

Communicating archaeology - In the search for the right platform

“In Iceland there are no ruins, no Viking ships to prove how we got here, so people think we evolved from cod... but Icelanders have always presented themselves as a nation of storytellers. Stories had been the only contribution to the world culture before Björk started having real influence.”

This is a quote from an interview in the New York Times in 2015, by Icelandic novelist and 2016 presidential candidate, Andri Snær Magnason.

Few days earlier similar words were heard in a talk show on national television, where Gunnar Smári Egilsson, the editor of Fréttatíminn, a well known Icelandic newspaper, said:

“Icelandic history is an invisible one; we have no archaeology; we don’t have any of these great monuments, and preserving stones in cellars in the city center - I think they should be covered up with soil... Icelandic history comes from our mind... Archaeological remains that are 5000 years old are grand and beautiful but everything belonging to the Viking age is just rubbish. The Vikings weren’t good in building houses, especially not in Iceland.”

His “stones in cellars” referred to one of the biggest structures unearthed to this day in Iceland, an early 20th century seafront wall. Following the completion of the archaeological excavation, the structure has been deemed pivotal in the development of Reykjavik and its transformation from a small fishing town into a modern city. What Mr. Egilsson was criticising in this instance was the decision of the Cultural Agency of Iceland to put a protection law into effect and preserve the structure in situ.

Perhaps most of you might have been confronted by a similar attitude towards antiquities alongside the raised eyebrows of developers and contractors, local politicians, media and the public regarding matters of excavation, preservation and the like. We can indeed be a nuisance to many.

In Iceland however, things are slightly different. The notion that we do not have archaeology at all is a rather popular belief. Local politicians, artists, writers and the public every so often ponder over our very existence.

This perception is obviously built on a misunderstanding about archaeological heritage in Iceland. But why do Icelanders think that they have no archaeology in their country?

Ever since the 19th century, Icelandic antiquities have been thought of as unimpressive, uninspiring and poor in comparison to the great monuments of Europe, such as the Colosseum, Stonehenge, or the Parthenon. For the early antiquarian, the earthen structures of turf and stone and the rather trifling archaeological artefacts discovered, did not live up to what was expected from the heroic Vikings of the Icelandic sagas. At a time when monuments and monumental architecture were regarded as repositories of national genius, the humble turf house and the overall archaeological record were signs of poverty, barbarism and backwardness. For the Icelandic nationalists, archaeology was indeed damaging to the struggle of independence. The discipline was to be very much sidelined, and the nationalist rhetoric was to be built on the literary heritage of the sagas, the tradition of storytelling and the spirituality of Icelanders as opposed to their materialistic needs.

Despite the fact that a general interest in archaeology has increased in the last few decades the notion that there isn't any archaeology in Iceland still exists (as the quotes I mentioned attest).

There is no doubt that such ideas still affect our work; not only the work of archaeologists, but also the work of other disciplines and institutes that have to deal with matters of cultural heritage. Whether it is in the commercial sector, the preservation of sites, research funding or designing exhibitions.

So - What can we do about it?

There are several ways to attack the issue but one of the approaches that I have taken is through the school system in Iceland. In the last three years I have participated in educational projects with the focus on archaeology and

archaeological heritage. These projects were done in collaboration with primary schools in Reykjavík and the Reykjavík City Museum. They were funded by various private and state funds; Fornminjasjóður, Sprotasjóður, Samfélagssjóður Landsbankans and Rannís. These projects are similar in many ways even though the execution itself differs.

The goal however stays the same; To educate and inform young people about the Icelandic archaeological heritage and archaeological practices by presenting diverse ways of learning.

One of these projects, named *Uncovering History* aimed to introduce children to archaeology through participation in an archaeological research using a recreated archaeological site in a big box that was brought into the classroom. The participants learned about the scientific methods of archaeology from discovery, cataloguing and interpretation to presentation of their final findings. Me and my colleague, archaeologist Eva Kristín Dal spent 2 hours a day for three days in the classroom working on various projects with the pupils (aged 10-11), teaching them some of the methods we use to understand material assemblages and record archaeology in the field. The project concluded with an exhibition during the *Children's Culture Festival* in Reykjavík in 2014, presented by the children at the *Settlement Exhibition* in central Reykjavík. The project received very positive remarks from all party's involved; pupils, teachers, principals, parents and museum staff.

