EXPLORING PERSPECTIVES: a conversation about the   impact of information management in archaeological archives

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In the three questions posed below, we share our experiences of and perspectives on information management in an archaeological archives setting, whilst outlining challenges, opportunities and the importance of adhering to the FAIR guiding principles.

What have been the biggest information management challenges in the large infrastructure projects era?

Theodora: Three things: firstly, I would highlight a lack of early consultation with archivists. A key issue discussed in past AAG events is that the project should only be considered closed by all parties on the day the archive leaves for the designated repository. Secondly, organisations working on infrastructure projects not being able to easily co-operate with each other to compare notes about the software designed for the field and its challenges. This is largely a result of working in a commercially competitive environment, but even where collaborations are possible, the different systems used lead to inevitable interoperability issues and inefficiencies in project delivery. Lastly, the need for clarification of project roles at the start of each project, with properly allocated budgets, especially where large teams are involved in producing vast amounts of data and trying to adhere to FAIR principles.

Jessica: I think the speed with which technology moves has made it challenging for organisations to keep up. There was a constant need to react to changes rather than plan for them and a lot of digital systems have evolved over time in response to external pressures. This has increased the need for data processing to be undertaken prior to the preparation of an archive, requiring consultation with the archives team throughout, impacting the time it takes to prepare and deposit an archive. Alongside this is the variability of museum requirements across the country; this lack of consistency adds to the complexity of archive tasks which also impacts on time.

Katie: The scale of the data being collected. Large files are difficult to transfer, process, disseminate and download with standard desktop computers. As the numbers and variety of file types increase more effort is required to compile the metadata and documentation to accompany them. This is exacerbated by a lack of appropriate information management skills within the sector. Around 80 per cent of all digital archives deposited with the ADS (Archaeology Data service) are returned to a depositor at least once because of errors in the data, metadata, or simply missing documentation. This is time consuming and costly for the depositors and for the ADS. There is also the barrier to re-use to consider with large files, as researchers who do not have access to high-performance computing resources cannot re-use the files.

What areas do you think the sector should focus on to improve information management?

Theodora: Responding more quickly to current needs: I hope that the development of two new roles, – Digital Archivist and Data Officer – will contribute to better architecture systems so data can be passed on to the repositories in a coherent fashion, allowing access for all relevant parties and the general public.

Katie: Skills and training. This will be a focus for ADS in the coming year as we launch our new deposit system with improved guidance on data deposition and data preparation. But this also needs to be supported with better skills training in information management across the sector.

Jessica: I agree with Katie that skills and training should be the focus. As we move towards fully digital recording systems it is crucial that staff at every level appreciate the importance of information management and the impact it has on the creation and preservation of the archaeological archive.

What do you see as the biggest opportunities that information management will bring to archaeological archives in the future?

Theodora: The ability for data to be used by all internal and external stakeholders faster and accurately to produce an informative publication with potential for re-interpretation and funding of new projects.

Jessica: There is no doubt about the increased opportunities information management brings to archaeological archives, enabling researchers and members of the public to freely access grey literature reports and digital archives from anywhere in the world. The growth of regional research agendas and linking of data across online platforms throws open the doors for new and innovative approaches to re-using the archaeological resource that would previously have been inconceivable.

Katie: I think the biggest opportunity lies in greater interoperability of data. If we can make our archaeological archives more interoperable with each other, we would create a wealth of opportunity for research and innovation within the archaeological sector in the form of cross-site and cross-organisational investigations. Improved interoperability will also enable our data to be used outside the sector in innovative ways, maximising their value, impact and legacy.

In store with one part of a physical infrastructure project archive. Credit: Headland Archaeology on behalf of MHI

Theodora Anastasiadou

Theodora has a bachelor's degree (University of Birmingham) and master's degrees (University of Birmingham/University of York) and is an archives specialist with over 30 years' experience. This is combined with a detailed knowledge of fieldwork practice in UK commercial archaeology and the Greek Archaeological Service (Ministry of Culture). She is the current Chair of the AAG for a second term and an Ordinary Committee member for IMSIG.

Jessica Irwin

Jessica is the Archives Manager for Wessex Archaeology, overseeing the archives team across five national offices. Beginning her career as a field archaeologist in 1999, she undertook a BSc at Sheffield University, joining Wessex Archaeology in 2011. Jessica is an Ordinary Committee member of both the AAG and IMSIG and represents CIfA on the OASIS Management Board.

Katie Green

Katie is Head of Collections Development at the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), where she has worked since 2013. Katie is responsible for managing the team of digital archivists, collections growth, and key partnerships. She is the Vice Chair of IMSIG and an Ordinary Committee member of the AAG and represents ADS on the Archaeological Archives Forum.

Hybrid physical and digital recording of a feature on a rural site. Credit: Wessex Archaeology

Digital tablet recording on an industrial site. Credit: Wessex Archaeology

Barcoding boxes for tracking archives in storage. Credit: Wessex Archaeology