

The History Hackers' Handbook:

10 strategies for making the Past Present



With a support of:



The History Hackers' Handbook: 10 Strategies for making the Past Present

Publisher: OPEN SPACE foundation

1-st edition | Sofia, Bulgaria | 2025



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Preprint: Ognyan Popov

Photos: personal photos of the authors

ISBN 978-619-90312-6-1

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web-page: <https://www.openspacebg.com/>

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Collective

"The History Hackers' Handbook" is a guide for heritage ambassadors.

"The History Hackers' Handbook: 10 Strategies for making the Past Present" was created within the framework of the "Inherited Culture" project.

The book contains a comprehensive description of the good practices and methodologies collected and used during our work with 9 volunteer teams in the period 2023–2025, with whom we worked at three key archaeological sites in Bulgaria (Heraclea Sintica, Veliki Preslav, and Misionis).

The main focus of the handbook is on cultural heritage:

- Why should we preserve it?
- How can it help the development and self-determination of young people?



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INTRODUCTION: From textbooks to action, or How to “Hack” History?

To the Reader of “The History Hackers’ Handbook: 10 Strategies for Making the Past Present”.

You are holding in your hands a handbook for revolutionaries. No, we will not teach you how to overthrow regimes, but how to break down the walls between the past and the present. In the age of short clips and constant information overload, history risks being perceived as a dry series of facts, destined only to be memorised and quickly forgotten.

This book offers answers to this problem. It brings together the insights of people from different parts of Europe who believe that the best way to make young people and the general public fall in love with our heritage is to make them active participants in its rediscovery.

What will you find in this handbook?

In the following chapters, you will learn ten strategies that turn the passive consumption of history into a captivating experience.

We will begin by rethinking teaching, revealing how to use history as a tool for critical thinking, and for comparing the past, present, and future, by making students “their own teachers.”

We will discuss the key role of experiential education. Several articles focus on experimental archaeology, from working in real excavations and using GIS technologies to conducting hands-on workshops on ceramics, archery, and historical reenactments that turn dry theory into tangible reality.

We will then dive deep into the world of gamification and video games. One article proposes a comprehensive model for an “Archaeological Olympics,” combining intellectual and physical challenges to bring Ancient Greece to life. Another chapter will show you how modern open-world games and real-time strategy can serve as “virtual museums” and a first

step towards academic interest.

We will also not ignore museums, as well as the broader societal context. You'll read about how to use public monuments, which often go unnoticed, to build "cultural intimacy" and community engagement. In addition, one of the most important chapters offers a strategy for rewriting historical narratives to include the contributions of migrant communities, showing how history can become a bridge, not a barrier, for contemporary society.

In addition to the authors' ideas, this book is also a platform for the achievements of the "Inherited Culture" project - our proven model for youth work in the field of heritage. We will present innovative products born from this project, such as the "DigiT" board game and the "Legacy Hunt" mobile application, which are examples of the successful implementation of gamification the heritage. We will share the revelations and insights of the participants themselves, who are the best gauge of the success of these methods, and of course, we will analyze what the project's real success is owed to namely, our methodology, based on experiential learning and listening to the voice of young people.

Are you ready to hack the way history is taught and experienced? It's time to get started.

Archaeology as a Living Classroom

Lessons from Heraclea Sintica, Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines archaeology as an experiential learning framework, with the potential to enhance youth engagement in history. It uses the recent 2025 rescue excavations at Heraclea Sintica, Bulgaria, as a case study to demonstrate how direct interaction with material culture can foster curiosity, empathy, resilience and intercultural collaboration. This chapter integrates research on multisensory and participatory pedagogy, evaluating how digital heritage tools - citizen science platforms, VR/AR, and 3D modelling - might expand access to archaeological practice. The author argues that modern approaches to archaeology can democratize the past and offer a distinctive means to cultivate sustained youth engagement with the past, whilst linking historical understanding to contemporary social and environmental concerns.

Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have had a fascination with heritage and history. As a young child, I am sure I did not know or fully understand the term "archaeology", nor did I have the ability to truly collect and consolidate where my deep fascination and connection to past lay. I grew up in the rural Cambrian mountains of Mid Wales, roaming the fields and farms barefoot or in wellington boots digging up small pieces of ceramic and nails with rudimentary tools. Engaging with the environment and landscape in this way must have stirred a buried link to the land and the long-gone societies which had engaged with it prior to me.

As I write this, I sit at the crossroads of youth and adulthood, and from my perspective, I have noticed that history can often be presented to young people as an abstract and distant concept, confined to the rigid paper borders of textbooks and uninspiring lecturers. It is all well learning about why such an event happened, where it took place, and who was involved, but this leaves a huge vacuum in the curious mind of youth, which begs questions such as: *“How does this relate to me today?”* and *“What was it like to be there?”*. These kinds of questions are rooted in a deeper urge and craving to interact with the context that is being described to us. I am not writing to criticise academia from that angle; in fact I am arguing quite the opposite. It is imperative for the human mind to understand said context by means of school lessons, textbooks and speakers, because without this sort of tangible cohesion of information and explanation, we would cease to retain and reproduce reliable and accurate information, which is one of the bastions of research, learning and general societal development (Hanif & Hassan, 2025, pp. 2–10). However, if we are to continue producing such impressive holistically researched and informed narrators and narrations of our past, perhaps we need to spend more time focusing and understanding how the malleable mentality of the youth can be ignited and inspired. By disregarding this, we run the future risk of producing dry, fragmentary sources, produced by detached researchers who never truly unlocked their true potential.

In a world so dominated by screens and instant access to information, it becomes far too easy for one to become under-stimulated by ordinary information presented in stale, uninventive styles. (Leonhardt et al., 2025, p. 7) explains that high screen exposure correlates with concentration difficulties, which I would argue is indicative that perhaps it is time to adopt and instigate a different methodology when it comes to illuminating the past to our youth. We must remember that as stewards of heritage, we have a responsibility to encourage and inspire those who will follow in our footsteps, and perhaps if we make the right decisions and promote adaptability, the next generation will do an even better job than us. It might be foolish for us to ignore the dynamic manner of the human mind and society when it comes to methods of engagement and learning, so we must listen, absorb and develop as best we can.

Now that I have touched on the importance of change and approach - the remainder of this chapter seeks to explore and suggest ideas, from a lateral perspective, on how we can instigate such a revolution in how history can be taught, experienced and

shared with young people, in a manner which increasingly inspires and interests them.

Immersion and discovery as educational practice

The discipline of archaeology has the potential to completely evaluate and peak young learner interest in history, which I will demonstrate in the content which follows. I argue that one of defining characteristics of archaeology is the unique position it holds in the ability to transform and connect academic historical knowledge into authentic lived experience. According to Kolb's experiential learning space model (Kolb, 2015, pp.67-83), learning occurs through a continuous flow of movement between experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation, which mirrors the rhythm of archaeological excavation. Through the direct participation in archaeological excavations, young people develop an understanding of the past as more than just a static collection of facts and information; it becomes an evolving dialogue between primary evidence and imagination. Every unearthed artifact becomes a piece of the larger puzzle which invites imagination, interpretation, and reflection. Such objects cease to exist as lifeless items, but instead become transformed through the beholder into a dynamic fragment of the wider narrative of human history. The experience of gently handling a pottery sherd, sensitively unearthing a burial, or photographing the stratigraphic layers from which you dug an excavation trench compels one to deeply ponder the lives, people and story behind it. Actively engaging with history in this way adds an undeniable empathetic response, in which we feel more connected and engaged with the landscape and the memories it holds. It is in this excavation context where education can start to feel like an immersive and interactive experience; history is no longer something to simply be memorized, but something to be felt.

When I found myself participating in the rescue excavations at the ancient city of Heraclea Sintica, South-western Bulgaria in the summer of 2025 under the Open Space Foundation, the concept of immersion took on a profound meaning to me. This particular project was prompted by the construction of trans-Balkan gas pipeline – an acute and emotionally charged context, which required immediate attention to recover data from the freshly revealed Western Necropolis before destruction. Each day began at sunrise, with the dry air of the Balkan summer thick with the aroma of soil and vineyards beckoning us into the trenches. Some of the members of the team were not even archaeologists, and this was their

first project, which took many of them by surprise. Some mornings were unpleasant; a battle against aching bodies and tired eyes, but under the leadership of Professor Dr Vagalinski, the project director, it was difficult not to find oneself feeling motivated and eager to get involved. The takeaway from this brief excerpt is that history can feel extremely stimulating, if you are guided and encouraged by somebody who has a fire in their soul about a particular subject. It is no use trying to impassion the youth through indirect means – it requires direct and engaging leadership, flowing with fervour to unlock the true potential of the young mind.

Unearthing a burial is a profoundly stirring act. As an archaeologist, I found myself at the crossroads between the vital technical precision and intangible empathy required when excavating human remains that had lain undisturbed for over two millennia. It is in moments like that, where time freezes and history ceases to be distant - it is right there in front of you, and you are present with it. From excavating Neolithic remains alongside Dr Beresford-Jones and other Cambridge associates in the Ica Desert of Peru, to working with Eryri National Park officers and local school children at post-medieval sites in the mountains of North Wales, I have learnt that wherever you may be, the past offers the same unostentatious invitation to connect, learn and listen.

From an educational perspective, this particular kind of embodied learning achieves what classroom teaching rarely can: multisensory engagement. Beard and Wilson (2018, pp. 46-49) suggest that experiential learning is most effective when it stimulates multiple senses, emotions and modes of reflection. It creates a deeper cognitive and emotional connection, whilst building strong 'memory anchors', which enhance retention and understanding. Regarding my experience as a young person who values both traditional academic and experiential learning, I can attest to the enormous benefit experiential learning has on the developing mind. I do not which to promote experiential learning over the aforementioned, however I would like to reinforce my belief that it can offer highly beneficial stepping stone towards further engaging the young mind in history.

Growth, resilience and youth empowerment

Archaeology teaches the youth resilience, as much reasoning. The combination of physical endurance and intellectual focus in fieldwork develops a strong level of adaptability, independence, and problem-solving skills. At Heraclea Sintica, our international team was

faced with limited shade in severe 45-degree heat, long hours, and taxing manual labour. Communication often required translation and interpretation across several languages and cultures – Bulgarian, English, French and Spanish. Such challenges might quickly breed frustration, yet they become powerful lessons in patience and empathy towards different cultural expectations and standards. Within days, we had evolved into a somewhat cohesive multilingual community, sharing tools, humour and stories in the trench and over evening meals in the fading copper haze of the Balkan sunsets. Through shared hardships emerged camaraderie and self-confidence – two vital skills in the development of the youth.

Experiential education research has consistently shown that learning through direct experience in real-world, hands-on programmes promotes deeper retention and self-efficacy (Beard and Wilson, 2018, pp. 46-49; Kong, 2021). In archaeology, almost every discovery rewards effort with direct understanding, which leads me to suggest that through increased engagement in this archaeological framework, young participants can internalise a crucial truth: knowledge is learnt through engagement. This realisation cultivates agency, and most importantly in this context, promotes and encourages the youth to engage with history to gain the reward. Project directors and heritage programmes should increase efforts to encourage young people to get involved, which could mean seeking grants for youth participation and advertising positions through improved outreach mediums, which I will expand on further in this chapter.

Engaging the next generation through technology and games

In order to make history genuinely engaging for younger audiences, it needs to be conveyed in a medium that is relatable to them. Young people use digital technology now more than ever which means that computerised tools hold the immense advantage of being able to convey the wonder of discovery and history to young people in a language they understand well (European Commission, 2025). For those looking to inspire young people, strategies which combine acts doing and seeing are a great way to hook the youth into the world of history. Facilitating access to the undermentioned preexisting resources, or developing similar models is a promising way to boost young people's engagement and interest with history.

3D collections and replicas: Through Sketchfab and 3D printing programmes, students

can enlarge and rotate digital artifacts, alongside actively engaging with replicas without the risk of damaging an irreplaceable object. Institutions such as the British Museum and Garstang Museum employ these approaches, which help bridge the gap between the observer and expert, fostering ownership of learning (Garstang Museum of Archaeology, 2025; The British Museum, 2025).

Citizen recording with ethics: The UK's Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) functions as a framework for the public to record artifacts through an open database (Portable Antiquities Scheme, 2025). Access to schemes like this encourages young people to take enthusiasm and pride in their findings, whilst simultaneously teaching classification, provenance and the social responsibilities of discovery.

Digital discovery suites: The British Museum's Samsung Digital Discovery Centre integrates AR overlays and tablet-based challenges which encourage students to think through a historical lens – interpreting finds, posing questions and reconstructing meanings. It is in this type of environment that learning becomes investigative rather than passive (The British Museum, 2025).

Europeana Education: Europeana is a digital archive which hosts millions of digitalised objects and classroom resources relating to European Cultural Heritage. It offers the opportunity for students to curate their own "digital museums", by linking historical artifacts to modern issues like environment, identity and politics (Europeana Foundation, 2025).

Immersive VR/AR: Virtual and Augmented reality can be put into a historical context through educational platforms such as Assassin's Creed: Discovery Tour. Programmes like this allow the user to explore historically accurate reconstructions of ancient worlds, whilst being guided by digital historians (Ubisoft, 2025). For a young generation stifled by screens, social media and video games, this type of immersion is not only appealing, but it also brings otherwise abstract histories vividly to life from a medium they are highly familiar with.

When combined with collaborative learning and intercultural knowledge, these innovations create opportunities for young people to view history as something which is alive – something that can be touched, interpreted and shared. As soon as history becomes tactile, it transcends from a distant narrative into a story that students can grasp and help tell.

Community engagement and interaction

Community events and games share a common strength in that they both encourage history to feel fun, participatory and social. When learning feels like more like a celebration or exploration rather than instructions, young people connect emotionally and intellectually with the past. Educational Theorist James Gee (2007, pp. 7–8, 34) demonstrates that games nurture experimentation, persistence and creative problem solving – vital life skills which are also central to archaeological work.

Playful learning: Activities such as DIG: An Archaeological Adventure (York Archaeological Trust, 2025) or classroom simulations employing layered boxes encourages students to hypothesize, test and revise real life scenarios, in the same way as real archaeologists. It engages the curiosity of the young mind, whilst immersing them in a constructive and educational environment.

Festivals and events: At some heritage festivals and open days, playful tasks which appeal to young people – find-identification races, mock digs and stratigraphy puzzles – transform heritage into engaging and exciting experiences. Such activities remould abstract concepts into tangible ones, helping learners to grasp concepts like chronology, identification and teamwork through attractive and relatable experiences.

Public engagement: Initiatives such as the European Archaeology Days (EAD) and UK Festival of Archaeology attract thousands of participants who may not usually engage with history (Council for British Archaeology, 2025; European Archaeology Days, 2025). These events facilitate national moments of engagement, whilst the smaller scale local heritage days reproduce that same excitement at a more close-knit, community scale. Another example of public engagement took place when I was working with Eryri National Park and The University of Sheffield on a project in North Wales, wherein we invited local school children to come and interact with our fieldwork. Many of the children arrived shy, unsure, and generally detached from the historical context, but after hours of digging, cleaning artifacts and discussing ideas, I witnessed a complete change in mindset and sentiment. They became animated – their minds brimming with concoctions of ideas, pictures and stories about the archaeology and history of the place they were in. When it came time for them to leave, many of them expressed how they wanted to do more and find out more about the history and archaeology of the place. It is entirely possible that the children

expressed this enthusiasm as a guise to escape stuffy classroom lessons, but from spending time with them and watching the change in character, I say with conviction that it is during this sort of memorable activity through community engagement that children can unlock a love and yearning for history!

Audience Interaction, media and youth voice

Film, digital media, and television provide powerful entry points into history, bridging connections between the audience and historical content. Productions such as *The Dig* (Stone, 2021) bring discoveries like the lavish Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo to life, blending archaeological method with entertaining cinema, drawing in wider audiences. Series such as *Time Team* (Taylor, 1994) convey the true excitement of real excavations whilst adding an element of competition, which appeals to many young people. Even satirical television shows such as the BBC's *Detectorists* (Cottle, 2014) manages to hook viewers through a blend of comedy and scientific content. Some of these media experiences draw audiences in through initial subject curiosity, but the sustained engagement can be credited to the entertainment value people find in television. Those involved with historical projects could begin creating short documentaries or YouTube series to engage young people in current projects.

Film and television are just one component of a much larger ecosystem of audience engagement. Increasingly, young people in Europe interact with the information and the world though short-form digital media – Facebook, Instagram reels, TikTok and YouTube (Ofcom, 2025). Presenting history through these mediums is highly appealing to young people, since it meets the learners in an environment they already inhabit. A short form video which I created and posted on my Instagram page about the Heraclea Sintica excavation reached thousands, which demonstrates that archaeology is not just a remote academic, but shared discovery. Digital and playful learning does more than just entertain audiences; it help to democratize heritage and spark imagination. When young people create, explore and interact, history becomes something living – something they possess.

Accessibility and Inclusion

If we wish to make history interesting for all young people – not only those who already have some level of intrigue – learning environments must be accessible, inclusive, and sensitive to a range of needs. Heritage sites and museums increasing recognise the value of sensory-friendly tours, tailored exhibits for the visually and aurally impaired, subtitled content and quiet hours for those who get overstimulated easily (Sharp, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Archaeology is remarkably well suited to inclusive learning, since it offers several pathways into interpreting and engaging with history: creating, imagining, movement, observing, sound and touch.

A young person who struggles with reading due to dyslexia or another difficulty may excel in handling replicas or reconstructing pottery through experimental archaeology. The organised and structured logic of stratigraphy may appeal highly to an Autistic or Aspergers recipient. Practical workshops which require hands on engagement may be the perfect fit for the student which does not talk very often in class. By diversifying the methods of transmitting historical education, we can widen the doorway into heritage, ensuring that curiosity in history is not purely limited to those who fit the traditional academic mould (Fisher, 2023; NCCPE, 2023).

Inclusive practices also includes acknowledging controversial histories – colonialism, contested landscapes, identity, and politics – and trusting the youth to engage thoughtfully. When such subjects are approached with awareness, care, and guidance, critical thinking can be strengthened which has the potential to empower students to view history as something connected to their own choices, communities and lives.

Environment, long-term engagement, and sustainability

Today, young people are deeply connected and invested in the issues of climate, environment, politics and sustainability (Stavrianakis, Nielsen, and Morrison, 2025). Archaeology has the power to speak directly to such concerns. Excavations can reveal evidence of past environmental adaptation, resilience, resource management and settlement changes. Eco-focused heritage projects such as documenting climate changes at historical sites, rebuilding traditional ovens, reconstructing ancient gardens, or testing

ancient craft techniques encourage students to combine creative skills, historical inquiry, and scientific experimentation. Such activities demonstrate that archaeology is not just a record of what has been lost, but can function as a guide to interpret human and environmental adaptation and change over thousands of years. For many young people this context is appealing, since it has the potential to make the past feel genuinely meaningful and relevant to current issues.

