

The Key Role of Community archaeology in Enhancing Local Identity and Territorial Bonds in Turkey and Jordan

Ilda Faiella

PhD student in Heritage Science at the University "Sapienza" of Rome, Italy

Abstract

The present research study, part of an ongoing doctoral project, is an interpretative-comparative analysis conducted considering two geographically distinct contexts: the archaeological site of Arslantepe with its village of Orduzu (Malatya) in Turkey, and the archaeological site of Tell Hisban with its village of Hisban (Amman), in Jordan. In both cases, the site is situated almost at the centre of the anthropic and natural landscape, forming a historical and natural monument. A qualitative research survey was carried out through interviews with semi-structured questions directed towards the resident population, to understand: the vision of the site, the level of involvement, the impact on society, and the relationship with the archaeological team. The research aims to understand whether community archaeology applications can contribute to increasing the recognition of the archaeological site as a fundamental part of their territory. The result is that such practices can foster a stronger connection with the past and the contemporary landscape, contributing to the transformation of the area by enhancing local well-being and benefits in sustainable development. This study is entered into the field of Community archaeology that, by establishing continuous communication between archaeologists, the local community, and their cultural heritage, and incorporating the local perspective into the interpretation of the past, aims to contribute to increasing awareness of the cultural heritage and its incorporation within the local identity.

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Keywords

Community archaeology, Qualitative evaluation, Local identity, Local involvement, Gender-inclusive engagement

1. Introduction

Archaeological sites and artifacts are often deeply intertwined with the landscapes where people live today. This relationship between heritage and place is crucial, as it connects the past with contemporary life through the people who have inhabited the territory over time. Furthermore, the definition of heritage and landscapes is not an objective practice. They are shaped by the perspectives and values of those involved. Community archaeology, by including local communities in these processes, aims to transform them no longer into mere passive observers, but into active participants in the documentation, interpretation, and management of their cultural heritage. This approach enriches archaeological studies by integrating local knowledge and contemporary perspectives, deepening the understanding of past landscapes, and ensuring a more inclusive and relevant interpretation of history (Álvarez Larrain & McCall, 2019). According to this perspective, cultural heritage, including archaeological sites, gains significance and a future only if its social value is maintained. Preservation involves more than protecting physical remains; it requires

awareness by the community of the cultural significance, which must actively participate in its preservation and promotion (Manacorda, 2007). This study, through the analysis of qualitative survey data, demonstrates how community archaeology and the active involvement of residents can increase the recognition of the archaeological site as a fundamental component of their local landscape.

2. Literature review

The present study falls within the field of community archaeology, a multifaceted discipline encompassing various aspects of archaeological theory and practice. Its primary goal is to establish an active relationship with contemporary society, which goes beyond mere communication and the transmission of knowledge by specialists. Rather, it is based on constant interaction, active involvement, and the participation of local communities in the definition and interpretation of their own past (Corbishley, 2011; Moser *et al.*, 2002). Community archaeology is thus central to the critical evaluation of archaeology in the modern world, particularly in how archaeologists engage with the public, encompassing themes of economic, social, political, religious, and environmental relevance (Moshenska, 2017). The community has both the duty and the right to express curiosity, passion, and pride toward its cultural heritage, which is a fundamental part of its territory (Roberts, 2017). This identification and strengthening of the connection with heritage is only achievable through multi-layered communication between archaeologists and the local community, and the creation of a direct, bidirectional dialogue. This dialogue must be based on the sharing of knowledge and the integration of local wisdom with archaeological expertise, achieved through inclusive and collaborative practices. The initial phase of formalized community projects dates to the 1980s, emerging from the idea of amateur involvement in archaeological research in the United Kingdom. As it developed further, this original concept of "community-led" archaeology sparked intense debate regarding its definition (Thomas, 2017). Over time, archaeologists around the world have engaged with many different communities and sectors of society, following a wide variety of theoretical models and/or applied methods, depending on local traditions, economic, political, and social realities, as well as how archaeology is perceived in each nation. In some cases, it refers to a collaborative research method between communities and professionals, while in others, it describes a practice facilitated and guided by professionals, where the public is not necessarily the creator of the information provided. In other cases, the concept of community archaeology is framed as "archaeology by the people for the people" (Moshenska and Dhanjal, 2012) or "archaeology from below" (Faulkner, 2000). These expressions have been misappropriated over time, misrepresenting the scholarly understanding behind them. In fact, the interpretation of community archaeology is the result of continuous and distinct development in the various countries where it is applied (Thomas, 2017). It responds to specific needs and motivations within each individual context, which frequently lead to different nuances in its theoretical and methodological definition (indigenous archaeology, community-based participatory research, collaborative archeology, co-creation archaeology, civic engagement). As a consequence, some researchers have stressed the necessity of developing a global perspective to understand how each country has incorporated and implemented community archeology in its projects. Okamura and Mastuda (Matsuda, 2011) proposed an implementation of the Merriman's and Holtorf's earlier theories on public archaeology (2004; 2007), termed the Multiple Perspective Model with a Multivocal Approach. This more theory-oriented approach considers the public as a subject, possessing its own agency that interacts with the past according to its beliefs, interests, and needs. The added Multivocal Approach aims to identify and recognize the various interpretations of archaeological materials made by different social groups or individuals across various contemporary contexts (Matsuda, 2016). It is essential to assess the extent to which community archeology has been adopted and applied in different countries and how it has become integrated into archaeological practice in each context. This model with its perspective serves as the theoretical foundation of the present research on community archaeology, acknowledging the diversity of interests, attitudes, demands, and needs expressed by various individuals and accepting multiple forms of engagement with the past.