The second project, *Digging the mound*, falls under community-based archaeology where the principal of a primary school initiated the collaboration with myself and my colleague, Mrs. Dal. It is my experience that teachers are usually very open to new approaches in teaching and teaching materials. Archaeology is inter-disciplinary and easy to project into other subjects. With that in mind we wanted to create diverse assignments for the pupils, where most of the work took place outside, in the field. The pupils participated in an actual archaeological research by visiting our small excavation site in the vicinity of their school. On site they learned how to plot ruins in the landscape and features of the site, sieve soil and describe deposits by seeing, touching and smelling the

soils. This project was well received by the archaeology community as well as within the school and its pupils.

Very recently I have also taken on a project for the Cultural Heritage Agency of Iceland where we want to explore further how we can productively reach out to the public. The aim is still the same, to raise awareness and inform the public about archaeological heritage in Iceland. Our focusgroup is the younger generations, between ages around 10-20.

Before deciding on which platform to use for approaching this group we needed to get a better understanding of what they already know about archaeology and archaeological heritage. Also, **if** they want to know about it in general and if so, **how** would they like to retrieve the information? So the first step was to make a survey of 6 questions, both multiple choice and free-form. We contacted a few schools, where two primary schools and one highschool were able to present the survey (within our tight timeframe) to 7 classes, in total of 139 pupils, aged 11-12 and 17-18 years of age.

I wont go through the whole questionnaire today but I would like to give you a preview of the preliminary results.

In the first question the students were encouraged to write whatever came to their minds about *archeological remains*. The most popular ones were: *Old things, bones, remains, stones, old buildings...* but of course there were answers like: *I don't know* and *uninteresting*. Also the two words that all of you have possibly read by now of the screen: *Indiana Jones*. But our beloved stereotype, Indy, was only mentioned by the older students at high school level. We will deal with his legacy later in our project.

To the question *Where would you want to receive information about archaeology?* Just over 50% answered: *at school*, the runner up was the *internet* with around 36% and in third place was the *television*, with 28%. This ratio clearly suggests that they would like to learn about archaeology at school. The question is though will this percentage remain so high when more schools undertake the survey...

Many of the pupils who claimed that they don't have any interest in knowing more about archaeology still think it has importance, because (as they wrote) it is how we learn about the "old days" or the past.

Lastly I want to read to you a few of my favorite answers from the pupils, these come from the younger crowd (aged 11-12). Firstly, replies to the question:

Is archaeology important? Why?/Why not?

- 1. No, because I don't go to museums.*
- 2. Yes, in order to understand the future we must understand the past.*
- 3. Yes, because they can mean something.*
- 4. Yes, because without them we wouldn't know so much about things.*

And to the question:

Do you want to know more about archaeology? Why?/Why not?

- 1. Yes, because I don't want to be stupid.*
- 2. Yes, because my great grandfather was an archaeologist.*
- 3. No, I find it useless information.*
- 4. Yes, because it can be interesting, but also incredibly boring.*

This research is in its first stages so it will progress within the next months or so but our next step is to expand the survey to more schools in the country. With these preliminary results however there seems to be quite a difference between the two primary schools. The two schools are situated quite far apart but within the Reykjavík region. This demographic distinction is very interesting and will be looked at further when the survey has concluded but most importantly the results will help us in our attempt to eliminate old myths and perceptions about Icelandic archaeological heritage. It is however my belief that the educational system is a strong platform as it provides an enhanced network of people, not only pupils, parents and teachers but also local communities at large.

By taking archaeology into the primary schools and implementing these sorts of programs we aim to raise awareness of the country's archaeological heritage. It is not to create future archaeologists per se, it is about counter-balancing the stereotypical images of archaeology in popular media by informing the public about the discipline's contribution to science, knowledge and society.