise). He joined the Butrint Foundation as its scientific director (1993-2012) to initiate new excavations and site management strategies at the Unesco World Heritage Site of Butrint (Albania). He is currently Principal Investigator of a major ERC-funded project in Tuscany (2015-20), in collaboration with the University of Siena.

He was Director of the British School at Rome (1988-95); Director of the Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture (1996-98); Director of the Institute of World Archaeology at the University of East Anglia (1996-2007); Williams Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology (2007-12). In 1999 he was principal adviser to the Albanian Minister of Culture, Edi Rama. Most recently, he was President of The American University of Rome.

His books include Dark Age Economics (1982), Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe (1983), Wall-to-Wall History (1991), Visions of Rome. A Life of Thomas Ashby (2000), and The Archaeology of Mediterranean Placemaking (2016). He is general editor of Bloomsbury Debates in Archaeology and of the Butrint Foundation and (the ERC) nEU-Med series of monographs. He is a columnist for Current World Archaeology.

In 1995 he was awarded the OBE by Her Majesty the Queen.