

How More Diverse Perspectives are Transforming the Field of Archaeology for the Better

The 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit in Saudi Arabia convened multidisciplinary experts to share their insights into how a more holistic approach to inclusivity and accessibility is reshaping the field of archaeology—and reframing historical narratives

“The past belongs to all of us,” explained the University of Oxford’s Dr. Shadreck Chirikure during a session at the first-ever AIUla World Archaeology Summit, “but not all of us benefit in an equal manner.” Historically speaking, this has always been true—and especially so in the world of archaeology. For much of the field’s academic history, archaeology had been the pursuit of a small, privileged subset of the population—and until the ‘cultural turn’ within the social sciences that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, there had been relatively little concern for rectifying this imbalance. But momentum has been steadily building for a more inclusive approach and during this inaugural AIUla World Archaeology Summit, experts from around the world echoed a unified call to action: to create an archaeological landscape that prioritises equality on all levels—from inclusivity within the field itself to a more equitable and balanced reframing of the interpretations of archaeological findings.

This theme of enhancing the accessibility and inclusivity of archaeology and heritage stood at the forefront of the summit—a testament to the ways in which those operating in the field of modern archaeology are rethinking and expanding the scope, impact, and reach of their work.

Today, archaeologists across the globe are working to ensure that their field and its findings are accessible to a wider audience, and that a more diverse set of stakeholders are included in these conversations about heritage and history. Although not without its challenges, this push for more inclusivity and accessibility in archaeology is allowing for more meaningful dialogue—and is engaging people everywhere in ways that are giving them a greater sense of ownership in the heritage that surrounds them, empowering local communities to act as stewards in the protection and preservation of the past.

The advantages of a more inclusive archaeological community are enormous and multitudinous. Perhaps most crucially, this inclusivity plays a vital role in how people around the world are rethinking and reframing history—in ways that are allowing modern communities to deepen their connections to the past, as well as to other communities in the present.

In Saudi Arabia in particular, and especially in the region of AIUla, archaeologists and heritage experts are providing myriad examples of how archaeology can reap the benefits of a more inclusive, accessible approach.

During the 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit, archaeologists, industry leaders, and cross-disciplinary experts from across the globe took part in numerous discussions and conversations dedicated to addressing issues of inclusivity and accessibility in archaeology, including sharing best practices and insights from around the world.

Empowering and Amplifying the Voices of Local Heritage Custodians

If there's one thing that archaeologists are particularly adept at doing, it's reckoning with the past. Of course, part of that reckoning requires recognising that, for much of its history, archaeology was perceived as a largely elitist pursuit—one dominated almost exclusively by a very narrow, unrepresentative segment of the population (a segment that, in much of the world, was also often foreign and non-local). These early days of archaeology as an academic field of specialisation also did little to respect the ownership and stewardship of local communities: archaeological finds were often removed from their lands of origin without the consent or knowledge of the local population.

The damage done by this past approach cannot be overstated: when local communities feel as though heritage sites are not for them or of interest to them, they have little interest in the preservation or stewardship of these sites. As Richard Wilding, Co-founder of Eye on Heritage, explained, "Over the last 10 years or so, it's been proven just how critical it is to engage communities beyond archaeology. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State was able to position archaeology as almost a Western interest—an imperial agenda for Western museums. And I think it's critical to involve local communities, to make them feel that this is their heritage—that it's not something that's being imposed from outside."

In recent years, archaeologists around the world have begun to prioritise local community engagement as a vital component of their work. Dr. Amelia Menna, a member of the Curatorial Staff at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, has witnessed firsthand how engaging local communities can add value to heritage preservation. As she explained, while international tourists and scholars would frequent the museum in droves, the museum's curators felt that something was missing: "Neapolitan people—the locals actually living in the city—knew very few things about their cultural roots." There was, at the time, a widespread belief among the local population that museums were 'not for [them].'