It is important to highlight how, in many archaeological excavations, although not always in a formalized manner, contact with the community has played a crucial role in archaeological activities since the beginning of the excavation experience. Conversely, the recent need to formalize community engagement in archaeology projects has, in some cases, led to a shift in priorities that potentially diminishes the significance of this interaction. In some contexts where

this research attitude has only recently developed, common challenges include practice-driven approaches and descriptive publications lacking clear research questions, data, evaluative frameworks, and relying on anecdotal evidence. Instead, community archeology must be conceived of as an ongoing, dynamic study comprising different research attempts. As Mastuda underline, public archaeology consists of an evolving process that includes two cyclical and interconnected phases - research and practice: “first, there is research into the archaeology-public relationship, which is then followed by action to improve that relationship, and there is again research, followed by action, and so on”. The present research study considers this cyclical process essential for fully exploring the complexity of existing challenges and addressing them within the context of the relationship between communities and archaeological sites. This approach constitutes an attempt to fully understand the territory, moving beyond purely theoretical, marginalized, anecdotal, or under-explored conditions (Mastuda, 2016). Within this complex framework, the aforementioned theoretical consideration intertwines with Isherwood's definition of community archaeology, which is conceptualized not as a set of practices or specific methods, but as a network of relationships between three key actors: archaeological remains, the community, and heritage professionals. The proposed framework positions the concept of place at its core, a distinctive feature of every community project and the space where all interactions between these actors take place (Isherwood, 2011).

Moreover, community involvement and participation represent fundamental elements of community archaeology, extensively discussed in the literature (Atalay 2012; Atalay et al. 2016; Little and Shackel 2007; McDavid 2014; Marshall 2002). This study highlights the multiple ways in which empowerment and engagement can be interpreted. Participation may manifest as physical involvement, but, more crucially, can take the form of emotional or intellectual engagement. These manifestations vary according to context, culture, social, political, and economic conditions, the sensitivity and specificity of archaeological properties, and the research team's methodological approaches and operational practices.

Finally, beyond examining the modes of audience engagement, exploring participation is crucial as it facilitates the capturing and addressing of different perspectives on the meaning of cultural heritage for each individual or group. This emphasis on assessing the pivotal elements of participation has enabled the study to evolve in understanding and enhancing the relationship and awareness that individuals have and develop with their own cultural heritage.

3. Research objectives

The present study aims to understand whether the local community's involvement and participation in their cultural heritage can contribute to increasing the recognition of the archaeological site as a fundamental part of their territory. Through an interpretive-comparative analysis of the two chosen contexts, the focus is to capture their critical issues and evaluate the negative and positive aspects of the two experiences of community archaeology. It is hoped that its critical application could serve as a starting point for reflection and action aimed at strengthening the connection between the past and the contemporary landscape. This, in turn, may contribute to the positive development of the local area by enhancing community well-being and promoting sustainable development from economic, social, and cultural perspectives.