Future practices and new ideas

To sustain an interest in history for young people, we must look further than traditional formats, and experiment with new ways to connect learners to the past. The future of heritage education lies in approaches which can merge creativity, involvement, learner agency and technology – methods that position young people as contributors to history. Employing and utilising ideas from the following examples may bring us one step closer to achieving this goal.

Digital-twin excavations: Livestreamed exhibitions, excavations and laboratory work, accompanied by real-time commentary can allow classrooms and remote learners to follow discoveries and information as it unfolds. Students could analyse images through the screen, submit interpretations and vote on hypotheses, which recreates a similar type of excitement to being there in real life. Furthermore, it demonstrates to students that interpretation is an unfolding, collaborative process, in which their input is valuable.

Youth Heritage Ambassadors: Archaeological projects, museums and schools can empower young people, by offering youth ambassador positions, wherein they might become interpreters and communicators of heritage. Ambassadors could create digital media, curate local displays or help to guide local tours. By offering young people responsibilities and tasks over public-facing heritage, it could foster further historical interest and pride in local contexts.

Community GIS and Mapping Projects: Adopting user-friendly digital mapping tools allows learners to plot artifact discoveries, environmental changes, or historical sites within their own communities. By bridging gaps between field observations, historical information and local features, it can create a space in which young people derive more importance and interest from local history.

Experimental and Maker-Based Archaeology: Hands-on craft workshops, such as ancient food preparation, historical building techniques, pottery reconstruction, or replica casting can help students understand past technologies through creative and interactive engagement. Working with materials provides students with deeper understanding of ancient skills, experimentation, and innovation, not withholding the fact that this practical approach can be more appealing than traditional learning for some young people.

Pop-up Heritage Laboratories: Portable kits or pop-up laboratories inspired by Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) could be rolled out in schools and at museums, offering young people the opportunity to handle replicas, form interpretations, and practice identifying artifacts. These mobile kits and workshops allow the youth further opportunities to engage with history in a hands-on manner, and could be especially beneficial to those with limited historical resources.

Historically themed clubs: By creating after-school historically themed clubs, funded and supported by education departments, Ministries of Culture, or private sponsors, students are given the optional choice to engage in history in their own time. It would function as a meaningful alternative to isolation in bedrooms in front of screens, alongside being a social and exciting space where history can feel fun. Sessions might involve historical themed activities and games, recreating historical artifacts from natural materials, or visits to local historical sites.

These types of practices have the potential to expand what heritage education can be. They facilitate and harness collaboration, creativity, and curiosity – qualities which naturally resonate in many young people. Perhaps most importantly, they can shift history from an occasional topic into an anticipated and exciting regular part of student's lives, supported by institutions which acknowledge its social value. When participation is offered through clubs, community projects, and creative activities, young people might start to view history as something can help shape – something they belong to (UNESCO, 2023).

Reflection: why all of this matters

This chapter opened with a simple memory: a child digging somewhere in the Cambrian Mountains, uncovering fragments of the past through curiosity and touch. I believe that the essence of this kind of early experience is crucial in making history

compelling for young people by making it feel alive, approachable, and connected to one's own sense of wonder.

Across digital tools, festivals, fieldwork, media and participatory projects, there is a constant theme: history can become accessible and interesting to young people when they are invited to take part! Whether it be through handling curating micro-exhibitions, filming short video clips, interacting with replicas, solving stratigraphy puzzles, young people engage deeply when they feel involved rather than commanded. These approaches help to remodel history from something distant towards something which feels alive through an active process of creativity, dialogue and interpretation.

Archaeology unites collaboration, emotional connection, problem solving and sensory discovery, teaching that history is not static, but continually re-examined, re-imagined and re-shaped through new perspectives. By showing young people that they have a role in this process, history can become meaningful to them: it becomes theirs.

If educators, heritage organisations and museums were to create environments which nurture this sense of ownership, then we do more than make history 'interesting' for young people. We open a doorway into long-term connection, curiosity and investment from which endless benefits to all corners of human society will flow. We can provide young people with the chance to interact with history with the same spark that drew many of us into it in the first place. Once that spark is lit, it can keep a soul burning for a lifetime, so we should do our best to light it.

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Antas: A historical Paradise in the middle of the desert

Antonio Milán Olivares

Introduction

Last May, I had the opportunity to participate in an archaeological excavation carried out in the Almería municipality of Antas, a small village of just over 3,000 inhabitants that holds an immense historical and cultural legacy. What caught my attention most of all were not the archaeological sites in the area, but the incredible dedication and work the local city council was investing to share the history of the place where the village is located. This work went beyond mere museumization, since it is intrinsically connected with experimental archaeology, social history, and historical reenactment. Its aim is not simply to show history, but to make it understood.

The problem with historical-archaeological outreach in Spain

Anyone's first contact with history is usually in the classrooms of schools and high schools where, unfortunately, teaching methods are more expository than explanatory. History becomes a set of facts to memorise for a future exam, and much of the information is forgotten over time.

For those who have not been sufficiently satisfied with the classroom experience, once they leave it and remain interested in history outside the path of university, they must turn to historical disclosure. In Spain, this has long been monopolised by books written not by historians or archaeologists but by journalists outside the discipline who, in many cases, perpetuated historical discourses long outdated by academia. Fortunately, in recent years, this has changed, and members who disagreed with the academic methods that confined

new historical research to their own journals—difficult for the general public to access—have begun to publish works focused on the general public in order to make public access to the historical discipline easier. Despite this, they have come up against an unbreakable barrier: the rigorous form of communication they were accustomed to clashes directly with the journalists' clearer dissemination, which is more attractive to the public and prevents readers from relegating the book to a tabletop that has been limping for several years.

On the other hand, we have museums—state-organised institutions where, unfortunately, the contextualisation of pieces is in most cases relegated to a mere explanatory sign that is often overlooked by visitors. These places of knowledge become a mere walking room for visitors who just want to take a picture of a fancy artefact that they will end up posting on social media.

But this is within the classic methods of historical disclosure, of history as part of written literature and the museum tradition. We can then ask ourselves: can engaging historical outreach be achieved for the public outside of books? We can go further with this question: is historical outreach possible outside of the expository nature that characterises museums and that allows people to participate in and understand history? The answer is yes, and Antas is an example of this.

The particular case of Antas

Antas is a small village located in Almería, the most oriental province of Andalucía, in southeastern Spain. It currently has just over 3000 inhabitants, but its territory is home to the most significant settlement of one of the most important cultures that emerged during the second and third millennia BCE, in the Bronze Age. It has come to be considered one of the first societies with urban and state characteristics in the western Mediterranean, the Argaric Culture, which takes its name from the settlement of El Argar, located in Antas.

The city council had to confront the problem of having a unique historical and cultural legacy that was completely unknown to the local population. They wanted to break the disconnection between the population and the history of their territory. To ensure that the archaeological sites were no longer merely decorative elements of the landscape, so that the population would feel they became part of them, understand them, and care about them.

Thus, thanks to funding from the European Union, they organised the “Argar Plan 2020–2030”, aimed at highlighting the value of the El Argar archaeological site and the Argaric culture in the area. Their plan was not simple; they did not wish to do a museum, but rather the creation of an entire project that would allow the population to participate and feel part of history. The first phase of this project consisted of the architectural and urban recreation of several houses of the village, built beneath the terraced slope where the original site is located so it did not compromise the cultural heritage. They built the houses with the help of the local people and using the materials and construction techniques of the Argaric era under the supervision of specialised archaeologists. The objective of these buildings was not to turn the place into an amusement park, but rather to create an Interpretation Center that could reveal the ways of life, habits, and daily life during the Bronze Age.

This Interpretation Center needed a new way to engage people in history, so they accompanied it with various activities that allowed visitors to understand and experience it. Instead of organising free tours, where information is collected on panels distributed throughout the various elements in the recreation site, as in museums, they considered organising guided tours where an expert could explain the Argaric society accompanied by a historical setting. In a theatrical manner, and again with the assistance of archaeologists and historians for the representation and costumes, they performed a historical recreation that explained social life during the period.

Those more demonstrative activities are complemented by participatory ones that allow both the general public and children from local schools, who participate in them as part of organised visits throughout the academic year, to participate in various workshops where they can engage in various activities based on the customs and materials of the time. Currently, four different workshops are available for this purpose:

Archaeological Workshop. The Archaeological Workshop is specifically focused on schools and constitutes one of the project's key pillars. In it they explain the archaeologist's profession, the phases and methodology of an excavation. It also allows students to excavate in designated areas of an archaeological play field, enabling them to simulate archaeological excavations and understand how knowledge is obtained in the discipline.

Prehistoric Archery Workshop. This one is used to explain the fundamental foundations of hunting during prehistory, allowing participants to understand the difficulties these societies

faced in obtaining food and the techniques they used. It also covers the methodology used to create the tools used for hunting.

Prehistoric Milling Workshop. The base food of prehistoric agricultural societies on the Iberian Peninsula was cereals, a crop that required specific knowledge for planting, harvesting, storage, and preparation methods to be used in food production. This workshop explains all these fundamentals while allowing participants to grind grains in a stone mill with the same techniques of the Argaric society, helping them to understand the time and difficulties involved in making such a basic food as bread in prehistoric societies.

Argaric Pottery Workshop. The Argaric culture featured a wide variety of high-quality handmade ceramics. The goal of this workshop is to help participants understand the stages involved in producing this type of material: obtaining raw materials, processing them for use in pottery, hand-molding them, and how they fired ceramics in the Bronze Age. The focus of this workshop is often the creation of the so-called Argaric Cup, a distinctive element of this society, which participants can try to replicate with their own hands.

The purpose of this Interpretative Center is to engage people in the history of their territory, to break with its intangibility, and to abandon the more obsolete approach to the discipline that reduces it to a set of data and dates. This project is rooted in experimental archaeology and social history, seeking to help the public understand the methods, lifestyles, and difficulties that the inhabitants of El Argar faced in their daily lives. In addition, historical reenactments are an added attraction that allows people to experience history firsthand.

Beyond local History: putting Antas on the National Archaeological map

The local council's initiative goes beyond historical outreach; it seeks to reevaluate the region's historical past. To this end, they have implemented a plan to contact different universities to conduct excavations at the area's archaeological sites to study the settlements, providing every possible help to the institutions. Thanks to this, for example, I was able to participate in the excavation carried out in the municipality last May, which allowed me to learn about the fascinating project being carried out there.

In addition to the excavations, the city council has taken into account that the history of the area belongs to the population, so they have begun organising conferences open to the general public where the results of the research made in the excavations are discussed.

In them, they also allow the participation of researchers from all over the country, which has turned the small village into a cultural centre where the diverse local histories of Spain can be shared.

In conclusion, is this kind of historical outreach useful?

From my perspective, the initiative of making people part of history, rather than resorting to the same method of telling it as a succession of facts, whether through books or museums, allows a better assimilation of concepts. The best way to learn and take care of something is to do it yourself, to be part of it, and if you are able to experience firsthand history and the difficulties of past societies, you will understand earlier populations much better and appreciate the opportunities we have today much more.

Generally speaking, these types of measures, which have only been implemented for a few years, seem to have begun to gradually influence how the population of Antas and the surrounding towns understand the land they live in. Especially when we consider that, when applied to students, these types of activities break the monotony of the classroom, making history something engaging, real, and tangible.

HISTORY FOR KIDS

A new way to make young learners interested in History at schools

Adrián Molada Miguel, Antonio Milán Olivares, Sandra Pérez Burgueño, Lucía García Rodríguez, Alejandro González Sacristán, Mario Moreno Seco, Victoria Acebes Sánchez.

Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to bring up ideas about how to make History attractive to kids at school, from little kids to teenagers. History has always been taught at schools, however the way teachers approach the subject has been a matter of discussion and controversy. To succeed in this search, this article will provide teachers and people who work with young learners with alternatives and options that could pave the way for them.

How can we make History an interesting subject at school?

During the past years, the way History has been taught in schools has progressively changed. At the outbreak of the last decade, a new way to approach the subject has become far more popular. We have moved from the traditional methodology of presenting a topic to the students in a theoretical way and letting them memorise everything to get through an exam (and forget everything soon after doing it) to a new way of teaching History, implementing didactic activities that make students challenge themselves.

By doing these didactic activities, students can become their own teachers, learn how to cooperate with each other and investigate a specific History topic while learning it at the same time. Furthermore, this way of teaching History provides them with the necessary

skills and aptitudes to work with their classmates, skills that will be potentially useful for their future, especially in a world that is constantly heading towards more cooperative work. So, in order to get through the challenges we will have to face, we need to prepare these young learners to be participative, cooperative, skilful and aware of how to work effectively with each other.

It is strongly believed by many experts in Didactic of Social Science that students become far more interested in History when they study it through activities that boost their creativeness than by staying seated while listening to a teacher explaining a specific topic during 45–50 minutes. In order to increase the creativity of students and make them passionate about History, teachers have to focus on developing activities adapted to their students' age and level of knowledge and present them as a challenge that they have to get through by themselves. The aim of the teachers has to be to coordinate the activities and create a nice and suitable environment for everybody.

Passion has been the key for most people when asked about how they got into studying History. There is always a story behind people's choice of picking it as their professional career. History portrays human behaviour through our timeline from the discovery of fire until the very recent days. We can relate to the people who lived centuries ago and ask ourselves the very exact same questions as back in the day. Is there life after death? When did we start to develop our spiritualism? When did we start to consider the fact of passing our knowledge to the next generations? How did ancient cultures manage to build such magnificent buildings? Asking ourselves this kind of question makes us passionate about History.

Kids are like an open book, a blank new piece of paper ready to be filled. They are far more innocent and curious than adults, they are not scared of asking questions, they are always willing to learn, they adapt better to every situation. Kids have a totally different and easier way of seeing the world, a perspective that can be really useful for adults. It is crucial to have a deep knowledge of History as well as pass this knowledge to the new generations. Studying History is a necessary way for us to comprehend the past, understand the present and be prepared for the challenges that we as human beings will face in the future.

For kids, it is vital to know what happened in the past because it teaches them about how our society has changed over the years, getting through many difficult situations until the

very recent days. By learning about these ancient societies' way of life they can understand and comprehend how life works today, why we live like we do. Through History they can learn that our evolution has been progressive and took a lot of time to build our current way of life. In order for them to be aware of the current problems that we are facing, we have to use History as a way of connecting and comparing past, present and future events. Moreover, by comparing these different political and social facts from the past they could manage to understand much more the similar problems we have now.

Conclusion

To conclude, History is the perfect tool to increase the critical thinking of young learners, which is totally necessary for them in order to grow up as members of this brand new society that is changing.

History 101: Museums as History lessons

Author: Yigit Mustafa Baldan

Introduction

There is an idiom in English: he that travels knows much. Many languages have similar idioms or old sayings with the same meaning. While it is not possible to travel through time, museums offer a way to explore different periods of history and culture.

For travellers who desire to go deep into culture and history, museums are must-see places. Throughout history, some languages have gone extinct and some cultures have been erased. But their remnants and ruins are still here and can be seen in museums. It is the best way to protect and preserve their legacy. Museums allow you to observe how archaeologists excavate, study, and restore ancient artefacts. Seeing their careful work first-hand will fill you with a sense of wonder and curiosity that cannot be obtained from a textbook.

Content

Let me be clear: Thracians from the Balkans, Hittites from Anatolia, Mayans from Mexico, and Sumerians from Mesopotamia are examples of ancient peoples who gave humanity writing. They are still there for all to see in archaeological sites and museums. This is important for various reasons. Symbols carry meanings. Their lifestyles undoubtedly had an impact on us, as did their inventions and institutions, which clearly shaped later societies.

For living cultures: 200 years ago, before the standardisation of clothing, people wore clothes according to their nation, religion, and social status or occupation. Nowadays we all wear the same brands and the same things, but the importance of symbols in the last decades cannot be rejected. The city is not an abstract space for those who live

there. It is made meaningful by interpreting the culture that lives within it. That is why small ethnographical museums in cities are also valuable.

Exhibitions in museums are a way to provide context — not only by displaying artefacts, but by creating a unique environment. From birth to death, humans crave fun. And, as it can be seen, this fun can be carved into stone by drawing a horse or collecting seashells. Natural human activities show us how we had fun before and how we have fun now.

The wonderful thing about museums is that they can be distinguished by their fascinating and diverse range of topics. The term museum is typically associated with history and archaeology, but this is an oversimplification. There is a small museum in Bursa, Turkey, which focuses on automobiles. It is a private museum owned by a car brand and features old models of important cars kept in good condition. It is full of old-fashioned metal technology. But some people — for example, my mother — might find it amusing, because one of those cars was her first and full of memories, and it is not ideal to have today because of the lack of safety and spare parts. This is just a simple family car, but around the world fancy, powerful, and rare cars are in museums waiting for visitors.



Throughout history, the experiences of humankind are countless. However, some chapters of our journey can only be presented with limitations. These experiences survive as myths,

stories, stones, pottery, swords, guns... Today, Troy — a Bronze Age city — is an ancient city and archaeological site. It was found in 1871 by an archaeologist who believed that a Greek legend in Homer's book was real. On my journey in Sofia, the National Museum of Military History held special importance for me. In the garden, some of the most important armoured vehicles and tanks of World War II are on display. For a person like me, who loves big machines and guns, this was very important and left a strong memory. Because my country did not participate in World War II, I had never seen so many tanks before. And because Bulgaria changed sides in WWII, it is possible to see tanks from both the Axis and the Allies — it feels as if I am on a battlefield. Museums like this help you feel history, not just read about it.

Making museums fun for kids

Museums with strict rules are not as attractive as parks and gardens for children. In my own experience, visitors with children have faced some problems while visiting museums. First of all, kids don't like covering their shoes with plastic protectors. Children also have a free spirit, a desire to touch things, and a natural tendency to cross barriers. Families try to warn them, and museum staff also need to warn them; this is difficult for both sides. Still, a kind approach is the best way to deal with this.

School tours to museums are usually very pleasant for both the children and the museum staff. Kids who visit as a group with their peers are energetic, curious, and encouraged to ask and explore. I remember that the best questions during tours often came from the children, because they do not filter their ideas. Their natural enthusiasm, curiosity, and creativity fascinate me personally. It is very important to make eye contact with children while talking to them about museums or historical topics — it makes them feel valued. That is what makes museums powerful: each person finds their own meaning in what they see.

For young children, it is important to give them content that is memorable and visually engaging. As they get older, we can build on this foundation to teach them how to think about history. The goal is to help children develop a positive attitude and curiosity toward the past. Instead of abstract ideas, we should use concrete and enjoyable experiences.

As children grow, we can help them understand cause and effect by asking questions like "Why did it happen?", "How did it happen?", and "What does it look like from different perspectives?"

This childhood is like the sky; it doesn't go anywhere

What can be done for the kids is not an easy question. What can a child of that age do with a historical vase, for example? Perhaps by sprinkling in things that might genuinely capture children's interest?