To counter this belief, Dr. Menna and the rest of the museum's curatorial team set out to find various ways to make the museum more locally accessible and resonant—including staging a hugely successful exhibition about Naples' football team. They also spent millions of euros to make its existing exhibits more accessible, allowing blind visitors to touch statues, hosting festivals that spoke to immigrants, and inviting local artisans to produce exhibit-inspired pieces to be sold in the museum shop.

Nearby, in the Bay of Baia, local divers were trained to act as guardians of the many underwater heritage sites, which had previously been disturbed and damaged by tourists. Steps like these allow locals to feel a sense of ownership toward historic sites and artefacts, while giving them a role to play in telling the stories of these sites.

In Peru, the Pachacamac Site Museum has worked to engage locals by showing them that the museum is a place that not only belongs to them, but enriches their lives: the site works with local craftswomen to sell their handmade wares, creating a link between the preservation of cultural heritage and real economic prosperity for community members. As museum director Dr. Denise Pozzi-Escot explains, "If we don't connect with the community around the site, we can't do anything."

In AlUla itself, there are numerous examples of how local communities have been engaged in archaeological sites and activities on the ground. Local students are frequently invited to attend field trips to local heritage sites like Hegra, Dadan, and Jabal Ikma. Public outreach workshops are hosted with members of the local community, covering a diverse array of topics—from ceramology and epigraphy to archaeobotany and anthropology. By training community members in crafts and skills connected to AlUla's heritage sites, experts are creating new pathways and opportunities for these communities to gain economic benefits via positive engagement with local heritage. This kind of approach provides local communities with strong incentives to invest in the preservation of these heritage sites and relics—as well as the preservation of traditions associated with these sites.

But perhaps one of the best examples of how AlUla's experts are engaging local communities can be seen with their archaeological work in AlUla's Old Town. Here, archaeologists and historians are combining traditional archaeology and conservation with the collection of oral histories from former Old Town residents. These stories and anecdotes are adding incredible colour and depth to the inquiries and excavations conducted on the ground, while simultaneously providing community members with a strong sense of ownership in the preservation and restoration of AlUla's Old Town. Curatorial experts are now working to preserve this intangible heritage in ways that allow visitors to engage with the people and stories of the Old Town: currently, a project is underway to create a Life and Memory Majlis ('majlis' means 'reception room' in Arabic, and often refers to a communal space in the home where guests are welcomed and entertained) in AlUla's Old Town—a living museum that connects personal and communal stories and histories into the more tangible elements of the town and its preservation. Notably, this space is designed with local visitors at its heart: many of the museum elements are specifically intended to encourage members of the local community to connect to their own history and heritage. This localised lens is revolutionary—especially in a world where most museums tend to be framed around a more international audience experience.

This combination of tangible and intangible heritage elements is an important development in the world of modern archaeology: understanding how intangible cultural heritage is interwoven into the more traditional, physical remnants of the past allows for a more comprehensive preservation of the past, in all its diverse facets and aspects.

Archaeologists in AlUla are also engaging local community members to serve as Rawis, or storytellers, at heritage sites throughout the region. These Rawis receive in-depth training and education on the history and heritage of AlUla's archaeological sites, including being invited to engage deeply with the archaeological work being done at these sites, before going on to serve as highly knowledgeable tour guides. Through steps like these, local community members are the guardians and custodians of their own heritage, which gives greater relevance to the historical narratives of these sites, and of the region more broadly.

As archaeologists engage more communities and stakeholders in their work, they are also working to bring individuals from more diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds into the field itself—fostering a new generation of homegrown archaeologists who are helping reshape archaeology and reframe heritage in a post-colonial world.