4. Study object contexts

Community archaeology has developed in different ways globally, with practices varying according to the specific context. To analyse and evaluate its potential in strengthening the relationship with the territory, it is essential to compare different realities with a global approach, as expressed above (Matsuda, 2016). The first site under investigation is the Turkish site of Arslantepe, excavated by Sapienza University of Rome for over 60 years. This site features a tell over 30 meters high with a dense stratigraphic sequence covering approximately 6 millennia. At Arslantepe, the best-preserved and oldest palace complex ever discovered, dating back to the final centuries of the 4th millennium BCE, provides evidence of the emergence of the first hierarchical societies in the Mesopotamian world (Frangipane, 2018). The study focused on the rural village of Orduzu (Malatya), which surrounds the archaeological site and acts as a protective buffer through its inhabitants. The choice of this context stems from the deep communication, trust, and respect established between archaeologists and the local population over decades of work at the archaeological site. This makes it an exemplary case for applying community archaeology and fostering

mutual understanding and collaboration aimed at future social, economic, and cultural sustainability. The second case, selected in Jordan, concerns the village of Hisban, located 10 km north of Madaba, which has a long settlement history. Its archaeological evidence is characterized by a Tell (Tell Hisban), with remains ranging from the Iron Age (c. 1200 BCE) to the late Ottoman period. Excavations, conducted by Andrews University (USA) since the late 1960s, were closely linked to ethnoarchaeological research activities, pioneering the development of community archaeology in Jordan (LaBianca, 2022; 2017).

5. Research methodology

The data were collected through conducting a qualitative research survey through interviews with semi-structured questions directed towards the resident population of the two villages. For both Hisban and Orduzu, the questions involved residents occupying areas at different distances from the archaeological site, but within 1.5-1.7 km. In fact, the analysis revealed that as the distance from the archaeological site increased, both the sense of attachment and awareness of the site declined. This outer zone was therefore identified as a temporary boundary of the current investigation and a point of decreasing engagement. At the same time, it should be considered a starting point for future actions aimed at strengthening the relationship between the site and the broader community.

People of all age groups were interviewed, from the 10-20 age category to the 80-90 age range. Both women and men have been surveyed to get information from both genders, as they tend to have different perspectives and ideas. Specifically, in Hisban, 23 women and 15 men were interviewed, while in Orduzu, 25 women and 16 men were interviewed.

The interviews consisted of 10 questions divided into five categories, each addressing a different objective:

1. Understand the community's vision of the archaeological site within their territory, and what it means to them.
2. Assess local participation in the archaeological site and their interest in contributing to its protection, enhancement, and management.
3. Capture local cultural heritage, focusing on behaviours, traditions, customs, and everyday craft tools.
4. Analyse the societal, economic, and intellectual impact of archaeological activities.
5. Understand the community's relationship with the research team, including expectations and desires for improved communication.

6. Results

The qualitative data analysis process followed a structured approach based on the method proposed by Saldaña (2015) in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. After familiarizing oneself with the material, a two-cycle coding process was conducted. In the first cycle, descriptive codes were applied to meaningful excerpts from the transcripts through a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts. In the second cycle, related codes were consolidated into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and hierarchies. This inductive and iterative process enabled the organization of participants' perspectives into coherent analytical units. The categories generated through the second cycle formed the basis of the results discussed in this section and were selected according to both the frequency and the intensity of participants' accounts.

Based on this systematic analysis of participants' responses, the following core themes were identified:

Mixed knowledge and connection: Interviewees showed varied awareness of archaeological sites, depending on age, education, and distance. Those living beyond 1.5/1.7 km from the archaeological site, especially in Arslantepe, feel disconnected from it.

Community involvement: In Hisban, respondents frequently highlighted the presence of community activities organized by SELA – a national association, which operates throughout Jordan, aiming to develop the capacity of communities living around archaeological sites and promote their active involvement in its protection - and Andrews

University, which fosters engagement and long-term commitment to heritage preservation. Conversely, in Orduzu, community archaeology activities are limited, mainly limited to school visits, leaving the community less involved.

Traditional practices and habits: Traditional activities related to agriculture and local craftsmanship remain important in both communities. In Turkey, objects like ocak and tandır ovens are still in use. The preservation of kerpiç houses, made of mud bricks, is emphasized in Orduzu as part of local heritage, drawing an analogy with the architecture of the 4th-millennium BCE palace complex at the Arslantepe archaeological site (Balossi Restelli *et al.*, 2017). In Hisban, hospitality and traditional customs are central values.

