

Public Archaeology in Marginal Contexts: The Case of Sant'Angelo in Vado (Italy)

E. Stortoni and E. Bevilacqua

Abstract—The team from the University of Macerata reflects on the utilization of cultural heritage and archaeology in a modest territorial context, focusing on a small ancient site that has undergone stratigraphic excavation for over twenty years. This work aims to foster the development of local identity and collective knowledge. The study highlights the numerous public archaeology initiatives undertaken over the past three years, despite the challenges posed by the global pandemic. These initiatives include site visits, public meetings and debates, storytelling, and artistic performances, all designed to engage and raise awareness among citizens. The goal is to illustrate that not only prominent archaeological sites, but also smaller, marginal contexts can contribute significantly to the understanding and appreciation of community identity, archaeological heritage, and the promotion of sustainable tourism.

Index Terms—cultural heritage, marginal context, public archaeology, third mission.

I. INTRODUCTION (E.S.)

The concept of the archaeologist as a "transmitter of culture" has been the subject of extensive and recent scholarly inquiry, referring to a professional capable of communicating cultural and archaeological heritage in both innovative and accessible ways, intertwining various disciplines. Archaeology is not merely the transfer of knowledge; rather, it is a process that actively engages the public, promoting a sense of belonging and identity; in a rapidly changing social context, cultural heritage becomes essential in reinforcing civic and social dimensions [1].

In recent years, best practices in archaeological communication and education have developed, where professionals and scholars directly engage the public, not only to convey research findings but also to teach archaeological methods. Among these practices are workshops, musealization of excavations, experimental archaeology, historical reconstructions, and virtual archaeology education. These experiences have been successful, demonstrating the public's interest in antiquity and the increasing awareness among archaeologists of the effectiveness of direct interaction with the audience. Enhancing cultural heritage means creating value from a social perspective, making it accessible to the

community. Cultural heritage should be managed as a resource for the well-being and sustainable development of society; promoting a participatory, shared, and democratic process of valorization helps increase the community's perception of the value and utility of cultural assets. Public archaeology, in addition to contributing to the enjoyment and dissemination of knowledge, must also respond to the need for the active involvement of local communities and citizens, as underscored by the Faro Convention of 2005 [2], [3]. The inclusion of the community extends beyond public archaeology, becoming genuine research when citizens are engaged in citizen science, particularly through the collection of data from oral sources that document archaeological discoveries, ancient roadways and memory of places, allowing the researcher to integrate the data collected in the present using archaeological research methodologies [4]. The goal of public archaeology should thus be to establish an open dialogue between professionals who, as part of their work, reconstruct and narrate the history of a place, and the locals who, in some way, are its witnesses, heirs, and owners. The approach of public archaeology, which combines inclusion, enjoyment, education and discovery, contributes to the promotion and protection of heritage through sustainable tourism, as exemplified by the work of archaeologists from the University of Macerata in the area of *Tifernum Mataurense* [5], [6].

II. PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY IN MARGINAL CONTEXTS (E.B)

Italy is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, which encompasses museums, architectural monuments, archaeological sites, monumental centers, and cultural landscapes. Two-thirds of Italy's territory is characterized by a spatial configuration centered around "minor centers," often located in mountainous or peri-mountainous areas (the Alpine and Apennine regions), where municipalities face significant disadvantages in accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, and mobility when compared to larger urban centers. Collectively, these areas constitute Italy's inland regions, which play a crucial role in maintaining the overall stability of the territory, particularly in terms of hydrogeological balance, landscape preservation, and cultural identity. The gradual depopulation of these regions has substantially heightened their vulnerability, due to a chronic lack of maintenance, leading to the progressive degradation and abandonment of both residential and cultural heritage assets. At the national level, the discussion on territorial and social disparities culminated in the adoption of the "National Strategy for Internal Areas" (SNAI, in Italian *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne*) in 2013, for the 2014–2020 period, later extended

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E. Stortoni is research fellow of Classical Archeology, Department of education sciences, cultural heritage and tourism, University of Macerata, Macerata 62100 Italy