Creating a More Inclusive Archaeological Community

The subject of inclusivity in archaeology is deeply entangled with the task of decolonisation: in order to create a more diverse field, experts and industry leaders must grapple with the fact that, for centuries, archaeology has been primarily led by Western values, priorities, narratives, and interests. Of course, across the globe and throughout time, there are extensive examples of indigenous peoples and local communities conserving heritage; however, within the mainstream academic practice of archaeology, there has been a long history of overlooking these indigenous and locally led efforts. Decolonising the archaeological field means placing local values, priorities, narratives, interests, and expertise at the forefront of the conversation—especially in the context of academia.

In Australia, for example, archaeologists are now engaging in indigenous-led research. According to Dr. Tracy Ireland, Professor of Cultural Heritage at the University of Canberra, “This is when archaeologists go to a community and say, ‘What do you want us to research? What questions do you have around the past that are important for your community going forward?’” This kind of approach is creating opportunities to create space for more authentic and diverse perspectives.

Education, of course, is essential to this process—not only in cultivating new generations of archaeologists, but also in creating an overarching culture of respect and enthusiasm for the past, which helps ensure the protection and preservation of heritage sites.

Nurturing local interest and expertise in archaeology requires upgrading and enhancing archaeological curricula at a national level. Speaking at the AIUla World Archaeology Summit, the Founder of Namibia’s Research Culture Heritage Services Consulting Firm, Dr. Alma Mekondjo Nankela, explained, “A lot of African countries lack archaeology at a grassroots level, including at primary and secondary school.” To address this issue, many experts are working with governments around the world to advocate for the funding and resources necessary to develop and implement new educational curricula.

At the higher education level, archaeology programmes and curricula are also being revisited globally. During the summit, Dr. Ahmed Mansour, Director of the Writing and Scripts Center at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, suggested that archaeological education should be made more flexible, in order to make it more accessible to people from non-privileged backgrounds who are unable to afford the high costs and long study involved in traditional archaeology programmes. He suggested the creation of ‘short-term diplomas,’ which could help attract individuals from more diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to the field.

Mentorship, too, is an important aspect of archaeological education, according to the Royal Commission for AIUla’s Cultural Heritage Research Senior Manager, Dr. Paul Christians: “I think it’s incumbent on the mid and senior career folks to take that seriously. When I look back, I was incredibly lucky to have two or three mentors.” Rather than treating mentorship as a passive endeavour or assuming that expertise trickles down if students simply watch and learn, archaeologists increasingly recognise that mentorship needs to be practiced as an active, intentional, and symbiotic process in and out of the classroom.

Modern archaeology also increasingly requires practitioners to possess a more diverse skillset, and interdisciplinary education and skill-building have become important facets of updating archaeological curricula. During a knowledge exchange session at the AIUla World Archaeology Summit, field practitioners and university professors highlighted a variety of skills that are becoming increasingly important. As one participant explained, “Digital skills are paramount: there’s a lot of data coming from every direction, and people have to be able to analyse it.” The same participant added that it’s also important to “read as much as you can outside of your field; we all have to have the capacity to be interdisciplinary.” While current archaeology students engaged in this discussion expressed concerns about finding meaningful work opportunities, those actively working in the field expressed much greater confidence in the current and future job prospects available to young archaeologists.

And make no mistake: there is no shortage of demand for qualified archaeologists, especially in places like Saudi Arabia, where, according to the CEO of the Kingdom’s Heritage Commission, Dr. Jasir Alherbish, around 80 percent of the country’s archaeological sites have yet to be documented. Dr. Alherbish noted that the high demand for qualified staff across all levels—from operational to organisational, to governance-level support—has led the country to prioritise the training of Saudi archaeologists.

Even in countries where most archaeological heritage sites are already thoroughly excavated and well-documented, the challenges posed by issues like urbanisation and climate change necessitate the ongoing management, risk mitigation, and maintenance of heritage sites worldwide—which translates to sustainable, long-term career opportunities for those working in the field. As the work of traditional archaeology continues to expand—incorporating more cross-disciplinary engagement and a greater focus on local perspectives and intangible heritage—even the most well-documented sites are being revisited through new lenses.