Impact of archaeology and communication: Archaeology is seen as beneficial for the knowledge gained and economic opportunities created. However, in Hisban, economic benefits are seen as insufficient, complaining about fewer job opportunities. In both places, locals feel a lack of communication about excavation work, leading to some negative perceptions.

Relationship with research teams: In Orduzu, the MAIAO team from Sapienza University has established a strong relationship with the community, particularly with families who have worked at Arslantepe, reflecting high engagement due to more than 60 years of continuous research. However, this connection diminishes among those living more than 1.5 km from the archaeological site. In Hisban, familiarity with Andrews University and SELA is common among older residents, but interaction has decreased due to a reduction in excavation duration from three months annually to two weeks every two years. This infrequent contact has led to a less consistent relationship with the research teams.

7. Discussion

Critically examining these results, one of the key observations of this study is the sense of awareness and perceived significance attributed to the archaeological site by residents of the two villages. The assessment of awareness levels was based on a systematic analysis of interview data and focused on three main indicators: (1) participants' ability to describe the archaeological site's history, significance, and features in detail, beyond surface-level information; (2) the frequency and nature of their interactions with the archaeological site, and the extent to which it was integrated into their personal and communal narratives; and (3) their ability to articulate this relationship with the site—either individually or collectively—through communitarian participation or an expressed desire for engagement, whether physical or emotional.

In Hisban, the Tell is regarded by everyone as a central part of the village, whether as a place of transit or as a prominent feature of the landscape. The development of this understanding is closely tied to the intensive work carried out over the years by SELA and the archaeologists from Andrews University, who, from the beginning, practiced community archaeology to bring the local population closer to the archaeological site. Participants frequently demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the archaeological site, referring to cultural and historical information and personal and communal experiences tied to it. This demonstrated how important it is for the community to recognize local identity through cultural heritage. These efforts have led, over the years, to the creation of local associations, particularly the Committee for Tourism and Heritage, founded by Abdullah Abdulazeez Al-Masha'lah, and the Women's Center, which includes a significant number of residents committed to the enhancement of the archaeological site and heritage, as for the interviewee 31 (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Interviewee 31 is among the citizens actively engaged in the enhancement of Hisban's local heritage – (Source: Author)



Figure 2 Interviewee 25 is among the citizens of Orduzu who describe the archaeological site as an ancient place connected to local origins. – (Source: Silvia Festuccia)

In Orduzu, despite the population's growing awareness and knowledge of the archaeological site, it is still predominantly perceived as 'an ancient place linked to the origins of the territory,' as stated by Interviewee 25 (Figure 2).

This recognition is primarily linked to the intense and continuous excavation work conducted by Sapienza University, which has always involved the active participation of the male population of the village through their employment as labourers during the excavation seasons. Consequently, the archaeological site is largely associated with its economic value, being seen as a source of sustainable economic benefits for the local people. At Arslantepe, a significant observation was the limited involvement of women about the archaeological site, despite their desire to learn more about it.

A further consideration is that several methodological challenges emerged during the research process, particularly in relation to cross-cultural fieldwork related to language and cultural barriers. In both the villages, linguistic mediation required double translation (Italian – English – Local language), which may have limited the conveyance of subtle cultural nuances and affected the interpretation of qualitative data. While efforts were made to include a demographically diverse sample in both contexts, achieving a perfect balance in representation or sampling proved difficult, especially among young participants, who were less accessible during the fieldwork period.

To address these methodological challenges, several strategies were implemented to mitigate linguistic and cultural limitations and ensure rigorous data collection despite sampling difficulties. The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the collection of rich, contextualised data, allowing participants to express complex and multifaceted perspectives in their own terms. To ensure analytical robustness, interviews were conducted until data saturation, that is, when no substantially new insights were emerging (Saunders *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the adoption of a two-cycle coding strategy, based on Saldaña's (2015) framework, facilitated the identification of meaningful patterns and thematic structures through a systematic, iterative, and transparent process. To address the linguistic barriers must be underlined how the analysis was further strengthened by ongoing dialogue with local researchers and professionals involved in the archaeological projects in both Turkey and Jordan. Nevertheless, as Kersel and Chesson (2013) argue in *Tomato Season in Ghor e-Saft*, qualitative fieldwork often unfolds under imperfect and context-specific conditions. In this study, these challenges were reflected in the limited availability of young participants, hindering a fully balanced demographic sample. Such complexity is a fundamental feature of qualitative inquiry, where these constraints must be recognised as an inherent part of the broader complexity of the research process.

8. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the outcomes, the study offers the following critical recommendations for enhancing the relationship between local communities and archaeological sites:

1. **Gender inclusive engagement:** In Hisban, the responses indicate a growing involvement of women in community archaeology activities related to the archaeological site. In contrast, in Orduzu, targeted initiatives are needed to

actively engage women and strengthen their connection with it. This is particularly important given women's crucial role in educating future generations and transmitting cultural identity.

2. Economic benefits and sustainability: In Orduzu, interviewees often associated the archaeological site with economic benefits, especially through the annual employment of local workers during excavation campaigns. This contributes to a form of local sustainability. In Hisban, however, archaeological projects would benefit from stronger economic integration strategies, such as the development of heritage tourism and small-scale enterprise initiatives. These could generate year-round opportunities and extend benefits beyond seasonal excavation work.
3. Knowledge sharing and transparency: Interviews highlighted the need to provide more detailed information about the site and ongoing excavations, to address community concerns about limited knowledge and to strengthen local engagement. Additionally, in Hisban, the widespread demand for formalized knowledge-sharing should be addressed by communicating curated information about the archaeological site and excavations in an accessible way and local language.
4. Youth engagement strategy: In both contexts, targeted strategies should be developed to engage younger generations through experiential activities that foster interest and involvement by combining practical and educational components (e.g., traditional re-enactments of archaeological excavations, hands-on experiences). These initiatives should also reflect suggestions emerging from young adult interviewees, such as the integration of new technologies that appeal to younger audiences (e.g., digital platforms or 3D models of the excavation).

Considering these findings, future initiatives should focus involve local communities at all stages of archaeological work, encouraging cultural heritage awareness and interdisciplinary collaboration to support sustainable archaeological site management. In this approach, communities are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in its interpretation, both physically and emotionally. Reframing the relationship between the three key actors (Isherwood, R., 2011) - communities, archaeological sites, and researchers - as a dynamic and balanced partnership can strengthen local connections to the archaeological site, promote mutual cultural exchange. This reconfiguration helps ensure that heritage continues to support local identity, sustainable development, and cultural resilience (Forte *et al.* 2021).

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Ethics approval.

I am PhD candidate in Heritage Science at Sapienza University of Rome, hereby declare that my research project titled "The Key Role of Community archaeology in Enhancing Local Identity and Territorial Bonds in Turkey and Jordan", conducted as part of my PhD studies in Heritage Science at Sapienza University of Rome, adheres to high ethical standards as outlined below.

I confirm that, according to the current regulations of Sapienza University of Rome, formal ethical approval is not required for studies involving non-invasive, non-clinical interviews with adult participants, as confirmed by CERT Sapienza, on 10/05/2024. Nevertheless, ethical rigor has been maintained throughout the research process.

Conflict of interest.

The author(s) declare that there is no competing interest.

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Appendix I:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The following questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews conducted with residents in both Hisban and Orduzu. While maintaining consistency in core themes, minor adaptations were made to accommodate cultural and contextual differences between the two locations.

General questions information

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your job?

Category A: The vision of the archaeological site

1. What can you tell us about ...?
2. How do you feel connected to ...?
3. What does the archaeological site represent for you?

Category B: Community archaeology activities and local participation

1. Are there any community activities at ...? Can you describe them?
2. Would you like to participate in these events? What activities would you suggest?
3. What would you like to tell visitors about the people of the archaeological site and your village?

Category C: Local cultural heritage

1. Which daily habits reflect your family's traditions?
2. Are there any traditional behaviours or tools specific to your area or family in daily, weekly, or annual activities?

Category D: Archaeological activities impact

1. What do you think about the excavation work at ...?
2. How have the archaeological works changed life in your village? What do you think about these changes?

Category E: Relationship with research team and future hopes

1. What is your relationship with the archaeological team like? What suggestions do you have to develop this relationship and the connection with the archaeological site?
2. What are your hopes for the future of the people of the archaeological site and your village?

Note: These questions were translated into Turkish and Arabic for the respective field sites.