Some museums have tours with audio guides. For children, they can make a simple and funny explanation to attract them. After failing to master formal education, museums can only attract their interest by making things fun. Also, museums can have some atelier activities for kids.

In Istanbul, Beykoz Crystal and Glass Museum, which is located in the north of the city, is full of glass and crystal artefacts. Historically, the region is important for the production of glass; the museum is located here with glass/crystal artefacts from history. It offers activities for children. The activity section explains to children how to work with glass and how glass cools, and then they practise together. Children and adults can experience the magic of glass shaping here and learn how to do it. Also, with a big garden inside the forest, the museum offers them space to play outside. Intentionally, to keep their interest, specially selected animals, like peacocks, roam the garden.

Tour guides also must be very careful. As everywhere, communication is key. Tours with kids mean being full of questions. Even from an unrelated question, the topic can be linked to history and the students pay close attention. From this point of view, it is observed that children's desire to be the centre of attention is a reality. When people pay attention to them, they learn about themselves. The teaching of history and museums can focus on this. And examples of it exist. There is a museum in Bulgaria for children called Muzeiko. Muzeiko is a slightly different museum for children in Sofia. In this museum they focus on scientific facts and making them funny. Children can touch everything and play. It's based on their preferences. The activities carried out in that place include seeing the world from the eye of a fish, a simulation of space travel, wearing historical clothes, and so on. It's fun, creative, and educational — exactly what a museum should be for kindergarten age.

As a museum worker, I observed that the most crowded days of museums are usually weekends. That means families, and their kids. To make them familiar with the museum, it's a perfectly fine idea to make a trip to the museum. But to attract them, not only their parents but also the museum administration is responsible. In a museum with historical buildings, like

palace museums and painting museums, it is forbidden to touch portraits and artefacts. As I experienced, this can cause some trouble with little visitors sometimes. The staff who are responsible for directing and securing the area should be experienced and patient. Children may want to cross the line and desire to sit on old furniture. Of course, it may not damage the objects always, but to preserve them for the next centuries and generations, preventing accidents is important for the sake of restoration and conservation. Also, children should be supervised at all times because kids can hurt themselves unintentionally. Some sharp marbles and objects can cause unexpected incidents.

Make History Interesting Again

TV shows about history can be great too — especially when they tell stories instead of just listing dates.



And you can't really study history without geography. The two always go hand in hand.

(If you've ever seen the map room in the Vatican Museum, you'll understand exactly what I mean).

Italy Map in Vatican Museum

National Days and Anniversaries of Important Historical Events: historical commemoration and celebration programs held in schools contribute to the development of historical awareness in students.

Also, digital sources are beneficial for young people. Digital history liberates the use of history. Prior to this development, only professional historians, archivists, curators, some teachers, and writers had access to various sources or archives. This led to history being produced by established authorities and a select group. With the rise of the internet and digitalisation, historical materials have become more accessible. Thus, amateurs, genealogists, teachers, and even students can access these sources. This also helps history teachers; it allows them to go beyond the school curriculum. Also, digital history (e.g. Wikipedia) is not structured like textbooks. With digital history, students are directly and actively involved in the process of historical investigation. This way, students investigate the past with critical, historical, and source-using skills.

For example, in Canada, there is a History Association which works with the government.

The main purpose is to honour teachers and students who excel in this area for their interest in Canadian history. Competitions are designed to commemorate specific historical events. For example, the 100th anniversary of the Canadian Arctic discovery, the 75th anniversary of the Second World War, the 100th anniversary of the First World War, and the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Also, the Canadian Historical Society has proposed that the Governor of that area give awards to history teachers. This is worth mentioning because it creates a competitive situation and a really good way to attract young people. Kids with their classmates and friends will be encouraged in this kind of activity. A hidden benefit of it is considered to contribute to the formation of national identity (loyalty to the nation) in children and adolescents.

It's undeniable that computer games spark interest in history not only in kids but also adults. Many kids nowadays spend a lot of time on the computer. Personally, my cousin was spending 7–8 hours on a PC, and I directed him to play history and strategy games. Games can help players develop historical thinking and embrace the flow of time over different periods. Eventually, my cousin studied history, which did not surprise me.

Children might not always remember what's "important," but they always remember what's interesting. That's why our goal — as teachers, guides, and museum workers — is to make history interesting.

Gamification as a tool to raise cultural heritage awareness, a model inspired by the Olympic and Gymnasion tradition

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ABSTRACT

In the current technological age, a significant problem is the declining interest in disciplines such as history and archaeology, and the replacement of cultural heritage awareness with illegal perceptions like treasure hunting. Traditional learning methods are insufficient for modern individuals with shorter attention spans, while digital content like videos and podcasts often provides only a passive experience. To address this issue, this paper proposes a festival model that both entertains and educates through gamification, inspired by the competitive spirit of the ancient Greek Olympics and the holistic educational concept of the Gymnasions, which combined intellectual and physical development. The activities are divided into two main categories, "Gnosiomachia" (Mental Games) and "Triathlon" (Physical Games), and include six games. Enriched with hands-on workshops like Miniature Architecture and Ancient Sculpture, this model offers an experiential learning environment designed to teach history and archaeology by allowing participants to experience the atmosphere of the period, aiming to instill a lasting awareness of world cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The digital age we are in brings big challenges for subjects like history and archaeology. It is hard to make many people like these fields and to change the wrong ideas people have about them. As life gets faster and the world becomes more digital, the way people connect with history is also changing. People are naturally curious about their past roots, but this curiosity often focuses only on the physical objects from the past. The

awareness of cultural heritage is being replaced by a simple and wrong idea, like treasure hunting. Furthermore, movies about archaeology encourage people to become treasure hunters, which leads to a viewpoint that is against the law.

At the heart of this problem is that traditional learning methods are not enough to meet the expectations of people today. In the past, the main source of information was long written texts, or "thick books." Today, these are discouraging for people who have shorter attention spans. Digital alternatives, like videos and podcasts, usually only reach a small audience that is already interested in the topic. They also offer only a passive experience of just watching or listening. While the rise of new technologies like artificial intelligence makes it easier to get information, it also brings a risk: the practice of deep reading might be replaced by consuming summarized content.

In this context, there is an urgent need for hands-on and participatory methods that go beyond passively giving information. These methods are needed to build a lasting awareness of history and cultural heritage in people. One of the most effective ways to learn a subject permanently is to combine theoretical knowledge with a practical and experiential process. Therefore, the most effective way to draw people interested in history and archaeology into this rich world, and to let them experience the atmosphere of that time, is to make them an active part of the process.

As a model for this hands-on approach, we can be inspired by the "Olympics," an idea that started in Ancient Greece and continues today. However, the model suggested in this article aims to go beyond just physical competition. It also includes the intellectual role of the ancient "Gymnasions." At first, Gymnasions were used for the military and sports training of young men. Over time, they turned into complete education centers where philosophers taught, and where intellectual and physical development went together.

The Archaeology Olympics developed based on this idea, is a unique festival concept. It brings together both the competitive spirit of the ancient Olympics and the idea of complete education from the Gymnasions. This event is made up of a total of six games — three are mental, and three are physical. It is designed as a learning model based on experience. Its goal is to teach participants about history and archaeology by letting them experience the atmosphere of that time, and to build a lasting awareness of cultural heritage.

1. ARCHAEOLOGY OLYMPICS

The Archaeology Olympics includes the following games:

1.1/. Gnosiomachia (Mental Games)

Hieroglyph Decipherment:

We know that some civilizations in the past used hieroglyphs. It is certain that three of these civilizations used hieroglyphs that we can still translate today. These civilizations are the Maya, the Hittites, and the Egyptians. However, when people say "hieroglyph" today, the first thing that comes to mind is Egypt.

If we look at these civilizations one by one:

Ancient Egyptian Civilization: We know that it was located in northeast Africa, along the Nile River. (It has almost the same location and borders as the country of Egypt today). It is a well-known civilization for many things, like its buildings, statues, and ancient political history. Everyone knows that it also had contact with kingdoms like Greece and Rome. If we look at its writing system, we can see that the Egyptians actively used hieroglyphs from 3200 BC to 400 AD. They had 6000 different signs, and they could write from right to left or from left to right. Egyptian hieroglyphs can be seen on stone monuments, seals, papyrus papers, and tomb walls.

Hittite and Luwian Civilization: Geographically, they were located in the region of ancient Anatolia. (Today, this area covers the Central and Southern Anatolia regions of Turkey and northern Syria.) We can see that their writing was used from the 14th century BC to the 7th century BC. Hittite (or Luwian) hieroglyphs were created separately from Egyptian hieroglyphs, and they are not the same. That is why they are known as Anatolian Hieroglyphs. There are around 500 hieroglyphic signs. The writing is usually read from left to right, but in some inscriptions, it is also read from right to left or from top to bottom. We can see Anatolian hieroglyphs on stone monuments, seals, and royal writings.

Maya Civilization: Geographically, it was located in the area of modern-day Guatemala, southern Mexico, Belize, and around Honduras. We can see that Maya

hieroglyphs were used from 300 BC to 1500 AD. There are 800 to 1000 hieroglyphic signs or symbols. The columns determine the reading direction: it is read from left (column 1) to right (column 2) in pairs, or from top to bottom. They are seen on stone monuments, stelae (large stone slabs), and in codices (ancient books). We can also see that they used hieroglyphs to make calendar and history records.

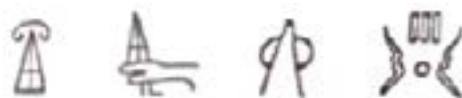
About the workshop's content: For this workshop, which is for students or the public, first we do the necessary research for the presentation, and then we gather the needed materials. For example, clay tablets can be prepared. These clay tablets can be used not only for Anatolian hieroglyphs but also for Egyptian and Maya hieroglyphs.

First, the participants take the ready clay and make a clay tablet of the right size. By doing this, they also experience how people in that time shaped the clay. After that, they are given words. They look at the hieroglyphs to translate these words into the correct symbols. Then, they carve this symbolic text onto the clay tablet they made.

Thanks to this workshop, the people who run it will get a detailed understanding of the history of hieroglyphs and the technique of making clay tablets. By teaching this information to the participants (who can be students or members of the public), they will both strengthen their own knowledge and share that knowledge with others. The participants, in turn, will gain the experience of using a writing and communication tool from the ancient period.

Examples:

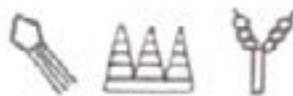
The Great King's Son fought on the mountain:



Earth, Sky, and Sun are life:



The Chariot Driver (is carrying) wine (to) the fortress:



1.2/. Clues in the Ancient world: An Image-matching game

For this workshop, categories are first created using world-famous historical and archaeological examples. For instance, groups are created, such as "the mysterious world of Prehistory," "the beautiful heritage of the Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations," "the symbolic stories of the Middle Ages," "famous paintings from the Renaissance and later periods," and "the fantastic world of mythology." Then, between 2 and 5 images are chosen from each of these categories. After they are chosen, research is done on these groups and images. This way, we gain knowledge about the selected categories.

When the workshop activity begins, selected images—ranging from an ancient ceramic to a famous painting or a great work of architecture—are printed on A3-sized paper, numbered, and shown to the participants. On a separate A4 paper, there are short descriptions for each of these numbered images. These descriptions include the name of each image, the period it belongs to, and its cultural meaning, all written with interesting clues. This preparation process also becomes a valuable learning experience for the organizers, because creating unique and clear two-sentence clues for each artwork requires a deep understanding. What the participants are expected to do is to first read and understand these clues on the A4 paper carefully. Then, they should correctly match the images they picture in their minds with the numbered visuals. This interactive method helps the participants improve their reading comprehension and visual memory skills. At the same time, it introduces them to the shared cultural heritage of humanity and allows them to gain a universal perspective.

Examples: could be seen on Figure 1: Image Examples for Matching and Figure 2: Text Examples for Matching in the next page

Figure 1:
Image Examples for Matching

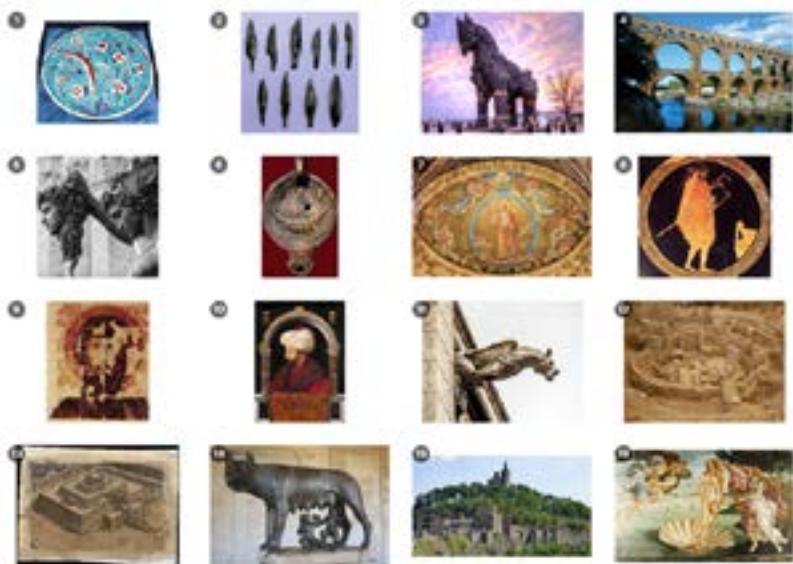


Figure 2:
Text Examples for Matching

Dragon Mosaic: This is a famous wall mosaic. The Greek word is to capture the city of Troy. The horse is on a giant horse made of wood, with soldiers holding around it.	Monsters and Beasts: This is a myth. It tells the story of the city of Nineveh. You will recognize it right away from the picture of a ferocious wolf-like dog-like-beast.	Obelisk: This is a site in Turkey. It is known as the oldest temple complex in human history. You can recognize it by its giant, tall pillars. These pillars have figures of animals carved on them.	Obelisk: This is a pedestal and made from volcanic glass. It is very sharp. You can recognize it by its sharp edges.
Oil Lamp: This is the most common tool used to provide light at night in the ancient world. You can recognize it by its small, thin container that holds oil, and the tip where thewick comes out.	Lute: This is a stringed musical instrument from Ancient Greece. It was used to accompany poems and songs. You can recognize it by its neck, which looks like a small harp and was often made from a turtle shell.	Obelisk: This is a monument of Roman engineering. It was used to carry water from far away places to cities. You can recognize it by its massive, which looks like a bridge with many arches and scratches across its body and base.	Obelisk: This is a temple tower from ancient Mesopotamia. It is shaped like a pyramid with steps, and was dedicated to the gods. You can recognize it by its unique, which has steps and stairs that run up several stories.
Obelisk: This is a stone sculpture. It was used on medieval cathedrals to drain water from the roof away from the building. It is usually carved in the shape of a grotesque creature. You can recognize it by its wavy and ferocious creature shape that sticks out from the top of the building.	Obelisk: This is a large medieval fortress in the city of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria. It is built on a steep hill that is surrounded by a deep, inside stone walls. There was not just a fortress, but a whole city where the Bulgarian king resided and ruled the country.	Obelisk: This is Saito Tsurumaru. He is an anonymous "warrior saint" for Bulgaria. He is mostly shown wearing armor like a soldier. His most famous image is that well-known, skeletal, and thirty-pointed face of his face from the city of Plovdiv. It is made by joining together pieces of ceramics.	Obelisk: This is a unique style of painting from the early Middle Ages which decorated the walls of churches. You can recognize it by its style, the figures are more stylized and less realistic. Arches with thick brick outlines, and are especially noticeable for their large, almost-circular eyes.
Portrait of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror (Gentile Bellini): This is a well-known portrait of the Ottoman sultan, Mehmed the Conqueror, who captured Istanbul. It was made by the Venetian Renaissance artist, Gentile Bellini. You can recognize this unique painting because it brings together the art of the East and the West. In it, an Ottoman sultan is painted inside an arch, using the realistic style of the Italian Renaissance.	The Birth of Venus (Sandro Botticelli): This is one of the most famous paintings of the Renaissance. It shows the Roman goddess Venus being born from the sea. You can recognize it right away by the figures of the goddess. She is standing on a giant seashell and wears the necklace with the long, yellow hair, white flowers all around her.	Portrait with the Head of Medusa (Raphael Sanzio): This is one of the most dramatic female sculptures of the Renaissance. It shows the Roman general Perseus defeating the snake-headed Medusa. You can recognize it by the large holding up the conical, snake-headed head of a woman, and from the bottom body under his feet.	Obelisk: This is a type of ceramic. It was made during the last period of the Ottoman Empire and is found all over the world. You can recognize it by its unique designs, which often feature flower patterns like tulips, carnations, and hyacinths. It is also known for using a serif and underline along with arabic block.

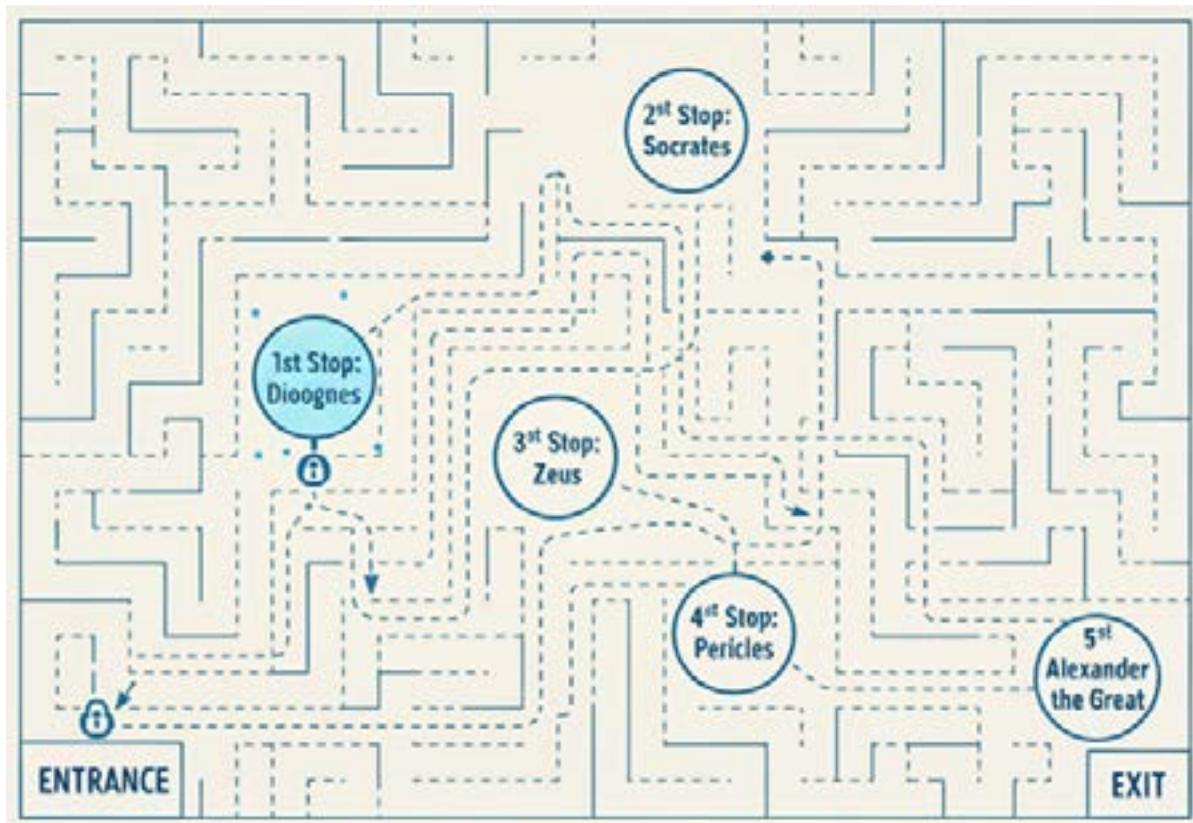
1.3/. Labyrinth – time travel

Naming this activity “Labyrinth: Time Travel” perfectly shows the exciting experience it offers. The activity invites participants into an interactive labyrinth where history and mythology come to life. As they walk through the winding corridors, they meet symbolic figures from the ancient world, like Diogenes, Socrates, Zeus, Pericles, and Alexander the Great. The key to moving forward on the journey is to have the right kind of conversation with these wise and powerful characters. To do this, they must choose the correct “attribute” (a special object) from three objects placed in front of each figure. This object must be the one connected to that person’s identity, story, or philosophy.