Unlike other academic fields and pursuits, the actual work of archaeology tends to be considerably more physically demanding. This can be prohibitive to those with physical disabilities, who may struggle with the challenging nature of archaeological work, which often includes gruelling hours and extreme weather conditions. But technological advancements, such as the use of digitisation tools, can enhance the working conditions of archaeologists, allowing more individuals to participate in the field.

In a similar vein, archaeology can also be a mentally and emotionally taxing career—especially when working around sites of a traumatic nature. Unearthing the remnants of violent or tragic histories can have a significant impact on archaeologists’ mental health. Even the act of working with delicate, fragile relics can be a source of considerable anxiety. Participants in the AIUla World Archaeology Summit suggested that creating space for open dialogue about these issues could help alleviate the mental and emotional stress of the job.

Because of the unique on-ground realities of the job, it’s vital for archaeology students to gain both classroom and on-ground education. In AIUla, experts are continuously ensuring that each archaeological season provides local archaeology students with opportunities to receive hands-on training. For example, during the third field season at the Dadan Archaeological Project, three Saudi graduate students from King Saud University joined the team and received comprehensive training in both field work and lab work. The Royal Commission for AIUla has

also created a scholarship programme designed to provide high-achieving local students with opportunities to study at prestigious universities around the world. These scholarships cover a wide range of fields, from archaeology and history to tourism and hospitality—all of which complement the overarching heritage preservation efforts being undertaken throughout the region. To date, 54 scholars have received funding from the Royal Commission for AlUla in order to study archaeology and other related fields.

Enhancing the Accessibility of Archaeological Findings: Challenges and Solutions

Bringing new, more diverse voices into the archaeological field can have profoundly positive impacts on the insights and discoveries being made. As archaeology becomes more inclusive, it is allowing experts in the field to gain enriching new perspectives on the past—everywhere, archaeologists and historians are making enlightening new discoveries and reevaluating previous assumptions about humanity's collective past.

But opening up archaeology's doors requires making archaeological data more readily and widely available—and this process can pose as many challenges as opportunities. It is easier than ever to democratise access to data, thanks to considerable advancements in technology. But by creating open channels for disseminating this data, archaeologists also risk putting this data into the hands of people with malicious intents, such as those who could potentially loot, pillage, or damage the sites being studied.

The Director of UNESCO's Doha Office for the Gulf States Region and Yemen, Salah Khaled, provided a harrowing example of how more open access to data—particularly through social media—has created new opportunities for the illicit trafficking of protected cultural goods. During the summit, he spoke of how he saw objects in Cameroon being sold illegally in Europe through social media marketplaces—allowing sellers and traffickers to maintain anonymity. He also relayed a story of how his own social media data was used by criminals: “One month after my appointment [at UNESCO], we had a notice of illegal trafficking activity from the customs authority. A week later, I got calls from all over Europe to check whether a signature on a certificate of authenticity for historical masks and statues was actually mine. [The criminals] had taken my picture from a conference and added a signature. It was all over LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter—and it continued for two years. People made millions using my own picture.”

This is always a risk associated with making data and information readily available to the masses: it can be used for nefarious intents as well as good. But according to Dr. Anne Austin, Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the benefits of making archaeological data accessible outweigh the potential risks: “If we're not making our data findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable, we're not making it something that other people can look at, and they can question our interpretations—they can say, 'Is this truly the authentic representation of what was excavated?'" Dr. Austin provided an example of how experts are toeing the line between accessibility and preservation: by releasing comprehensive site data that excludes or obfuscates the actual site locations, other parties are able to access and study this data without making these sites more vulnerable to the risks of looting.