E. Bevilacqua is PhD student of Classical Archeology, Department of education sciences, cultural heritage and tourism, University of Macerata, Macerata 62100 Italy

to 2021–2027 as part of European cohesion policies. A distinctive feature of the SNAI is its innovative approach, embodied in the principle of being "not space-neutral, but place-based and highly contingent on context." This paradigm emphasizes the recognition and enhancement of local specificities and identities, grounded in the understanding that the inherent diversity of territorial contexts necessitates flexible, modular organizational frameworks and context-sensitive solutions [7]. In terms of Italian cultural heritage, according to the 2022 ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) survey, *Indagine sui musei e le istituzioni similari* (2023), the country is home to 4,416 museum-like exhibition structures, 65.2% of which are located in municipalities with populations below 30,000, including 31.7% in small towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. Among these, 298 archaeological sites open to the public account for 6.7% of all museum-like exhibition structures. This distribution reflects a broad presence across the territory, extending into peripheral areas characterized by geographic, socio-economic, and infrastructural challenges; notably, 39.4% of these structures are situated in inland areas [8]. As is common in many other international contexts, these areas are often geographically distant from major tourist flows, which tend to be concentrated in large art cities or coastal destinations; as a result, several critical issues arise, particularly in relation to accessibility and tourism. This geographical isolation leads to reduced visibility and a lack of tourists, thereby limiting the economic opportunities that could stem from the enhancement of cultural heritage. Moreover, transportation infrastructure is frequently inadequate or underdeveloped, making it difficult for visitors to access these regions and contributing to their further marginalization. Another concern is that, in some cases, the valorization of heritage in marginalized areas can lead to the standardization of local traditions. This phenomenon occurs when traditions, crafts, and cultural practices are reduced to mere forms of tourist consumption, thus losing their authenticity and significance. On the other hand, Italy's inland areas are often rich in natural heritage, including parks, nature reserves, and rural landscapes, all of which must be managed in ways that prevent environmental degradation. Striking a balance between promoting tourism and preserving the natural landscape presents a significant challenge [9]. Even in natural settings, over-tourism can diminish the aesthetic value of these areas and damage natural resources, which are often closely linked to the cultural heritage of local communities [10]. The challenges confronting the internal areas of central Italy have been further exacerbated by the seismic events of 2016, which caused significant damage to cultural heritage, with repercussions still markedly evident today. Public archaeology in marginal contexts encounters numerous obstacles that hinder the preservation and sustainable promotion of cultural heritage. A major challenge is the limited economic capacity, which constrains the funding available for archaeological projects. Local communities often exhibit limited awareness or appreciation of their archaeological heritage, frequently due to insufficient education about cultural heritage and the lack of tangible connections between the past and present in their daily lives. Moreover, socio-economic difficulties, population migration, and lack of local pride in heritage often result in

apathy or resistance toward archaeological initiatives. In many cases, marginal areas - particularly those with poorly developed infrastructure - prioritize economic development over heritage conservation, further complicating efforts to preserve and promote cultural assets.

III. THE CASE OF SANT'ANGELO IN VADO (ITALY) (E.S.)



1. Sant'Angelo in Vado: aerial photo of the city and inside the "Domus del Mito" during the "Serata-evento tra scienza e arte" (Florio 2023).

A. Current context

One example of marginal context is Sant'Angelo in Vado (Fig. 1), a small town in the province of Pesaro-Urbino in the Marche region, situated in an inner area between the upper Metauro Valley and the central Italian Apennine range, that exemplifies a context with a rich archaeological heritage complemented by an extensive array of historical, artistic, environmental, and gastronomic attractions (Pesaro-Urbino, Marche, Italy; GPS Coordinates: Lat. 43.666392, Long. 12.416167; IGM F. 115, I NE). The town is notable as the birthplace of distinguished Italian artists, including the Zuccari brothers. Among its cultural assets are significant landmarks such as castles, feudal churches, and prominent structures like the *Palazzo della Ragione* and the Church of *Santa Maria Extra Muros*. This artistic and archaeological heritage is situated within the picturesque natural environment of the Massa Trabaria plateau, near the Metauro River and the Apennine crossings. The area features pristine landscapes, waterfalls such as the Cascata del Sasso, woodland trails and scenic routes that are particularly appealing for activities such as cycling, motorcycling, and caravanning; additionally, the town hosts notable events, including the annual International Motorcycle Rally. Sant'Angelo in Vado is also widely recognized for its esteemed white truffle (*Tuber Magnatum Pico*), celebrated during the annual National Truffle Fair. Other regional highlights include the production of the sweet wine Santangiolino and the farming of Chianina cattle, renowned for their premium-quality meat. Despite its rich cultural and natural resources, the town faces significant challenges in fully capitalizing on its potential. The local economy, historically oriented toward industries such as textiles and ceramics, has experienced a marked decline following the economic crisis of 2008; currently, the region struggles to implement a cohesive and forward-looking strategy to unify its scattered initiatives, which remain predominantly focused on the gastronomic sector.