For example, participants are expected to find the lantern for Diogenes, the philosopher who searched for an “honest man” with a lantern during the day. They also need to choose the philosophy scrolls for Socrates, which represent his deep questions, or pick the lightning bolt for Zeus, which is a symbol of the king of the gods’ power.

With every correct choice, the participant not only gets a key clue on how to reach the next goal but also strengthens their knowledge about that character’s world. After successfully completing each task, the participant gets directions from the historical figure. This guidance opens the next door of the labyrinth and brings them one step closer to the exit.

Through this activity, participants gain lasting knowledge by exploring the historical figures and symbols of our shared human heritage in an interactive game. In the process, they improve their problem-solving and analytical thinking skills. They also develop an awareness of and interest in this heritage. For the organizers, this process is an opportunity to research and fully understand the cultural heritage in great detail so they can teach it. They also learn how to turn this valuable heritage from abstract information into a real game. By doing this, they gain the skill to design creative and effective learning materials to pass this heritage on to new generations.



2/. Triathlon (Physical Games)

2.1/. Discus Throw

Discus throw is a very old sport. Its history goes back to the 2nd millennium BC, and it is even mentioned in Homer's epic, the Iliad. This shows that discus throw was considered an important competition even in the 8th century BC.

Even though the discus was not a direct weapon of war, the strength, balance, coordination, and accuracy needed for this sport are the basic skills a warrior must have. The act of throwing the discus was seen as a beautiful moment. It involved the athlete turning

his body, stretching it like a bow, and then releasing all his power in one explosive move. This ideal of beauty was made immortal with the famous "Discobolus" (The Discus Thrower) statue by the sculptor Myron. This statue shows perfect balance and beauty, even at the most tense moment of the action.

The person who prepares the event learns about the sport's connection to mythology and art history and then shares it with the participants. The participant, in turn, joins the activity with a new perspective, seeing that the sport was not just an athletic event, but also the subject of statues in history.

2.2/. Javelin Throw

Javelin throwing is a sport that came directly from the practice of hunting and war. In the ancient world, the javelin (a light spear) was one of the most basic weapons. It was used both to hunt animals from a distance and to stop enemy soldiers in battle. For this reason, how far and accurately a man could throw his javelin was one of the most important signs of his skill in survival and fighting.

The person who prepares the event researches how a survival tool turned into an Olympic sport over time. By doing this, they develop the skill to explain the evolution of a subject. The participant, in turn, learns the origin and the place in history of this Olympic game that they often hear about, and then they get to practice it.

2.3/. Marathon

The Marathon was not a regular sports competition in ancient times; it is a legendary run based on a single event. According to the legend, in 490 BC, the Athenians won a great victory against the Persian invaders in the Battle of Marathon. A messenger, Pheidippides, ran the entire distance from Marathon to Athens, about 40 kilometers, without stopping to announce the news of the victory. When he arrived in Athens, he shouted, "We won!" and then he collapsed and died from exhaustion. Although the historian Herodotus tells the story differently, this is the popular story.

Inspired by this heroic legend, the French philologist Michel Bréal suggested that this run should be a competition in the first modern Olympic Games, which were held in Athens

in 1896. The first modern marathon followed the legendary route and was run between Marathon and Athens.

The person who prepares the event analyzes the difference between legend and reality and learns how a single story created a modern tradition. The participant, in turn, learns the origin of the sport and practices it.

3/. HANDS-ON WORKSHOPS INTEGRATED INTO THE FESTIVAL

In addition to the main events held during the festival, we also propose integrated workshops. In these workshops, participants will be actively involved in the learning process and will also create the physical content for the festival area themselves. The artworks made in these workshops will serve a dual purpose within the festival: on one hand, they will be used as elements to enrich the atmosphere in experiential areas like the Labyrinth. On the other hand, they will become educational materials in the Exhibition Area, with informative texts placed next to them. This way, a participant who sees an artwork in one area will have the chance to examine it again later in the exhibition section with full awareness, which helps to strengthen their learning process.

3.1/. Hands-on History of Architecture: Miniature Building Workshop

This workshop aims to teach participants (especially students) about Ancient and Medieval architecture in a hands-on way. The process begins by pouring plaster into pre-made molds of architectural elements (like columns, pediments, arches, etc.). While the plaster is drying, the supervising academic or teacher gives theoretical information about the history, function, and terminology of the buildings being made, turning the activity into a practical lesson. Once dry, each architectural piece is assembled like a module to create a complete structure (for example, the front of a temple or an aqueduct). This method allows each participant to create a different building, which provides a variety of final products and increases the educational benefit. The finished miniature buildings are then used for display in designated areas like the Exhibition Area and the Labyrinth during the festival.

The Intersection of Art and Science: Ancient Sculpture and Polychromy Workshop

Following a method similar to the architecture workshop, this activity provides participants with various molds for sculptures, portraits, statuettes, and figurines. The stages of pouring and drying the plaster are enriched with information from the instructor about the artworks' iconography, artistic style, and historical context.

The most innovative part of this workshop comes at the painting stage. It is a known fact that many ancient sculptures were actually polychrome (multi-colored), but the organic-based paints have not survived to the present day. To put this historical information into practice, we suggest working with natural science departments (like Chemistry and Biology) for this part of the project. With the help of science students, paints can be prepared using natural pigments and binders that are very similar to the paint technology of that period. Painting both the sculptures and the architectural miniatures with these colors will provide a look that is closer to historical reality. This process takes the workshop beyond a simple art history activity and turns it into a platform for interdisciplinary interaction. It also gives natural science students a practical awareness of cultural heritage preservation.

CONCLUSION

The age of technology we live in weakens the way people view history and reduces their awareness of cultural heritage. Innovative approaches have become necessary to fill the gap created by traditional methods of sharing information, such as the discouraging nature of textbook-style written sources and the passivity of digital content. The gamified festival model proposed in this study, inspired by the Olympic and Gymnasion tradition, was developed as a direct answer to this need.

The festival model combines mental and physical games (Gnosiomachia and Triathlon) to change participants from being passive receivers of theoretical knowledge into active parts of the learning process. The experience of writing on a clay tablet in the Hieroglyph Workshop, the interactive journey with mythological and historical figures in the Labyrinth, and the use of visual memory and analytical skills in the Ancient Object Matching Game help to make knowledge permanent. In a similar way, physical games like the Discus Throw and Javelin Throw are more than just sports activities; they teach the historical, mythological, and artistic origins of these actions in a hands-on way.

Furthermore, the architecture and sculpture workshops that are integrated into the festival preparations offer an interdisciplinary approach. They allow participants to create the festival content themselves and make the learning process more concrete.

As a result, this model takes history and archaeology education out of a static and theoretical framework and turns it into a dynamic, interactive, and complete experience. It does not just offer information to participants, but also gives them problem-solving, critical thinking, and practical skills. By doing this, it has the potential to build a deep and lasting awareness of our shared human heritage.

Replaying the past.

Considerations on history and videogames

Juan Jesús Pedregosa Pareja

History is everywhere and belongs to everyone

There are as many definitions of “history” as people trying to define the term. Philosophers and scholars alike have formulated their interpretations of history and its role describing and explaining the past events of human societies. Since the very conception of “history” in Ancient Greece the declared goal of historians was “to recount and tell the past as it truly happened”, a noble intention carried through the 19th century’s historicism and still present today to some degree. However, there is no possible way of recreating the past exactly as it happened, and history has always served a purpose in the present day. Ancient historians turned their view to the past to search for role models that could guide the actions of their contemporaries (history as *speculum principis*), to praise the greatness of the city/empire they belonged to or to hide veiled critiques towards their sovereigns. Similarly, 19th century historians used the past as a way to legitimise the new nation states, formulating narrations that placed the origin of nations in ancient times and rooted the new political systems. Later, Marxist historians resorted to the past to prove the class struggle theory.

This short view at the “history of history” – i.e. historiography – illustrates that history is neither an objective science, nor mere fictional literature. There is no possible way to go back in time and relive events to recount them as they truly were. History is not “what happened in the past”, but the interpretation of the traces left behind in past times to create a coherent narrative that explains said remnants of bygone eras and fulfills a purpose in the present time. The purposes of history may vary, from political action to entertainment, and all sorts of political ideologies (such as nationalism, colonialism, liberalism or Marxism) have resorted to history to offer a narrative that justifies their postulates. Historians don’t work to

retrieve the past just for the sake of it, but to create a better understanding of the present and to contribute to a better future. History is just a series of answers given to the universally asked question “how did we get here?”, which is usually the start of the follow-up question “where do we go from here?”. As Rosenstone put it (2007, 594), history “has never reflected or captured the meaning of the past but has always created meaning for the past”. History is deeply connected with contemporary sensibilities, and the past is only relevant as long as it maintains a direct dialogue with the present day (Chapman, 2016, 13). Furthermore, it is not unusual for historians to argue about the interpretation of sources and present different narratives about the same historical events, formulating plenty of historiographical debates.

However, history is not written only by historians. It doesn't belong exclusively to the high political spheres or to academia – despite what some historians still vehemently defend. History can be found anywhere, in the old tales told to children – those that happened “once upon a time” –, in the local heritage, in the customs and traditions of every village, in the romanticised view of the “good old days” and so on and on. There is a collective memory of the past, an imaginary of how most people think the past should have been, that is shaped by multiple factors. Academic history plays a part in it through education, but so do the local tales and popular media (movies, TV shows, music, literature, videogames). Popular media plays a key role in the construction of this collective memory of the past, as it is more visual, engaging and easy to remember than academic history. At the same time, historical representations in the media reflect the very imagery of the past (Chapman, 2016, 12–13) and perpetuate it. For instance, it is hard to imagine the Spartan king Leonidas and the battle of Thermopylae without thinking about their depiction in the comic-based movie 300. History is appealing for culture and entertainment products, as it offers endless possibilities for new narratives, letting imagination fill the gaps of the historical discourse. No one “owns” the past, not even historians or governments, so it is possible to insert any sort of story into history, entirely fictional stories or reimaginations of historical figures and events. Furthermore, stories set in past times appeal to the collective memory and the public is expected to, at least, be somewhat familiar with the events depicted, which makes them more engaging. Considering these aspects, it should not come as a surprise that several entertainment products make use of past times, adopting this collective memory and, at the same time, transforming it.

Video games and History

Plenty of videogames can be found among the plethora of cultural/entertainment products that have resorted to history. It is not particularly easy to define a “historical videogame”. Every videogame is historical by itself, as an entertainment product created in a specific time and space that reflects a part of the society that produces and/or consumes it. As an instance, the very first digital games date back to the 50s and illustrate the early development of civil computers. Moreover, videogames have their own history, and some of them can be considered historical in the sense that they constitute a milestone in the industry. Although it is important to remember that every game, as every other cultural product, is historical, a more pragmatic definition of historical videogames would be any game related to specific historical events (Stirling and Wood, 2021, 3); a relationship that could be the overall setting of the game in a historical context – games set in the past with entirely fictional storylines – or the recreation and reimagining of historical events. A historical game creates a virtual world set in past times that players can explore freely, which helps to express the importance of understanding that historical events took place in a specific context. The depiction of this virtual world and, especially, the insertion of the players in said world truly distinguishes historical games from other media formats. Interactivity is the key element in the gaming experience, and players get a degree of immersion in the historical setting, a virtual past that can be altered depending on their choices (McCall, 2016, 9–10).

Videogames, by their own definition, do not intend to recreate reality. Instead, they usually aim for authenticity, recreating real world actions and events in a way that can be depicted as realistic but without the real-life drawbacks. For instance, racing games usually recreate real world cars so that players can feel like they are driving them. However, the consequences of digital accidents are very different from those suffered in a physical car. Therefore, it is pointless to judge historical videogames in relation to their “accuracy” to the historical discourse, as their main goal is not to make completely realistic simulations of past events. When working on a game, developers do not usually consult primary sources and establish their own interpretations, as a historian would do. Instead, they draw from the existing historical imaginaries to create a setting that is somewhat familiar to the player. Doing so implicitly – and sometimes unwary – they position themselves in certain historiographical debates (Stirling and Wood, 2021, 6). Historical game developers must find the right balance

among historical academic knowledge, players' expectations and engaging gameplay (Di Giovanni, 2025).

Frequently, the image of historical events depicted in a videogame is directly or indirectly taken from previous popular media sources. The repetition of distinctive imaginaries related to specific historical events in previous entertainment products creates a visual identity that is reciprocated in historical videogames (Jiménez Alcázar y Venegas Ramos, 2023, 186). However, that does not mean that historical videogames are merely interactive movies in an ancient setting. Videogames have their own characteristics (game mechanics, interactivity, replay value, map and character design), and they adapt the existing imaginaries to fit these distinctive features. Historical videogames insert the players in virtual worlds inspired by past times, where they can interact with different elements of the map and make countless choices. Historical videogames may recreate larger and more detailed scenarios than movies and literature and achieve a higher level of immersion, even if by doing so several historical inaccuracies are present. Historical videogames provide the feeling of "being there", of "going back to the past" and "experiencing first-hand" what are considered the most important events in history.

Another aspect of historical games, shared with other forms of media, is that they cater to counterfactual history (the what-if narrations) (McCall, 2016, 8–9). For example, strategy games that recreate historical battles (Age of Empires, Total War, Imperivm and many more) or focus on empire building (i.e. Europa Universalis, Civilization) allow the players to stray away from the historical discourse with their choices and change the results of historical events, opening up endless opportunities for counterfactual history and motivating players' imagination.

This broad definition of historical videogames conveys a rather large list of games, including any that depicts World War II or any other conflict in the history of humankind (the most used source of inspiration). Focus will be put on two examples of commercially successful historical games and their relationship with the past – Assassin's Creed Odyssey and Age of Empires II – but it is important to note that this type of game is growing in popularity. For instance, *Ghost of Yōtei* (Sucker Punch Production/Sony), sequel to the acclaimed title *Ghost of Tsushima*, is a game set in early 16th century Japan that has reportedly sold 1,3 million copies in a single day after its release (Wassem, 2025). What is more, earlier this year *Assassin's Creed Shadows* (Ubisoft), also set in 16th century Japan,

was released. Two more examples of the interest in historical games can be found in the new content continuously developed for the Age of Empires (Xbox Game Studios) franchise and the development of a new Europa Universalis (Paradox) title. Age of Empires is a well-known series for historical games fans and has recently (October 2025) launched new downloadable content (DLC) recreating the conquests of Alexander the Great (Messina, 2025). Europa Universalis V is a long-awaited strategy game that will allow players to simulate events from 1337 to 1837 (Tones, 2025). It is safe to say that there is enough interest by the public in historical games and the offer of these entertainment products is ever increasing.

Assassin's Creed: Odyssey. Ancient Greece brought to the 21st Century

Assassin's Creed is one of the most successful franchises in videogames and there is no doubt that most people who are familiar with digital games have at the very least heard of it. Assassin's Creed is an action-adventure game that follows a fictional story based on the never-ending battle between the assassins and the templars for the control of powerful items hidden from the public knowledge and bound to an extinct race of alien god-like creatures. Ever since the launch of the first game back in 2007, fourteen main games have been released by the gaming giant Ubisoft, alongside other related products. Precise sales numbers are obscure, but as of September 2025 it is estimated that over 230 million copies of the Assassin's Creed games have been sold worldwide (Otterson, 2025). Those figures illustrate the impact of the most commercially successful historical game franchise so far.

The main plot is more inclined to sci-fi than history, but the use of futuristic technology allows modern-day assassins and templars to relive memories of the past and travel back in time to search for those items. This premise feels like a narrative excuse to set multiple games in different points of history, with each game recreating some of the most important events in (western) history. The very first game (Assassin's Creed, 2007) was set in the Third Crusade. Assassin's Creed II (2009), Brotherhood (2010) and Revelations (2011) took the player to Renaissance Italy (recreating late 15th century Florence, Rome and Venice) and Constantinople. Other notable examples in the franchise include Assassin's Creed Unity (2014) and its recreation of Paris during the French Revolution, Assassin's Creed Origins (2017) – a reboot of the franchise set in Ancient Egypt – Assassin's Creed Valhalla (2020) – set in the ninth century Viking conquest of England – and the aforementioned recently published

Assassin's Creed Shadows (2025).

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018) takes the players back to ancient Greece during the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC). The main character is a mercenary that gets involved in the war as he/she begins a journey to discover his/her family origins and defeat a shadowy organization that intends to control all of Greece. The war is merely a background for the main storyline and the protagonist, being a mercenary, will switch sides constantly. The conflict is represented in a very simplistic way, reduced to the clash between Athens and Sparta. There are some regions supporting either Athens or Sparta. In this context, the player can actively decide which side to choose by wearing down the loyalty of any region (except for Attica and Laconia) and triggering a “conquest” battle. These battles are presented as chaotic confrontations where the individual actions of the player may shift the scales. Far from the strategic clashes of the Classical era, conquest battles are meant to present the main character as a hero who can win a war on his/her own. Soldiers from both sides are only distinguishable by the colours of their pieces of armour (red for Sparta, blue for Athens) and the emblems on their shields and banners. The colour code and the emblems are some of the many artistic licences, as there is no archaeological evidence supporting those identifying features. Additionally, the depiction of Sparta in the game draws heavily from the movie 300, exemplifying the appeal to the collective memory. The tutorial of the game is a recreation of the battle of Thermopylae; the main character is a descendant of king Leonidas and one of his/her abilities – aptly named “Spartan kick” – directly resembles the iconic scene of the film where the Persian emissary is kicked into a pit.