Leveraging Technology to Increase Engagement in the Field of Archaeology

While technology plays a critical role in making archaeological data accessible to a larger expert audience, it is also playing a key role in how archaeology is being translated to the masses—allowing communities to gain access to more digestible archaeology content. At the 2023 AIUla World Archaeology Summit, Richard Wilding highlighted a project that helped overcome the “disconnect between the ancient heritage of Mesopotamia and the modern-day inhabitants of Syria and Iraq” via social media. By translating ancient Mesopotamian literature into Arabic and sharing it over Facebook, more than five million people in Iraq and Syria were able to engage in ancient mythologies from their part of the world.

According to Dr. Chase F. Robinson, the Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, D.C., social media is having a noticeable and tangible impact on the museum’s audience demographics. “There’s no question,” Robinson said, “we can see it in the profile of those who come to museum events: they’re younger, they’ve heard about an event not by virtue of conventional paid advertising, but because they’ve been following an influencer.”

However, the nature of social media is such that it often relies on digestible, bite-sized bits of content—which runs the risk of oversimplifying complex, multifaceted information. “We fret about the ability to communicate nuance, subtlety—to tell the stories we really want to tell, to engage people seriously in a medium that is so unforgiving and so inflexible and so determined to capture eyeballs,” Robinson explained. “Although social media grabs attention, it is not as substantive, not as considered. We need to think of social media as just one part of a broader landscape of platforms in which we can take our content and make it accessible.”

And social media is just one of many technological tools being leveraged by modern-day archaeologists in order to add new complexity, resonance, and accessibility to heritage sites and findings. Multimedia Producer Sparsh Ahuja spoke of how virtual reality has helped connect communities in India and Pakistan with their heritage: through a project that allows survivors of the partition of India and Pakistan to take virtual tours of their ancestral homes, Ahuja explained that “not only was it a very emotional experience for the survivor, but it allowed the younger generation to really connect with that story, and put a place on a map for their own heritage.” Artificial intelligence is another tool being harnessed by modern archaeologists; but as Professor Dominic Powesland, Director of the Landscape Research Centre in Yorkshire, explained, the outputs of technology like AI are only as good as the data that’s put in: “If you have very high-quality data and high-quality questions, you should be able to use AI to get high-quality results.”

In AIUla, archaeologists have been doing innovative work when it comes to leveraging technology to add new depth to their findings. For example, archaeologists have collaborated with digital experts, forensic specialists, historians, and other diverse parties in order to breathe new life into one of their most remarkable discoveries: the tomb of Hinat, a Nabataean woman who lived in Hegra roughly 2,000 years ago. From the skeletal remains recovered in the tomb, these experts were able to create a digital reconstruction of Hinat’s likeness. From this digital image, experts then created a realistic model of Hinat’s face—and now, using the power of artificial intelligence, AIUla’s heritage experts are working to create opportunities for the public to engage in conversation with Hinat. Similarly—although following a less detailed

methodology—archaeologists working at Dadan have collaborated with diverse experts to create a digital likeness of the Lihyanite king Talmi, based on a sculpture recovered from the site.

Ultimately, all of these modern tools and technologies serve the same underlying purpose: to translate the work of archaeologists into compelling narratives. This focus on storytelling sits at the heart of the broader issue of accessibility as well: it is by refocusing and localising historical narratives that archaeologists are able to better engage with local communities; it is by creating a more inclusive archaeological community, with broader access to archaeological data, that more diverse perspectives are able to inform and rethink these storylines; and it is by rethinking archaeological education that the field is able to benefit from more inclusive—and more accurate—revisions of traditional historical narratives. “Human beings are connected by stories,” explained Sheila Russell, Storyteller and CEO of Sands in Time. “We need to draw them in and actually link in with that human element.” In the world of modern archaeology, this emphasis on storytelling is one key to a more accessible, inclusive field. When local community members, future archaeologists, the global public, and other stakeholders feel connected to the relics of the past through meaningful, culturally resonant narratives, they are more likely to be invested in the preservation and continuity of this past—which plays a vital role in safeguarding this heritage for the future.