Playing through the game, at times the main storyline feels like an excuse for the player to travel through the recreation of ancient Greece and meet the numerous historical figures that make a digital appearance. Each one of them is given their own personality and traits, broadly inspired by the historical discourse. For example, the interactions with Socrates tend to revolve around the philosopher questioning every little aspect and the morality of the protagonist, while Alcibiades is presented as an undisciplined and power-hungry, yet cunning strategist. Even if their personalities are somehow inspired by “real history”, they are still fictionalized characters for a videogame, reimagined historical figures introduced in the fictional storyline that can produce a lasting memory in the players. As someone who played this game before reading in depth about the Peloponnesian War, it is hard for me not to

imagine the strong personality of Alcibiades presented in the game when researching about the disastrous Sicilian expedition partly led by the Athenian, or reading about his defection to the Spartan side.

The game offers a scaled down version of Greece to wander around and complete quests. The map and the general atmosphere recreated in the game were key selling points, as the recreation of Greece became the biggest map in the entire franchise until that point. The locations depicted are Attica and mainland Greece until Chalcidice, the Peloponnese, Crete, and the main islands in the Aegean and Ionian seas. Noticeably, the Greek cities of the Ionian coast and Magna Graecia are missing, which means that the map corresponds exclusively to modern-day Greece. This illustrates the association between ancient Greece and current Greece that lingers in the common perception of the Greek area for the Western world, an idea that is rooted in the 19th century Greek war of Independence. The game not only draws from this notion of nationalistic history but also actively perpetuates it, positioning itself implicitly in the historiographical debate.

The main hallmarks of ancient Greece are recreated in great detail, with outstanding representations of Athens and its Acropolis, the sanctuary of Delphi, the temple of Zeus in Olympia, the theatre of Epidaurus and the rest of the most representative monuments of Classical era Greece. Buildings are filled with statues, paintings, pottery and tapestries decorated with well-known motifs of ancient Greek art, and the visuals stride away from the old-fashioned conception of "white, marble Greece" to represent colourful statues and art. Outside of the main locations the different settlements that the player may encounter on his/her way become generic and duller, which is to be expected considering the amount of time and resources that takes modelling the game assets. More than a recreation, the game imagines and "reimagines" the appearance of the Greek cities. Monumental Athens was depicted in a way that closely resembles the studies made by art historians, with some minor changes in the layout of the city. Frugal Sparta, however, appears in the game as a much grander and monumental city than ancient testimonies and archaeological excavations describe, recurring to anachronistic or straight up invented buildings to maintain the style of the rest of the game and meet the perceived players' expectations. This notion of "grandeur" in Antiquity is part of the collective memory regarding this era. Literature and movie representations throughout the 20th century have traditionally resorted to this topic and it's carried on in the game, as well as plenty of other artistic choices that provide a visual

identity to the scenery.

A controversial topic was the inclusion of contemporary sensibilities. At the very beginning of the game, players choose between a male and female protagonist character, women are present in public buildings and spaces that historically were restricted to men (such as theatres) and there are quite a few female characters throughout the game filling traditionally assigned male role models (i.e. leading a revolt). In addition, homosexuality is completely normalised in the game, and the protagonist may engage in same sex relationships if the player chooses. Slavery is also barely touched upon even if it was a major factor in Greek society and the rise of Athenian politician Kleon after the demise of Pericles is equated with Donald Trump's populist campaign. The political panorama depicted in the game offers several parallelisms to the political situation of the United States during the first presidency of Trump – and it is still relevant during his second term – including a not-so-subtle reference in a dialogue where Kleon promises to "Make Athens Great Again". Kleon is presented as a populist that constantly rallies the Athenian mobs to get into power and start a more aggressive policy against Sparta. Some players argued that these present-day references ruined the immersion for them and that writers were "pushing a political agenda", but the inclusion of current sensibilities in a game – or any other entertainment product – is inevitable. Developers and game writers don't live in a bubble away from politics and, consciously or unconsciously, are influenced by several factors, such as the cultural perceptions and the target markets. Nowadays it would be unthinkable to offer any cultural product where women are subdued into passive roles, any sort of slavery is praised, or autocracy is presented as a more desirable option than democracy.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey worked closely with historians with the goal of providing an "authentic" feeling to the virtual world. History consultants such as Maxime Duran and Thierry Noël have provided their expertise during game development (Di Giovanni, 2025), so the several game historical "inaccuracies" can't be attributed to mistakes. Aspects such as the aforementioned inclusion of present-day sensibilities or environment design not recreating exactly its real-life counterparts are by no means "historical errors", but conscious decisions that work to make an entertainment product appealing to the players. Aside from the main game, Assassin's Creed Odyssey offers a game mode named "Discovery Tour" that offers players the possibility to safely wander around the virtual map of Greece and learn about the main landmarks of the game. Inside the Discovery Tour the player

will encounter several historical figures that will offer small pieces of historical information, curated by the expert team and related to the recreation of historical places in the game. Information can be expanded by reading slightly longer information presented in text form after each guided tour. It feels like a combination of a digital guided tour and a museum visit, focusing on historical figures and monuments, curiosities and explaining the way people lived in the recreated time. Discovery Tour made its first appearance in the previous title of the franchise and one of its main figures behind it, historian Maxime Duran, explained in an interview that this was the tool used to explain the many historical inaccuracies (Ory, 2018). Historian consultation and Discovery Tour also help achieve the desired sense of authenticity, working as a marketing strategy to position the game as a teaching tool. Nonetheless, it's a way to immerse the players into the virtual world and make real history more appealing. Unfortunately, Discovery Tour has been cancelled for the most recent game – replaced with an old-fashioned in-game library – (Mira, 2025) and its future remains uncertain.

The case of Bulgarian History in the videogame age of empires

Age of Empires is a veteran franchise in the gaming world and one of the best examples of the real time strategy (RTS) category. The very first game of the series was released in 1997, and its historical setting made it distinguishable from its main competitors. It wasn't the first strategy videogame whose environment was located in ancient times – that honour probably goes to Civilization (MicroProse) – but its success brought history to millions of players worldwide. The most popular game of the series, with a very loyal community around it, is Age of Empires II, released originally in 1999 but enhanced and relaunched in 2018 (Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition). Still today, the game receives regular updates that add new content and improve the experience for the players.

Age of Empires II is set in the ancient and medieval eras. Players take control of a settlement, gather resources that can be found around the virtual map and create an army to clash against CPU or other human-controlled players. Starting a new game, players can choose among 51 different factions, named "civilizations", that represent historical societies. Most of the buildings, units and technologies are identical for all civilizations, so that basic game mechanics are relatively easy to pick up. A few unique buildings, technologies or units offer some personality to the factions. For instance, the Bulgarian civilization in the

game has the krepost as a unique building and the konnik as a special unit. Furthermore, every civilization can build a “wonder”, a special building that is considered representative of the historical society they represent. Yet again, in the case of the Bulgarians, the wonder is a recreation of the Round Church of Preslav.

Every civilization has a campaign available, a series of curated scenarios that depict certain historical events. The Bulgarian campaign is named “Ivaylo” and recreates the story of tsar Kordobukas/Ivaylo. Ivaylo is one of the most well-known characters of Bulgarian history, a historical figure that has been presented as a symbol of Bulgarian nationalism and a champion of the lower classes in different historical narratives. In 1277, during a time of severe civil unrest within the Second Bulgarian Empire and external pressure from Byzantines and Tatars, an obscure character led an uprising and deposed Tsar Constantine Tikh. Little is known about the origins of Kordobukas/Ivaylo, aside from most likely being a Cuman from the lower classes. Ivaylo married widow tsarina Maria, becoming de jure legitimate ruler of Bulgaria, but the nobility of the capital fiercely opposed him. Emperor Michael VIII tried to install Ivan Asen III in the Bulgarian throne and asked for help from his allies in the north, the Tatars led by Nogai. A Tatar army invaded from the North and clashed with Ivaylo's rebels in the fortress of Silistra, besieged by both Tatars and Byzantines. Ivaylo managed to escape, but at the same time a smaller detachment captured Tarnovo, sent tsarina Maria to Constantinople and installed Ivan Asen III in the Bulgarian Throne. Ivaylo gained the alliance of the Tatars in 1279 and started to reconquer Bulgarian land, which made Ivan Asen III flee. Bulgarian nobility chose George I Tarter as a new tsar and Ivaylo went directly to Nogai's court asking for support, where he met Ivan Asen III – sent by the emperor. The Mongol chieftain had to choose between supporting Ivaylo and installing a cooperative rebel in the Bulgarian throne or Ivan Asen III and reigniting the alliance with the Byzantines. Nogai chose the latter and Ivaylo was assassinated at the Tatars' court (Uzelac, 2021, 216–218).

Ivaylo's tragic story is perfectly suited for a reinterpretation in a historical novel, film or game; and the developers of Age of Empires considered it as one of the most representative events of medieval Bulgarian history, despite being anecdotal in the grand scheme of events. Every playable scenario in the campaign is preceded and succeeded by slideshows presenting the narrative to the player. The slideshows offer a tale of Ivaylo's journey that is loosely loyal to the historical discourse, adding minor details to remark the epic character of the story. Ivaylo is presented as a Bulgarian pig hoarder, without any mention of its possible

Cuman origin, and the whole story follows the classic “from zero to hero” scheme. Ivaylo is constantly fighting against all odds (Byzantines, Mongols, Bulgarian nobility) and was only defeated by the treason of the Nobility and Nogai’s manoeuvres. The story is voiced by a fictional version of tsarina Maria in the form of a tale told to her child. As it was previously stated, the in-game narration follows closely the historical discourse, but the scenarios alter significantly the course of history. The most egregious example is the last scenario, where the player – controlling Ivaylo – must escape tsar George I Terter’s army, destroy a Hungarian town and join Nogai in his war against Genoese Crimea and Poland. There is no historical evidence for any of these actions in Ivaylo’s final moments alongside the Tatars, but it is much more engaging to present this fictional scenario for the player to end the campaign on a high than just having Ivaylo assassinated by the Mongols.

When the first *Age of Empires* was released, lead developer Bruce Shelley explained in an interview that the team chose history as their setting merely to differentiate the game from the competitors, usually fantasy focused. Shelley also argued that history was merely a framework to make the players feel familiar with the game, and that detailed research was neither needed nor a good idea, for the goal was to entertain players, not to impress them with their scholarship (Shelley, 1997). Fast forward to 2024, *Age of Empires II* released a new expansion as downloadable content titled *Chronicles: Battle for Greece*, a series of scenarios set in ancient Greece written under the narrative lead of Doctor Ben Angell. Moreover, the game’s official website offers brief pieces of historical information about the civilization that expanded on the history side. The series has gone from doing basic historical research in the children section of the public library to employing a doctor in Ancient History as narrative lead, and the reason behind this evolution is very simple: players demand more historically accurate information. A quick search on the official online forum or the Reddit community will yield several posts discussing historical events depicted in the game or asking for the inclusion of new civilizations and YouTube channel *Spirit Of The Law* uploaded several videos analysing the historical accuracy of the in-game depictions, with viewing numbers ranging from 100,000 to 400,000; a figure much larger than the amount of downloads of any academic paper. *Age of Empires* has created a community very loyal to the game and interested in history, that demands a minimum of accuracy and is willing to search for further information.

Yet, the treatment of history in *Age of Empires* needs some observations. The campaigns and the civilizations represented cater to a nationalistic view of history. Most of

the civilizations in the game correspond to present day countries and Ivaylo is presented as a champion of Bulgarian people betrayed by bordering powers. The very use of the word “civilization” is old-fashioned and barely used by historians these days, as the dichotomy between “civilization” and “barbarism” has been surpassed in academia. Furthermore, one of the main mechanics of the game (advancing through ages to unlock new units, buildings and technologies; from the simplest to the most complex) is rooted in the positivist view of history as a line of progress. Several historical myths and misconceptions still persist in the game, some of them entangled in the very core of the gameplay, and the popularity of the franchise contributes to perpetuating them.

An approach on videogames and History

Historical games are interpretations of the past that should be treated critically by the players (McCall, 2016, 20), although it is understandable that critical thinking is not what most people have in mind when they boot up the game. Robert Rosenstone argued that cinema has its own rules to approach the past (2014, p.23), and the same can be applied to videogames. Historical events are adapted to the format of videogames, where interactivity, immersion and engaging mechanics are prioritised to create entertaining products that can be considered fun to play with and obtain commercial success. As obvious as it may be, it is important to approach any historical game being aware of its nature as an entertainment product. The main focus of the development team is to create interesting game mechanics and appealing virtual worlds that can attract the attention of players, so maintaining fidelity to the historical discourse is not a priority. History comes in handy in the search for authenticity, as it can help construct a feeling of realism, but to do so they tend to rely on the collective memory of past events (what the public expects to find) and not on historians' work.

Historical events and contexts are usually depicted in games in a simplified way. Players can easily identify with the main character and historical figures are presented in an overly positive or negative way. This may induce a black and white approach to history. The trend in videogames is to explore more complex characters, and in-game decision making allows players to connect with historical agents and gain a better understanding of the process of decision making in history (McCall, 2016, 8). Nonetheless, videogames tend

to exaggerate the agency capabilities of historical figures, giving players the ability to win recreations of historical battles by themselves or simplifying in excess the management of a human settlement, as with the cases of Assassin's Creed Odyssey and Age of Empires – respectively. Overall, a game is not the most suitable format to present the complexities and contradictions of history and historical figures.

Special mention deserves the depiction of war and conflict in historical videogames, usually a central aspect in both the gameplay and the storyline. Digital games tend to make war and all sorts of historical atrocities appear fun, so they may produce certain "desensitisation" regarding historical events. Both in Assassin's Creed Odyssey and Age of Empires ancient war is depicted, but neither conveys the terrible consequences suffered by the people who were somehow involved in conflicts. In Assassin's Creed the main character slaughters countless enemies in his/her way and partakes in battles that simulate the skirmishes of the war, but as soon as those battles end life will continue as usual for the digital people living in their settlements, as if war was no more than a mere encounter of enemy forces in the battleground. Age of Empires treats war as merely a strategic clash, where soldiers and villagers are simply disposable resources that can be used to overcome the enemy. This is not a critique to the way videogames handle historical tragedies, and there are examples of games that depict war as neither fun nor heroic. Spec Ops: The Line (Yager development), a shooter game set in a fictional military operation in Dubai, showcases the descent into insanity of a US Army Delta team captain and the severe consequences of his actions for the civilian population. Another fantastic example of unconventional treatment of war in videogames is This War of Mine (11 bit studios), a strategy game inspired by the siege of Sarajevo where players take control of a small group of civilians trapped in a war zone whose only objective is to survive. The studio did a thorough research of civilian stories during wartime and portrayed them in a way that the player can feel the horrors of any war (Hall, 2014). Unfortunately, these are the exceptions to the rule, and in the case of Spec Ops: The Line it was a commercial failure (Donnelly, 2017). Videogames are meant to be fun and engaging and it is only logical that they usually leave out the terrible consequences of conflicts, an aspect that must be considered when approaching history through videogames, especially when digital games are used as a tool to approximate historical events to younger audiences. It is important to remember, and to remind everyone, that historical events portrayed in games were usually much grimmer than the way they are represented.

Players' demand for authenticity pushes developers to work with history consultants, as is the case of both Assassin's Creed and Age of Empires. Historians should take advantage of this situation and work closer with entertainment/cultural products, recognizing their potential to reshape the collective memory and overcome historiographical myths. For instance, the colourful statues in Assassin's Creed Odyssey symbolize a significant step away from the traditional view of "white marble Greece" and present a more modern interpretation in the field of art history. Balancing players' expectations, fun gameplay and fidelity to the historical discourse is not an easy task, but videogames offer the opportunity for historians to reach a much wider audience than academic production.

Video games do not teach history to their players, nor do they mean to. They are cultural and entertainment products whose goal is to generate as much revenue as possible. However, videogames may be a tool to get more people interested in history, and both Assassin's Creed and Age of Empires are good examples of that. Studios have shown that players are more inclined to learn more about historical events after playing through them in videogames (Burgess and Jones, 2025, 19–20) and that perceived authenticity is highly valued (Stirling and Wood, 2021, 19). Strategy games and in-game tools such as the defunct Discovery Tour may also be used in classrooms to encourage students, so long as they are received with critical thinking, directed by teachers, accompanied by complementary activities and not forced upon those with no interest in videogames (Oulitskaia, 2024, 172; McCall, 2016, 19–20; Muqueta et al., 2015, 9–11). History and videogames may develop a symbiotic relationship, whereas history makes the game richer and more authentic and games get more people interested in learning history.

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Migrant Contributions in the History of Bulgaria: Turkish, Iranian, and Other Asian Peoples'

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This article aims to spark interest in the archaeology and history of Bulgaria among Turkish, Arab, and Farsi-speaking communities by highlighting the major contributions of migrant populations throughout the country's history. A key goal is to foster an understanding that these communities, far from being foreign or external, were deeply involved in the building of Bulgaria over the centuries. In other words, the ancestors of these communities took part in the founding and subsequent development of the country.

Bulgaria's history is rich and reveals a convergence of various peoples. While this interaction was initially assumed to be antagonistic, archaeology has shown evidence of cooperation and mutual learning among the different peoples who coexisted in what is now Bulgaria. This presentation aims to encourage Turkish and other migrant communities to see themselves as part of the nation's historical fabric and to develop an interest in its history and archaeology.

Turkic Contributions

The Proto-Bulgarians were a Turkic-speaking people who founded the first Bulgarian state. Through them, key elements that would later shape Bulgarian identity - such as Christianity and the Cyrillic script - were introduced and integrated. The Bulgarian nomads were a conglomerate of tribes who settled south of the Danube after being pushed westward by the Khazars in the 7th century. These tribes spoke a Turkic language from the Oghur branch and lived in the Pontic steppe region (1).

Under the leadership of Khan Asparuh, they defeated the Byzantine Empire and founded the First Bulgarian Empire in 681 CE in the region of Moesia. This event marks the foundational act of the Bulgarian state, hence the name "Bulgaria," meaning "land of the

Bulgars." Subsequently, the Byzantines signed a peace treaty with them, which constituted the first official recognition of a Bulgarian state established south of the Danube (2).

The Bulgarian nomads did not arrive as disorganized hordes, but rather with a political structure known as a khanate. This structure allowed them to survive and organize themselves before settling south of the Danube, and it was crucial in their military confrontations with the Byzantines. Without their organized political system and military skills - such as horseback archery and heavy cavalry - the fledgling Bulgarian state would not have withstood foreign forces.

The political system of the Bulgarian nomads not only succeeded in defeating the Byzantines but also managed to integrate the various Slavic tribes of the region under a supreme leader - the Khan—and his highly disciplined aristocracy, the boyars, within a culture where religion, politics, and warfare were deeply intertwined (3).

For centuries, medieval Bulgarians used a 12-year cyclical calendar, each year named after an animal, of Turkic steppe origin. This tradition persisted even after the country's Christianization. The supreme celestial deity of the Bulgarian nomads was Tengri, the same god worshipped by the ancient Turks before their conversion to Islam. They also shared with the ancient Turks a deep admiration for the horse—an animal central to their survival and success on the Eurasian steppes. The importance of horses among Turkic peoples is evident in their funeral customs, where horses were often buried alongside high-ranking leaders. While local Slavic peoples contributed their language and population, the Bulgarian nomads contributed statehood, military techniques, and a steppe culture that blended with local beliefs (4).

Archaeology shows that the Bulgars did not lose their culture after settling along the Danube. Instead, they preserved many of their steppe practices, adapting them to the new sedentary and Slavic context. Archaeological evidence suggests that both Pliska and Preslav may have originated as nomadic camps, with Pliska being the most striking example. What stands out most is its size: the outer enclosure (the "lower city") covered an area of around 23 km², making it one of the largest enclosed spaces in early medieval Europe. Archaeology suggests that this vast interior space was not densely urbanized; instead, it functioned as a sacred and administrative territory of the Khan. This is where the tents (and later the houses) of the nobility and army were set up, along with their herds (5).

Also notable is the stark separation between the aristocratic citadel and the lower

city. The warrior elite lived highly isolated from the common people and the subordinate tribes, almost as if trying to recreate a nomadic lifestyle in the heart of a sedentary city, surrounded by sedentary servants who supplied them. Another important aspect concerns architecture. Bulgarian palaces and significant residences are not mere replicas of Byzantine or Western European palaces; rather, they represent a distinct case marked by steppe influence. The palace of Pliska was a massive two-story building with a large audience hall that served as a throne room and may have evoked the feeling of an ancient nomadic dwelling (yurt) on a grand scale, combined with sedentary elements. Additionally, the houses within the citadel were not clustered together, but spaced apart, much like tents in a nomadic camp (6). This indicates a population that, although sedentary, retained customs from steppe life—such as keeping horses tied close to the dwellings.

Preslav also reflects steppe elements, despite being the capital of Christian Bulgaria. One of these is the citadel of the elite and the Tsar's palace. The citadel preserved the characteristic spacious architecture, and the palace was not a replica of Byzantine constructions. Instead, it was a complex of political and religious buildings separated by open space and enclosed within a wall. This layout may reflect the steppe association of power with territorial extent, as opposed to the European association of power with verticality and solid, dense structures (7).

Likewise, in Preslav, archaeologists have discovered unique houses that differ from the typical square-shaped European houses. Some of these have a sunken level and a central interior hearth, which could be seen as a convergence between the steppe yurt and a new sedentary context (8).

Moreover, social hierarchy was not expressed through exterior decoration - as in Roman houses - but through proximity to the city's political center. This type of house contrasts with the classic Mediterranean house, which is square, ornamented on the outside, and built around a central courtyard. In the latter, water is the central element, while in the Bulgarian house, it is fire. In short, these findings challenge the idea that the Bulgarian nomads abandoned their entire culture, and that the entirety of present-day Bulgarian culture is purely Slavic.

Figure 1. Fragments with ancient runes, 9th-10th c. (ceramic, marble) - Museum of Preslav, photograph by the author (August 25, 2025).

The presence of runes on everyday objects after the Christianization shows that the steppe identity of the Bulgars did not disappear with the adoption of religion, but instead persisted in daily life.



The Pechenegs and Cumans were also Turkic peoples - like the Bulgarian nomads - who played a fundamental role in the Second Bulgarian Empire. The Pechenegs were a nomadic people, expert horsemen and warriors, who by the 11th century had settled along the borders of the Bulgarian population. The Cumans, another nomadic group, displaced the Pechenegs due to their superior military power and eventually settled in a vast region extending from the Danube to the Aral Sea.

Both the Pechenegs and Cumans provided cavalry forces to the Second Bulgarian Empire. Their exceptional skills as horse-archers were crucial for Bulgaria's military campaigns. The Tsars employed these groups as both allies and mercenaries in battles against the Byzantine Empire. Their inclusion in the military was decisive in the Battle of Adrianople (1205), where the Bulgarian army achieved a complete victory and captured the Byzantine emperor Baldwin I (10).

Many Pechenegs and Cumans settled on the empire's frontiers in exchange for military service. Over time, migration and military collaboration led to the integration of these frontier communities with the Bulgarian population. This integration extended not only into the lower classes but also into the nobility and aristocracy. Nobles of Pecheneg and especially Cuman origin held key positions as generals, high-ranking palace officials, and royal advisers. Furthermore: Tsar Ivan Asen II (1218–1241), the greatest ruler of the Second Bulgarian Empire, was the son of a Cuman princess. Tsar George I Terter (1280–1292) belonged to the Terter dynasty, of Cuman origin - as indicated by his surname. Likewise, Tsar Michael III, of the Shishman dynasty, the last to rule before the Ottoman conquest, may also have belonged to a dynasty of Cuman origin.

In conclusion, the Cuman and Pecheneg contributions were not merely instrumental or servile; they permeated all levels of Bulgarian society, including its highest political and aristocratic circles. Turkic people have been intertwined with Bulgarian society from the Proto-Bulgarian nomads to the Ottoman Turks.

Iranian Contributions

Iranian contributions are primarily evident during the nomadic stage of the Bulgars. These

influences were not merely superficial but reflected a complete cultural integration and assimilation among nomadic peoples. The Sarmatians were an Iranian nomadic people who inhabited the Eurasian steppes, mainly between the 5th century BCE and the 4th century CE. Their integration with the Bulgar nomads was so profound that some historians have considered them essentially the same people (A.P. Smirnov, V.T. Sirotenko, and Al. Burmov).

When the Sarmatians came into contact with the Bulgar nomads, a unification of burial rituals became evident. Narrow burial pits became common, and the orientation of graves shifted from east-west to northward-facing. Additionally, cranial deformation has been observed in some remains (characteristic feature of the Bulgarian nomads) (11). Through this process of integration between local populations and eastern migrants, a Turkic people with strong Iranian influence emerged by the first half of the 4th century CE. This group would later be identified with the Onogur Bulgars, or simply the Bulgars.

Moreover, skulls with minor East Asian physical traits have been found between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, indicating a process of ethnic mixing and supporting the conclusion that the Bulgar nomads had Asian ancestors (12).

The Alans, another Iranian people, also contributed to the development of the Bulgar nomads. Unlike other groups, the Alans were distinguished by catacomb-style graves and specific funerary rituals. After the Hunnic invasion in the 4th century CE, many nomadic Bulgars migrated southward, occupying northern Dagestan. However, rather than displacing Alan culture, they coexisted and blended traditions.

Rock-cut tombs continued to be used, associated with the sedentary Alan population, but cranial deformation, associated with the newly arrived Bulgars, was also introduced (13). The Bulgars brought their nomadic traditions, while local populations like the Alans already had established sedentary customs and agricultural practices. Archaeological evidence points to mutual learning - for example, failed agricultural attempts in early urban centers, reflecting the trial-and-error process of Bulgars adapting to a settled lifestyle (14). According to Dimitar Dimitrov, the close coexistence between the Proto-Bulgars and Alans eventually gave rise to a hybrid culture in the 8-th century known as Saltovo-Mayaki (15).

In conclusion, there is clear evidence of syncretism in funerary practices and the adaptation of local techniques by the new migrants who temporarily settled in Dagestan. What we observe is not only convergence but the emergence of a new mixed culture, shaped through the union of diverse nomadic and sedentary traditions.

Arab Contributions

The relations between the Arab caliphates and Bulgaria were primarily pragmatic, though far from insignificant. The role of the Arab empires in Bulgarian history fluctuated between border conflicts and occasional alliances against a common enemy: the Byzantine Empire. One striking example of cooperation between the two cultures was during the sieges of the Byzantine Empire. While Caliph Al-Amin attacked Anatolia from the east, Khan Krum launched the Battle of Pliska on the western front. The fact that Byzantium was pressured on both fronts and forced to divide its army allowed the decisive Bulgarian victory, which ultimately led to the death of the Byzantine Emperor at the hands of Khan Krum's forces (16).

In terms of archaeology, there is evidence of trade and the transfer of eastern craftsmanship techniques. The Bulgars initially traded for, and later learned to replicate, Abbasid ceramics. At first, scholars believed these oriental ceramics arrived in Bulgaria only as luxury goods, as they were most commonly found in the palaces and churches of Preslav. However, subsequent discoveries of defective shards, waste material, and unfinished pieces revealed that Bulgarian artisans had learned the technique (17).

This transmission of knowledge may have occurred through Arab prisoners of war, slaves, or migrants who ended up in Bulgaria's political centers. Later changes in the designs and Arabic

calligraphy on ceramics suggest that these techniques were adapted by local artisans who likely did not understand Arabic (18).

Another notable aspect of oriental art adopted in Bulgaria is stucco decoration, which achieved exceptional quality and sophistication. These stuccoes display typically Islamic geometric designs, but also animal and plant motifs unique to Bulgaria - indicating not just imitation, but creative adaptation to local tastes and needs. These decorations, found in the palaces of Simeon I, demonstrate the refinement of the Bulgarian court and serve as excellent examples of how intercultural contact can lead to artistic innovation.

The state-building process initiated by Khan Krum created a favorable environment for refugees and foreigners to contribute their knowledge. According to Byzantine chronicler Theophanes, Arab engineers helped Krum's Bulgaria to develop its first siege weapons. This not only reflects the Khan's efforts to strengthen his military power, but also shows an openness to foreign knowledge and a positive appreciation for the contributions of outsiders and refugees to the Bulgarian state (19).

Figure 2 (in the next page) could see the dish with depiction of a griffin, 10th c., "white clay painted ceramics.". This type of decorated ceramic reflects Eastern influences in medieval Bulgarian art and demonstrates the refinement achieved by local workshops in Preslav during the reign of Tsar Simeon I.



Figure 2. Dish with depiction of a griffin, 10th c., "white clay painted ceramics." - Museum of Preslav, photograph by the author (August 25, 2025)

Conclusion

The contributions of migrant peoples were decisive in the formation, consolidation, and resilience of the Bulgarian nation. Migrants did not play a secondary role; in fact, the Bulgars themselves were a migrant people. Turkic peoples were present during the nomadic stage of the Bulgars - indeed, the Bulgars themselves spoke a Turkic language. During this period of great migrations, cultural assimilation and blending occurred with Iranian peoples such as the Alans and Sarmatians, evident in the merging of funerary rituals.

Once the Bulgars settled and founded the First Bulgarian Empire, their steppe culture did not vanish - rather, it survived through adaptation and cultural syncretism, visible in the urban planning and architecture of major cities like Pliska and Preslav. During this era, influences were not only Slavic, but also Greek and Arab, as noted by Byzantine chroniclers. Furthermore, the ornamental techniques used in important buildings in these cities reflect Arab artistic influence, demonstrating that the Bulgarians were open to intercultural contact. In the time of the Second Bulgarian Empire, Bulgarian society remained open to interaction and migration from other cultures. The integration of the Pechenegs and Cumans stands out.

Though they initially arrived as mercenaries or strategic allies, they soon rose to high positions in Bulgarian society and became indispensable to the empire's military expansion and political consolidation. Their incorporation into the Bulgarian army was key to victories against the Byzantines. But their roles extended beyond the battlefield - Cumans and Pechenegs also gained access to the royal court and leadership positions. This integration went so far that the last independent dynasty of Bulgaria - the Shishman dynasty - is considered of Cuman origin.

Finally, it is worth reflecting that the contact between Bulgarians and Turkic peoples did not end with the Cumans and Pechenegs. The Turkic legacy continued under Ottoman rule, through bridges, aqueducts, hospitals, soup kitchens, and public baths. As demonstrated throughout this overview, the interaction between Bulgarians and Turkic peoples is not a historical anomaly, but rather a recurring theme. Turkic people have been present in Bulgaria's history from Proto-Bulgarian nomads, through the Ottoman Empire, and into the living communities of today.

Recommendations for Enhancing Public Engagement with Bulgaria's Plural Historical Heritage

Taking into account Bulgaria's plural heritage and the contributions made by its various communities throughout history, it is important to encourage initiatives that allow the inhabitants of contemporary Bulgaria to embrace this history as a close and meaningful legacy in which their direct ancestors participated. The aim is to move beyond the idea of history as something distant or relevant only to a select few, and instead recognize it as something reflected in our daily environment and in the country's present-day diversity. History is not found exclusively in books; it is present in our food, clothing, routines, public spaces, schedules, ourselves, and our neighbors. What follows is a series of recommendations intended to strengthen the sense of belonging within communities, promote a fair and balanced historical narrative, and foster public recognition of all the communities that have contributed to the making of Bulgaria.

Promoting local history: disseminating the history of neighborhoods and towns, highlighting important local figures who contributed to the consolidation of the community or who fought for the rights of its inhabitants. Requesting the official recognition of community leaders.

Pedagogical reports and research projects: asking students to interview members of ethnic communities in their neighborhoods about their traditions, memories, and migration stories. Sharing this information on social media.

Local migration history: investigating the peoples who inhabited the neighborhood or town, explicitly mentioning whether Bulgar nomads, Slavs, Greeks, Armenians, Turks, or any other groups settled in the area.

Embracing historical heritage: encouraging students from different communities to present the contributions their group has made to the country's history. For example, an Arab student might explain the Abbasid-style ceramics and stucco work present in the palaces of Preslav or Pliska.

Geographical recognition: requesting the placement of historical contextualization plaques in important parks or squares to acknowledge the presence of the peoples who once inhabited those places.

Recognition and preservation of heritage: caring for heritage buildings and sites

regardless of the civilization with which they are associated, and requesting explicit mention on plaques of the peoples involved in their construction.

Multilingual heritage signage: encouraging heritage sites to include explicit references to the peoples who participated in their construction, with signage provided in the most widely spoken languages in Bulgaria as well as in major international languages.

Intercultural days: promoting intercultural days in educational settings where students from ethnic communities can present not only their gastronomy, music, and oral traditions, but also explain how their community contributed to the history of Bulgaria.

Reflection on migration: asking students to consider the similarities and differences between current migration patterns in Europe and those experienced by Bulgar nomads, Slavic migrants, Cumans, or other groups that shaped Bulgaria.

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Fostering Cultural Intimacy with Monuments in the public space of Balkan Communities

Katerina (Kate) Argyropoulou

The monuments of a city or settlement create the narrative framework within which history and memory are united, as they do not change in space. It is therefore a duty of the community to protect the material cultural heritage. The greatest challenge in monument restoration is the reintegration of the site into local history and heritage. However, the most crucial aspect of this article is the transformation of monuments into active and vibrant spaces. It is important to find ways in which the site can become sustainable and contribute to societies of bigger and smaller cities in educational, cultural, touristic, and economic ways. In Heidegger's book "Sojourns - The Journey to Greece" it is stated that the sequence of history and the continuity of time form are the chains of memory. However, in the Balkans that is not always the case due to the population migration and the changes in territories during the 18th, 19th and 20th century and the exchange of populations with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne. Many monuments became unfamiliar to the population living around them as the nationalities and religions change, but also the difficult times people all over the Balkans had to endure (Terzoglou, 2006, 262). Christians from Minor Asia for example, who migrated to post- ottoman territory of the Balkans weren't interested nor familiar with Islamic practices, could not maintain the memory of an Islamic temple. Because of the association of historical monuments with national identities, Balkan countries have problematic attitude towards monuments from the Ottoman empire, that are often ignored by the authorities. It is important for these places to be celebrated, connected and known so that they can serve the community as they were intended to do.

Physiology of a monument

Memory sites are defined by three intertwined parameters: the material (physical), the symbolic (representational), and the utilitarian (functional). The objective of any intervention must, therefore, be the simultaneous activation and transformation of these parameters, ensuring they "endlessly recycle their meaning and unpredictably multiply their impact." The symbolic dimension is paramount. While a community can sustain shared experience through performance or commemoration (enactment), the monument itself possesses the unique capacity to "enclose upon itself" (Nora, 1989, 18-24). Crucially, this intrinsic focus must be balanced by an openness to external re-signification by diverse audiences.

This symbolic enrichment is a prerequisite for fostering a space that is both familiar and accessible to citizens, promoting a diverse range of values and addressing the public's creative and socio-cultural needs. In the context of non-urban environments, where the phenomenon of metropolitan alienation is mitigated, residents engage with the landscape by mentally distinguishing between full and empty spaces (or positive and negative spaces). The effective communication of the site's meanings facilitates the harmonization of human activities with core community values and strengthens the cognitive link between experiential reality and conceptual spatial understanding (Terzoglou, 2012, 77-88).

The functional value of monuments is arguably their most significant dimension, particularly since many are situated in central locations - often the historic centers of Balkan metropolitan areas. Their prime location makes them invaluable for the accommodation of public activities and accessibility. These sites offer an excellent opportunity to establish cultural centers that host classes, workshops, and various activities for the local population as it is crucial that these spaces remain closely integrated into the daily life of the community. Furthermore, they can serve as permanent bases for local cultural associations and accommodate activities from organizations in other regions. This approach would foster greater synergy and create more opportunities for collaboration among associations. As a space for socialization and interaction, the symbolic value of the monument will be constantly enhanced. This integration will make the monument more readily adapted into the daily routine of citizens and establish it as an active component of the urban fabric within which residents interact.

Potential use of monuments and ethical values

To ensure the longevity and relevance of a cultural center's function, the continuous articulation of new ethical values is essential. This is critical for space to operate as a domain of action and socialization, rather than merely an object of consumption for visitors and passersby. It is crucial that the monument is organically integrated into the areas where residents are active. In the case of an exchange library that could be implemented in such buildings, participants would effectively contribute to the organic transformation of the space through the continuous alteration of its content. Similarly, innovation and culture spaces should function as areas of free expression, continually undergoing transformation in their organization, use, and aesthetics. Furthermore, these ongoing transformations within space will cultivate a participatory character over time, resulting in an environment that is familiar, activated, and evolving.

The users themselves will create a flexible and continuously changing space where coexistence and action prevail over mere usage. Practically, the monuments must be transformed into a pliable environment featuring numerous interactive, changeable elements and ephemeral constructions. The physical object will thus evolve into a human-centric space designed for and by the people, filled with play and art, directly addressing contemporary cultural and social issues (Terzoglou, 2012, 88-90). Local government and municipal authorities must contribute to these initiatives, not only through financial support but also through the systematic monitoring of the innovative cultural centers. This oversight is crucial to ensure the center can produce work with a long-term time horizon. Therefore, beyond the site's artistic and historical value, what will keep the space alive is the value of human impact upon it. Consequently, the primary challenge in creating such a space is inaction.

Regarding exhibition areas it is important to always keep in mind the different understanding models that can coexist in an educational space like museums, without the knowledge transforming into its most simplistic form. The museum presents to the visitor the contextual knowledge, before even reading any of the information or hearing the presentation of the guide. Just by noticing the object we can, in our minds, create a context filled with materials, colors and shapes that coexist and create the context of a story. The knowledge that follows the first impression is an interaction with space, the artifacts but also

the lights, the architecture and the way everything is placed. For something like this to succeed we must set aside the belief that learning must follow a predetermined and predictable path. Some changes museums can make to educate their visitors and give them a more meaningful and credible experience will be presented below. Firstly, visitors must consider the information given to them as an interaction to their existing knowledge and thoughts, that will create a state of action and reaction, between them and the artifact. Also, creating incentives after the visit is crucial for educational purposes, as kids and adults can recollect things they learned. This can be done by simply giving material for home or for the teachers, or by creating a continuous bond of interaction with them (Falk J.H., Dierking L.D., Adams M., 2021, 454-460). There are also three major criteria that focus on how effectively interactive a space is with “hands on” education. These are: the presence of a technological means, a leading artifact that is being presented and a device that needs the visitor's action to operate (Witcomb A., 2021, 490).

Buildings of the Ottoman heritage, as relatively modern monuments, and structures that mostly remained standing even after the formation of the Balkan countries, constitute a significant portion of the building reserve in the center of big cities. As such, these monuments were instrumental in shaping the urban landscape and the town planning. Since many of these buildings remained in good condition, cultural bodies are presented with the opportunity to bestow upon them rich “post-mortem cultural lives” (Kolovos, Pallis, Poulos, 2023, 14). Essentially, this architectural reserve is given a second chance at relevance, saving it from collapse, a fate suffered by many of its kind. As these monuments are part of the urban landscape, they exist at the intersection of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as they are situated within the residential space of a large segment of the population. All the elements that produce stimuli within the urban landscape collectively determine the quality of life for residents (Tsoukala, 2017, 275-276).

Culture and Tourism

The coexistence of culture and tourism is a complex issue as well, as tourism will provide financially in the future of these spaces. Also, the expansion of tourist services is important because it significantly contributes to the image projected by the country, both to tourists and to its own residents. A central objective of tourism policy is the qualitative upgrade of the tourist product and the promotion of cultural creation. Conversely, culture defines, directs, and provides meaning to aspects of tourism, usually those associated with cultural tourism. Given that our approach to the monument is purely human-centric, we will utilize methods similar to those of museum education. Unlike museums of the past, contemporary museums aim for or

engagement, recognizing it as an equal element to learning. Therefore, the cultural spaces must maintain a balance between the two. For example, if the center hosts classes for traditional dances, it should also organize festivals featuring traditional dances, like the "Lefkada International Folklore Festival." All these cultural actions acquire different dimensions due to the authenticity of the people have to it. Furthermore, the flexible nature of the space allows it to serve different purposes, respond to the needs of citizens of different ages and preferences, and result in open outcomes (Nikonanou, 2015, 75).

Cultural tourism, as one of the most dynamically growing sectors in the global tourism market, intensively utilizes the cultural and creative industries to promote tourist destinations. The promotion of tangible and intangible cultural elements and local particularities constitutes a key means for developing comparative advantages, enabling destinations to meet the demands of the global market (OECD, 2009). Leveraging tourism to promote culture contributes to the preservation of history, religion, and tradition. At the same time, the increasing demand for destinations with high cultural value enhances competitiveness in the tourism services sector. Culture can serve as a driving force for the development of local tourism and the creation of new economic activities. Religious tourism has deep roots in Greece's heritage, and in recent years, the Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTO) has focused efforts on "tourism development strategies and the general role of religious and cultural tourism in the recovery of the Greek tourism product" (GNTO, 2021). Furthermore, gastronomic tourism and wine tourism are additional avenues that residents can exploit with the support of cultural organizations.

As the monuments develop a wide scope for interaction with citizens, the communication policies managed by the individuals responsible for the site's operation will be crucial. The space should not address a single, specific group but rather implement activities targeting families, adults, seniors, children, and teenagers. Beyond creating an activated space, an organization managing the monument with such a broad, inclusive approach increases its likelihood of securing state and private funding/subsidies, as well as ensuring the overall success of its management (Nikonanou, 2015, 87).

Protecting Memory

It is crucial at this point to establish methods for protecting the monument's pre-existing memory, with children acting as both transmitters and receivers, thereby utilizing the site as a pedagogical object through targeted activities. These activities can employ

methods of direct communication, such as storytelling, Socratic questioning, dramatization, and exploration. The purpose of these actions is the emotional and intellectual interpretation of the monument and the creation of associations with the children's own lives. Additionally, free-form guidance aims at the communicative dimension of the monument itself, typically with the aid of visual materials (Nikonanou, 2015, 94). The institution responsible can play a crucial role in the relationship young people develop with culture, while the local government should adopt a dual role in supporting the acquisition of culturally relevant knowledge and encouraging creative occupation and expression. This approach facilitates a more immediate connection between young people and their cultural environment and simplifies the creation of engaging activities.

With the goals of extroversion and networking in mind, it is pertinent to identify potential collaborations that can further the cultural activation of these sites. Initially, contacts can be established through the school network, aiming to increase interaction among minors and promote general outreach to residents. Such contacts can prove invaluable, and the resulting cooperation can lead to long-term relationships and partnerships, twinning agreements exchanges and excursions. Furthermore, these collaborations will aid the broader relationship between the two countries, fostering contact between citizens and the "other". Beyond establishing these contacts for children, there will also be an opportunity to increase tourism as Limnos gains a familiar character among the Turkish population. Moreover, these contacts will facilitate the participation of schools in student exchange programs and activities associated with the UNESCO Associated Schools Network (ASPNet).

Beyond establishing contacts with organizations abroad, creating ties between cultural organizations established within the cities and the surrounding areas is a critically important incentive. Currently, local cultural associations, especially those situated in outlying villages, often lack contact and rarely cooperate with each other. The new spaces that will be created will serve as a common ground where a joint festival, created by all participating groups, can be planned and organized. This utility can also be extended to schools and parent-teacher associations, who frequently hold Christmas Bazaars to provide financial support to schools. Therefore, the new spaces created will not be confined to a single, specific role but will be a dynamic venue that continuously changes, transforming into whatever the community requires at a given moment. In addition to collaborations and programs carried out with various organizations, the Ephorate of Antiquities/ Ministry of Culture will gain dedicated venues that can be an opportunity to get closer to the communities, organizing lectures, announcements, and

archaeological activities.

Living around a monument

Through the collaboration between public monuments and residents, various activities can be created, such as guided routes through the historic city center that incorporate private homes and open-air monuments, as well as events inside the monuments or in their courtyards. With the initiative of the Ministry of Culture and the Ephorate of Antiquities, programs can be supported, either through technological means or through citizen volunteerism. In many European cities, there are municipal initiatives for programs where citizens voluntarily participate in walking tours of the city. Examples of highly successful programs include the "Free Plovdiv Tour" in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, the "Walkabout Free Tour" in Bucharest, Romania and the "Athens Free Tour" in Athens, Greece. These programs are initiatives of associations or private organizations and are conducted by citizen-volunteers without a fixed charge. Without entering museums or regulated archaeological sites, these citizens inform tourists about the cultural wealth of their city, while each volunteer adds their own personal touch and perspective.

Volunteerism will play a significant role in creating activities and events, drawing participation both from the residents and from EU-funded programs in which the center will participate. Examples of organizations that could collaborate with the Ministry of Culture and the Ephorate of Antiquities include the University of the Aegean and the ANEMOESSA Group (Group for the Protection of Environment and Architectural Heritage). These cultural centers will also be able to participate in programs focusing on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, such as those offered by Interreg and the European Youth Portal.

The results that will arise from the above endeavor are primarily social. Citizen action will contribute to the general strengthening of relationships as there will be daily interaction and cooperation. This cooperation will not be limited only to citizens of the city, but also to the citizens of the villages. Through the Ministry of Culture, a larger network will be created that will connect a small village, with a bigger city, with Turkey, and the rest of Europe, through volunteering and research programs. Furthermore, these spaces will contribute to a sense of social responsibility, collectivity, and common goals. The problem of the undesired memory of the ottoman monuments will also be positively influenced by the interaction of the

population and the actions that will take place in the area. A space that will be for everyone will also offer a lot to the tourist product and will have economic consequences for the community. Through the multipurpose space, local products, traditional manners and customs, and activities throughout the year can be promoted. These actions can also provide valuable opportunities for European funding of cultural interest.

As the necessary contribution of the residents has been analyzed in previous pages, it is appropriate to present some more social groups that will benefit from this effort. In the smaller towns, there are many residents with a limited duration of stay, who will be helped through activities where relationships will be created between them and the local population, and a closer emotional relationship with the villages is expected to be developed. Teachers, military personnel, doctors, and university students often spend a few years on isolated islands without necessarily bonding with either the place or the local population. Cultural activities and activated spaces can give these individuals an opportunity that may result in either their permanent presence on the island or their return for tourism.

Conclusion

Cooperation, synergy, and volunteerism will be the tools for creating relationships and a large network of organizations that will be interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The most important aspect of these actions will be the networking of citizens and the cooperation of cultural associations which will interact with each other through these centers. Together, through events, concerts, and music and dance festivals that take place throughout the year, there will be better and more harmonious cooperation. Furthermore, cultural associations will be able to contact the Ministry or the Ephorate with the aim of creating a network that can be established at a European level for the purpose of collective promotion. The speed of disseminating news also contributes to the activation of the monument.

The proposed model is something that can be implemented anywhere. There are many islands and villages facing problems of cultural inactivity, a fact that stems from deep social and political issues plaguing our countries, such as urbanization and the demographic problem. Meanwhile, citizens of large cities are strangers to their neighbors and their neighborhood. The success of such an effort is based exclusively on the activation of citizens, without whose participation they are doomed. Those actions can be the first step into fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry that values and protects its local heritage.

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How we preserve the spirit of youth while digging up walls

Pepa Peneva

Introduction

I am a happy person! And this is not just a cliché, but my personal realisation about what we achieved during the three years of the “Inherited Culture” project. It is not the result of a random meeting between young people and ancient stones. It is the outcome of a clear framework and a working methodology that transformed volunteer work into a tool for personal and civic development.

This chapter is dedicated to the “how”, how we managed to turn History into the present while working with 9 groups and over 130 young people in Ancient City Heraclea Sintica, Veliki Preslav, and Misionis, 3 archaeological sites in Bulgaria.

Our secret engine was the methodology that we regard as “A gate for development.”

Here you will find not dry theory, but the action plan for how we protect and nurture young people while we preserve their heritage.

I. The gate for development, or what Is the philosophy beyond the shovel

At first glance, the “Inherited Culture” project looks like a summer archaeological expedition. However, once you enter the kitchen of things, you realise it is a laboratory for non-formal learning, founded on the principles of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). At the heart of our methodology lies the understanding that volunteering in the field of heritage is not just “work,” but “cultural exploration.” Every minute spent with a pickaxe, a brush, or a GIS map in hand was not merely physical labour, but an answer to one fundamental question for young people: Why are we preserving this?

Why are we actually preserving it?

In a time of constant information overload and unstable identity, young people need roots. History, when experienced, contemplated, and understood, becomes that root—not a burden from the past but a source of stability. One of the main elements of our program was “Cultural awareness: presenting cultural heritage, exploring our roots, and building bridges between traditions and modernity.” That is exactly what we did!

When a young person touches polychrome ceramics from the 10th century in Veliki Preslav or steps on the Roman pavement in Heraclea Sintica, they are not just seeing an artefact. They are exploring our roots and realising they are part of a thousand-year-old civilisation.

On the other hand, heritage is a bridge between the past and the future. We preserve history to show that today's challenges have been experienced before. History gives us lessons about migration, conflict, governance, and engineering. Cultural heritage is not a museum display; it is a resource centre for the future. The volunteers realise that preserving a fortress today is directly connected to their sustainable future.

Heritage is also identity, and with that comes inclusion. It was extremely important for us to implement the principle of inclusion. Our sites in Bulgaria, especially Veliki Preslav and Targovishte, where the fortress Misionis is located, are areas of rich cultural mixing (Turkic, Slavic, Byzantine, Thracian roots). Our desire through the project was for young people to understand that “the Proto-Bulgarians were a Turkic-speaking people who founded the first Bulgarian state” and that cultural syncretism is part of our strength. We preserve it so that young people can self-determine as part of something grand and inclusive, far from the populist and radical narratives of today.

II. The Methodology in Action

The “Inherited Culture” volunteer project was structured as an intensive process of non-formal learning, which lasted 30 days for 3 groups and 45 days for 6 of the groups.

Our work was based on three main pillars that developed simultaneously, transforming young people from “tourists” into “ambassadors”:

The first pillar: intellectual and professional development (Hard Skills)

This was the work on the site. Every volunteer, whether a programmer or a philologist, went through:

- Practical Archaeology - fieldwork, mastering techniques for digging, brushing, and documentation.
- Mapping and digitalization - participation in GIS projects and contemporary documentation.
- Meetings with experts and daily conversations and joint work with archaeologists and historians at the sites.

The second pillar: social and emotional development (Soft Skills)

This happened after the excavations, at the accommodation bases, or during trips and relaxation on weekends.

- Shared living - in some locations 8, 16, or 20–24 people from at least 4 different countries living together. This is the best school for tolerance, communication, and conflict resolution. (We shared heat, fatigue, food disorders and viruses, infatuations, failures in the kitchen, and stories about democracy and corruption...)
- Household management - Who will cook? Who will clean? Who will manage the budget? This gave the young people the opportunity to develop leadership and management skills, teamwork and cooperation in real time, which they themselves realised they needed to upgrade.

The Third Pillar: Human and Value Development (Self-Determination)

This was the most important part - the transformation.

- Self-Awareness: Through reflection and discussions about history (How did we get inspired? Why does history interest us?), the young people built a connection between the past and their personal future. We talked about democracy, the current economic state, and the political situation in European countries, and the fact that we were people from so many different places allowed us to check not only the information the media had presented to us but also our own stereotypes and prejudices.

I will elaborate a bit more on the specific tools of the methodology, as they are important and are prerequisites for the success of such camps.

1/. Participant selection: Our project partners and the <https://youth.europa.eu> platform played a key role. So did the analysis of stakeholders interested in cultural heritage and youth work: universities, cultural institutes, and museums, through which we could reach young people keen on participating in excavations.

2/. Pre-departure preparatory sessions: To clarify expectations, prepare for project tasks, and identify how young people could be included according to their talents and skills.

3/. Arrival training and final evaluation:

- Arrival: introducing the cultural environment and establishing group culture and rules for co-living and working (team building).
- Final Evaluation: conducted with all 9 groups to measure the change. This is where their needs emerged: gamification, digitalization, leadership—this is the voice of the youth that we heard and which directs us toward future projects.

4/. The volunteer's journal (reflection journal):

Every volunteer was encouraged to keep a journal where they recorded not only what they were digging, but also how they felt, what they learned about themselves, and how their attitude toward heritage had changed. Reflection transforms the experience into lasting knowledge.

5/. Experimental archaeology and reenactment:

As we saw from the article about Antas, the best way to learn something is to do it yourself. In Veliki Preslav and Heraclea Sintica, the volunteers were included in experimental activities, which made history “engaging, real, and tangible.”

6/. Free Time Activities:

Planning free time in the evenings and on weekends started during the arrival training. For many of today's young people, being offline and socialising with so many people face-to-face can

sometimes be stressful. A good starting point is cultural evenings, where they present their countries, the place where they live, and something favourite and important to themselves. After that, common interests, hobbies, and learning from each other gradually emerge, and we reach a point where they start sharing universities, job opportunities, and fun activities.

III. The Result: Ambassadors with History in their hands

(as one participant said)

My personal story, which began as a small “young guide” in Veliki Preslav, is proof of the power of this methodology. I find a way to inspire other people to think, to be interested, and to reflect on history. I find a way to contribute to the region with centuries of history coming alive. But the greatest triumph is that I turned young people from other countries into ambassadors for 3 locations in Bulgaria outside the capital Sofia.

The statistics speak more eloquently than any theory:

Success indicator	Results for 3 Years, 9 Rotations	Significance for Self-Determination
Geographical scope	135 young people from 14 countries	Broad European citizenship, cultural intimacy
Lasting commitment	7 returned as assistants/leaders	Development of leadership skills, awareness of self-worth.
Long-Term Volunteering	Over 10 requested, 4 returned for a long-term projects	Lasting self-determination, linking personal future to a cause.
Training needs	They request Gamification, Digitalization, Leadership, preventing Radicalization with History lessons...	Realized need for upgrading competencies for active citizenship.

The story of the programmer girl who came with a different mission and ultimately wished to dig from 5:30 AM under the August sun is a symbol of this transformation. She is the best example of how a young person who has been listened to and heard voluntarily chooses the path of physical labour and cultural exploration to find their own story.

The methodology “Volunteering as a gate for development,” applied in the field of cultural heritage, does exactly this: it provides the foundation for young people to stand on so they can grow their wings in the future.

Let us not stop listening! You are invited to share your 2, 5, or... strategies! But more importantly, let's implement them!

Games

History can be exciting and interactive! And in our work over the past three years we have proven it.

We worked together with the young people, participants in the project "Inherited Culture". We invested their energy, personal experience and creativity to create something special. The result? A series of games that bring history lessons from dusty textbooks to the dynamic world of today's young people.

Our goal was to create products that are not just educational, but truly interesting and engaging for today's teenagers.

After a successful pilot in Bulgaria, we are very pleased to present them to you! It's time to turn the study of heritage into a real adventure!

A boarding game "Digit" Rediscover History in the "Living classroom"

The team working on it (all of them are volunteers from the project "Inherited culture"):
Rūta Zemīte (idea, team leader), Isabel Galindo (general elements for the design), Ivanna Uzounov (design for the volunteer cards), Roos van Deursen (design for the board), Kate Argyropoulou (author of the game's name), Maria Mora (concept idea), Reyes Jiménez Jiménez (concept idea), Pau Prats (concept idea), Elli Kalamida (concept idea), Ruben Vazquez (concept idea), Juanvi Martinez (concept idea), Anelia Gospodinova (concept idea), Milo Emma Katelyn Pilgrim (ideas for questions), Kristaps Freibergs (ideas for questions), Yolanda Quiñones Rodríguez (ideas for questions), Verónica González Mellado (ideas for questions), Julian Olmos (ideas for questions)

In an era where young people seek active and engaging learning, the board game "Dig It" offers the ideal bridge between theoretical knowledge and exciting practical archaeology. This game transforms the learning process into a race against time and, simultaneously, an exercise in cooperation.

Game concept

You are leading archaeologists struggling with the approaching deadline for publishing a scientific paper about your latest excavation. You have only 25 minutes (measured by an hourglass) to complete your dig and prepare the report.

"Dig It" balances cooperation and individual ambition:

- Cooperation: Players must donate Volunteer cards to the excavation site they are participating in (The Excavation). The accumulated total number of volunteers determines how many archaeologists will be cited as authors in the scientific paper. If not enough volunteers are gathered, everyone loses!
- Individual ambition: To earn the right to be cited, you must collect Artefact cards. Ultimately, only those with the largest collections of artefacts will become famous authors.

The game is designed for 3 to 8 players and contains 120 Volunteer cards, 100 Artefact cards, 48 Special Find cards, an Hourglass (25 minutes), and the Archaeologist figure, which determines where actions are performed on the field.

"Dig It" in History class could be Your Gamification Tool

The structure of "Dig It" makes it ideal for use in an educational environment, following the principles of gamification and experiential learning discussed in modern pedagogy.

The game provides:

- Teamwork under pressure: Students learn to manage time and resources (Volunteers) together while pursuing their personal goals (Artefacts).
- Decision making: Players must decide when to donate Volunteers (for the common victory) and when to collect Artefacts (for personal glory), reflecting the real-life challenges of scientific work.

Educational kit: Personalization for every lesson/unit

For the needs of educators, the "Dig It" game is offered in a special Educational kit which includes blank "Special Find" cards.

- Classroom application: The teacher can prepare questions related to specific study material to be drawn when landing on a "Special Find" tile.
- Review and testing: After the completion of each unit (e.g., "Ancient Greece," "The Second Bulgarian Empire," etc.), the game transforms into an exciting and fun review and preparation for a test. The correct answer to the question can be a condition for receiving a bonus Artefact or Volunteer.

With "Dig It," history steps out of the textbook pages and becomes a dynamic, competitive, and memorable experience that encourages critical thinking and a passion for the past.

Order your copy of the game at:
info@openspacebg.com



The “Legacy Hint” App: History is your next treasure

The team working on it:

Pepa Peneva, Lia Dimitrova, Krum Dobranov, Mia Kanarieva, Anelia Gospodinova, Vasil Vasilev

In a world that values mobility and immediate engagement, “Legacy Hint” emerges as an innovative mobile application created with the ambition to transform history and historical sites into a fun and interactive experience. We bridge the gap between passive sightseeing and active discovery through the power of gamification.

Concept: the “Treasure Hunt” can hold high Historical value

The “Legacy Hint” application allows for the uploading of online “Treasure Hunt” games that not only test users’ knowledge but also enrich them with new and unexpected historical facts. Our main goal is to provoke interest in objects important to a given city or location and to encourage users to physically visit them, revealing details that would otherwise go unnoticed.

We believe that free and engaging content is the key to making history accessible, especially for young people. The greatest advantage is that once created, the games are permanently available to visitors of the museum or historical site and can be used independently, without the need for an operator or specialized personnel.

What are the functionalities of our digital adventure?

“Legacy Hint” transforms a casual walk into a dynamic mission, combining diverse tasks that require both intellect and physical presence:

- Information quiz - Question and selection from possible answers;
- Visual solving - Assembling a puzzle related to an artefact or object;
- Physical search - Finding a location via GPS coordinates;
- Photo proof - A photo that must be taken of a specific detail/place;
- Extended learning - Scanning a QR code for additional information, followed by a question

Competition and community

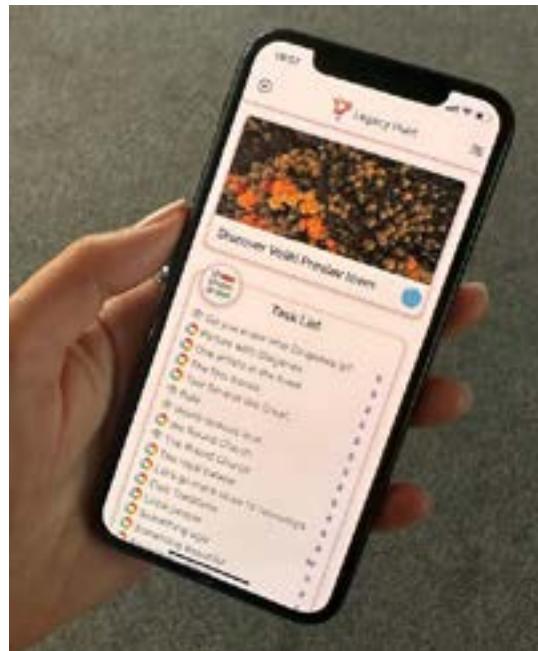
The application is designed to sustain a healthy competitive spirit, but also a community:

- Rewards and Ranking: a reward is given for every solved task, and users are ranked according to accumulated points and play time (personal time is tracked).
- Format: each game can be played in an individual or team format.
- Competitive mode: it is possible to create a competition where players/teams can monitor the progress of their opponents in real-time (by time and points).

“Legacy Hint” for everyone

The application has enormous potential for use by a wide range of users:

- Families and tourists for fun time spent during tourist visits, where results can be compared with those of other users who played before them.
- Education and business, or for groups of students or companies/employees as an innovative team building exercise that perfectly combines fun, teamwork, and educational elements.



There is nothing more wonderful than to....

(one volunteer share)

Kosara Kostova

There is nothing more wonderful than putting your knowledge into practice. And it is even more wonderful when you can share and improve this knowledge, not with just anyone, but with fresh young people, in whose eyes the same flame for growth burns!

I am Kosara Kostova, a young graduate of the humanitarian high school in the city of Kazanlak. Ever since I was six or seven years old, my dream was to become a paleontologist! Yes, can you imagine, as you walk around Kazanlak, meeting me digging for dinosaur bones! Well, so do I. Over time, this dream turned 180° in the direction of archaeology! I remember how as a child, in front of the apartment building, a friend and I played by cleaning stones from the sand. Haha, the interesting thing was that we did it with brushes and were even equipped with protective masks! As I got older, I started to like history a lot, but definitely not the politics section!!

This year my mother learned that the ancient city of Heraclea Sintica, near Petrich, was looking for volunteers to help with the excavation of the western necropolis of the ancient settlement. We were informed by Prof. Dr. Lyudmil Vagalinski about the Open Space Foundation program, to which volunteers could apply. So, with a lot of courage, hard work and effort, since I had never had to write an autobiography before, even in English, I was approved to participate!

And now comes the interesting part! Students of archaeology, history, economics, political science, and even astrophysics, from all over the world, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting! For more than a month, with this group of 16 people, my horizons have expanded dramatically! To be honest, I've never been away from home for so long, and it made me more independent! At first, I was wondering how the excavations and our life together would go, but later we got along well! We had fun with the Spaniards, they were the life and soul of the company. With a very well-read boy - a Kurd by ethnicity, anyone could argue until dawn, whether it was about the political situation in the world, or how a mosquito's brain works! With

Nasko - a wonderful boy from Bulgaria, we always prepared something delicious to eat, although the Spaniards liked lyutenitsa more (the Bulgarian version of ketchup, but much tastier).

And my roommate and I always tried to live cleanly. However, when it came to training, I was only able to find a common language with two people! We always spent our weekends in a different place in our homeland, or most often, in our colorful neighbors Greece and Macedonia. We still had time to go to Albania for dinner! However, at first I was quite skeptical, I didn't think it was possible, or at least not to such an extent, that people who smoke and drink could be so smart! This was actually one of my partially eradicated stereotypes! So, Friday barbecues, barefoot ball games on the grass, jumping into Lake Ohrid or just deep conversations!

You can learn from everyone, and the best lessons the group provided me are the following:

Patience, how to listen to the other person, his point of view, no matter how annoying it was sometimes, but it seems - necessary! Real fun, not sitting at a table with a phone in hand. Dancing and smiling with people in front of whom I didn't have to choose my words or clothes! Just pure friendship!

The work! It's time to get down to earth, as they say! Archaeology for me during this month was getting up at dawn (at 5:20 in the morning), and digging, but really digging!! Pickaxes, shovels, hoes, trowels, pitchforks, and even mini spatulas were always in my hands! On the one hand, I tempered my body, and on the other, my patience, because, dear readers, don't think that digging up bones is so easy!

No, first they need to be carefully cleaned, like any other object, with the exception of individual fragments, then they need to be prepared for a photo, photographed, and only then taken out! And if you break something during this process, don't worry, after the excavation you will play a puzzle - you will put it together with paper tape in about 30 minutes. This definitely teaches you patience! Not to mention the hundreds of pine cones removed from the graves! Seed by seed, hop, in a bag! What about the heat?! Petrich is a warm place! But it's good that there was always someone around me to help me, like the archaeologists. I met great support from them and we will definitely keep in touch in the future! And yes, it was difficult, but only through difficulties does one improve!

How will this experience help me in the future? I would boldly say that the most

significant help for my career development in years that I have ever received was provided to me by the Open Space Foundation! My friendship with so many people, some of them students at European universities, will one day grow into an international network, where everyone will contribute their knowledge! Who knows, we might become a team in the next 15 years! And the fact that I had to speak and think in English 24/7 will definitely help me become more fluent in the language!

As a final note, I felt sad just thinking about parting ways with the people we became family with! That's why I'm thinking of visiting them again very soon!



Picture: personal archive of Kosara Kostova

With dust in the shoes, but with History in the hands

(one young lady inspired to be volunteer)

Victoria Mileva

Before that summer day, history felt so far away. I would memorize an important date about the rise of Alexander the Great.

I did not feel the weight of our nation's fate,

I did not sense the words that laid in the history guide until I felt them inside.

I held history itself in my hands and felt it in my glands, imagining my ancestors walking on these lands. I could steal a glimpse of life from another year; I could hear the old bells' echoes in my ear like those days were still near.

I painted pictures in my head, imagining the lives once lived with every step I tread.

I saw the hands that made the clay I am holding now, never knowing that their work would rest within my hands somehow. My shoes are filled with dust from roads I did not know I would walk; my heart is beating words engraved with chalk,

like shadows dancing in rhythm, defying the clock.

My visit was supposed to be short, just dip my toes in the dust, but the soil began to whisper mysteries and to follow them I must, the thrill of every buried story I longed to retrieve made it impossible to leave.

We came to uncover the past, but with each sunrise, with each night that passed, we unleashed parts of ourselves once sitting in silence on forgotten shelves.

The day we met was the greatest find of all,

in a world filled with blindness, we saw each other's soul. And if to be loved is to be known, then in your hearts I found my own.

Epilogue: Heritage is not the past; it is the future.

Listening to the voices of change

Pepa Peneva

I am a happy person!

This is the sentence that begins my narrative, and it is no coincidence. It is the culmination of my work over the past 3 years, which is also my personal mission, presented on the pages of "The History Hackers' Handbook: 10 Strategies for Making the Past Present."

If, until now, this book has introduced you to the world of experimental archaeology, gamification, critical thinking, and the rewriting of historical narratives, then this final narrative is about the Human element in this whole formula. Because history is not a pile of stones or dusty parchments - it is a living, breathing experience that happens between people.

The obligation to listen

The "Inherited Culture" project started as an idea to support excavations in Veliki Preslav but turned into a true laboratory for building European citizens. We welcomed 130 young people from 14 countries - each one a different culture, and each one a different perspective - gathered in our common "home" near Heraclea Sintica, Veliki Preslav, and Missionis.

Over the course of 45 days, we lived together, sharing heat, exhaustion, kitchen failures, falling in and out of love, and stories of democracy and corruption... We were creating our own history. My greatest pleasure was being alongside these young people, leading them in the training sessions, and most importantly - listening to them.

Here is the key that this book wants to convey to you: our efforts were not just about being with the young people, but about hearing them. To provoke them on various topics and to see the desire and curiosity awakening in their eyes and minds to know more and more, to develop, to be capable.

The Ambassadors of Heritage is my personal triumph

I call myself an Ambassador of Heritage, not because I am a historian, but because I

managed to sow the seed of curiosity.

“The History Hackers’ Handbook” compiles the insights of people who show how to use history as a tool for critical thinking and leadership. The young people we welcomed proved this with their actions:

- 7 returned to be assistants and small team leaders—they were changed by the experience and wanted to pass it forward.
- At the end, they clearly stated that they needed to upgrade their skills: they wanted training in Gamification and Digitalization (to convey knowledge in a modern way), How to prevent Radicalization and Populist narratives using History lessons (to use history as a shield against manipulation), and Leadership and Management skills (to lead the change).
- Quite a few of them wished to, and 4 returned to Bulgaria for long-term volunteering, while others joined projects with other organizations.

This is the power of the ESC (European Solidarity Corps) program and the power of our collective effort - you transform a programmer into a person who gladly greets the morning at an excavation site, with “dust in their shoes, but history in their hands.” You transform young people from passive consumers of culture into its active creators and defenders.

Why is this book yours?

My personal story, which began as a small “junior tour guide” in Preslav decades ago, is living proof that the connection forged with heritage does not fade—it leads to unexpected effects in the future. I find ways to inspire other people to think and reflect on history, revitalizing a region with centuries of history and attracting young people who would never have thought to visit a “town in the middle of nowhere, in the backyard of Europe.”

This book is the culmination of all these efforts. It is a roadmap for every teacher, museum worker, NGO, or parent who believes that cultural heritage is not just a burden from the past, but the most powerful tool we have for building an engaged and critically thinking future.

“The History Hackers’ Handbook” is your invitation to transform history from forgotten facts into an active force.

Now that you know why, all that remains is to start. It’s time to hack history!

ABOUT the AUTHORS:

Misch Watson - half German, half British. Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (UK), Universiteit van Amsterdam, UWTSD. He is the author of the piece "Archaeology as a Living Classroom: Lessons from Heraclea Sintica, Bulgaria," and as a native speaker also our editor. Cosmopolitan man, traveler, explorer. His work focuses on connecting youth with history, arguing that it should be presented as a "living, breathing" context to answer questions like: "How does this relate to me today?" and "What was it like to be there?". He describes a deep, childhood fascination with heritage and history, growing up in the rural Cambrian mountains of Mid Wales and engaging with the landscape through digging, which he believes "must have stirred a buried link to the land."

Antonio Milán Olivares is from Almería, Spain. He's been working as an agriculture laborer as far as he can remember. For himself he said: "When they told me in Archaeology I could use a pickaxe, I just asked where I had to sign. I don't know how I ended up with a degree in History and a Master in Archaeology."

Adrián Molada Miguel is from Valencia, Spain. He works as an Archaeologist and History teacher. Was a part of Volunteering team season 2024 in Veliki Preslav, and 2025 return back in Bulgaria to work in Open Space Foundation as a team leader for a volunteering team in Heraclea Sintica. "I am passionate about rock and rap music. You'll find me doing sport on a daily basis."

Yigit Mustafa Baldan is from Turkey and describe yourself as "a history enthusiast who works in a museum, and an amateur archivist who loves preserving stories and pieces of the past. I also have a deep love for forests, and I'm really curious about psychology, especially what shapes the way people feel, think, and connect."

Ömer Seyfettin Albay is a student in the Archaeology Department at Bursa Uludağ University. He is interested in cultural heritage and have volunteered in many projects related to this field (the Iznik Underwater Basilica, Apollonia ad Rhydacum, Veliki Preslav Palace, Patara Ancient City, Termessos Ancient City, and workshops aimed at increasing interest in the ancient period), and

she continues to participate in some of these projects. "I wish to work on the preservation, exhibition, and understanding of cultural heritage. I want to work on the preservation and exhibition of our cultural heritage, not only that found on land but also that found underwater. In the future, as an archaeologist, I will actively fight for the preservation of world heritage."

Yağmur Engin studying Archaeology at Bursa Uludağ University in Turkey. "Thanks to the Open Space Foundation, my first experience was at the Veliki Preslav Palace excavation in Bulgaria, and I subsequently participated in excavations at the ancient cities of Patara and Termessos in Turkey. I volunteered at the municipality, conducting workshops aimed at developing cultural heritage awareness among children and adults. I applied historical/archaeological ideas that could be used in workshops and would engage people's interest both theoretically and practically. Currently, I am conducting theoretical studies individually and applying them practically in various events. In my academic development, I aspire to work in a multidisciplinary manner as an academic and contribute to making the world of archaeology and global cultural heritage accessible to a wider audience."

Juan Jesús Pedregosa Pareja, is from Granada, Spain, born 1995. PhD student interested in Ancient and Early Medieval History and the reception of history in our contemporary world and former tour guide in my home city. "My passion for history started as a child watching my elder brother play Age of Empires in his computer and both history and videogames have been part of my life ever since. My experience as a tour guide taught me how big the gap between academic and popular perceptions of history may be and how difficult it is to find the right balance to present information in an interesting yet accurate way."

Sebastián Clavijo-Villalba, from Bogotá, Colombia. Born 1999, currently lives in Spain. Philosopher and volunteer. "I celebrate human culture in all its forms."

Argyropoulou Kate, Katerina (Kate) Argyropoulou is a Greek archaeologist based in Athens, specializing in the field of Cultural Heritage Management. She completed her undergraduate studies in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management at the University of Peloponnese. She subsequently earned her Masters degree from the National and Kapodistrian University

of Athens, specializing in Monumental Management. Her postgraduate research focuses on the complex intersection of difficult heritage, national identity formation, and collective trauma. Specifically, her Masters thesis investigates the controversial reception and management of monuments intrinsically linked to problematic historical memories. Ms. Argyropoulou is currently employed as an archaeologist within the Greek Ministry of Culture, where her professional work informs the preservation and interpretation of Greece's monumental and historical sites.

Pepa Veleva, is the co-founder of OPEN SPACE Foundation (Bulgaria) and the driving force behind its mission. She is a psychologist by education and a youth worker at heart by calling. She is a person who loves to challenge herself with new and unfamiliar activities and places. For Pepa, working with young people is a constant source of inspiration: "Young people constantly challenge me: to develop, to learn, to be the better version of myself." Her work is dedicated to passing this drive for development and progress on to others.

Kosara Kostova is from Kazanluk, Bulgaria. She is an inspiring example of a young person from Kazanlak who turns her interest in history into a practical experience. As a participant in the excavations of the ancient city of Heraclea Sintica (near Rupite, Petrich), Kosara is part of the team that contributes to transforming the archaeological site into a "living classroom". She trains in climbing, where she puts energy, thought and emotions. However, archaeology is still her passion and dream for professional development. Participates in the volunteer team of the Ancient City of Heraclea Sintica near Petrich, season 2025

Victoria Mileva soon will be a programmer. She loves meeting new people, as well as helping homeless people and animals. She is interested in personal style and vision in everything, and is terribly excited about the overconsumption of clothes and belongings today. She arrived at the camp in Veliki Preslav (summer 2025) to interview volunteers and plan how the website and mobile application would look. There, however, the dust and spirit of the past took over her and she bravely exchanged her office desk for a pickaxe and a shovel. Her words are: "With dust in her shoes, but with history in her hands" and a lot of love for the people with whom she lived for 45 days in the old capital of Bulgaria.

Producer:



With a support of European program "European Solidarity Corps" project in High Priority Areas



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

1-st edition, 2025

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