B. Historic-archaeological context

For the past twenty-four years the University of Macerata has been conducting continuous historical and archaeological research at *Tifernum Mataurense* in Sant'Angelo in Vado. This work, carried out in collaboration with the Superintendence for Archaeological Heritage of the Marche Region and other local authorities, includes periodic area surveys and annual excavations; these activities aim to rediscover the history of this Roman municipality, situated between the upper Metauro Valley and the central Italian Apennine range, near the ancient *Via Flaminia*. Scholars believe that the ancient center underwent a protohistoric phase before achieving the status of municipium during the Social War (90–89 B.C.). During the late Republican and Augustan periods, the site saw early urbanization, followed by monumentalization under Hadrian and the Antonines. After a brief resurgence during the Constantinian era, the area became increasingly ruralized and was largely abandoned by the mid-6th century A.D. The ancient site's road network was strategically connected in three directions: eastward toward *Pitinum Mergens* and the *Via Flaminia*, southward to *Tifernum Tiberinum*, and westward to *Sestinum*. The ancient urban area spans from the current "*Campo della Pieve*" to "*Loc. Colombaro*" (Detailed cadastral references are available in the Land Register of the Municipality of Sant'Angelo in Vado, record 1295, page 47, parcels 106, 408, 410, 914). Historical records highlight extensive orthogonally arranged roads, advanced infrastructure systems, and notable private residences. Among these are the so-called "*Domus di N-O*" and the "*Domus del Mito*", featuring exquisite polychrome mosaic decorations. Significant sections of the *thermae* have been preserved, although many were damaged by modern interventions. Surviving elements include a cold room adorned with a polychrome marine mosaic, parts of the *calidarium* system with its *hypocaustum* and *praeefurnium*, as well as remnants of the *natatio* [11].

C. Overview of public archaeology strategies until 2021

Before the arrival of archaeologists from the University of Macerata and the initiation of systematic annual excavation campaigns, the local community demonstrated a general indifference toward its rich archaeological heritage. This heritage was not perceived as an added value, i.e. capital, for the social and economic development of the town. In line with contemporary theories of public archaeology, the University of Macerata, starting in the early 21st century, implemented a cultural policy aimed at fostering community archaeology alongside traditional fieldwork. One of the initial efforts in this direction was the "*La giornata con l'archeologo*" ("Day with the Archaeologist"), launched in the summer of 2002. This initiative achieved moderate success, attracting twenty participants from across the province over a single week; the event also received coverage on local television. Building on this experience, the "*La settimana con l'archeologo*" ("Week with the Archaeologist") was introduced in 2003. This project retained similar objectives, participants, logistics, and methods but expanded to a national scale. It offered participants the opportunity to engage for up to five days, with a maximum of ten individuals per week over five consecutive weeks. The initiative garnered significant public interest, enrolling fifty

participants, with an additional twenty applications that could not be accommodated due to logistical and organizational constraints. Furthermore, the organizing office received over a hundred inquiries from across Italy. In 2011, two experiential and educational exhibition spaces, dedicated to textile production and *opus tessellatum*, were added to the small archaeological museum established by the municipality in collaboration with Superintendence. That same year, a proposal for the redevelopment and reorganization of the archaeological area was implemented [12]. Although these initiatives were appreciated, they ultimately failed to generate significant impact within the local community. The severe economic crisis of 2008 and the resulting socio-economic shifts underscored the urgent need for new strategies of development and civil coexistence, with a stronger emphasis on cultural heritage. This context necessitated the adoption of a novel approach: a "complexity archaeology" capable of integrating diverse fields of knowledge as a "driver of development" and a vehicle for innovation, leveraging research to benefit the local economy and tourism. Beginning in 2015, an innovative strategy of interventions and initiatives was implemented, centered around the annual excavation campaigns and organized as a series of events titled "*Vado per la città antica*" ("I go through the ancient city"). These initiatives actively involved colleagues (notably M. Brunelli), collaborators, and students, who participated in the organization and execution of the events. This approach transformed students into both active participants and informed learners, equipping them with insights not only into the intricate "world" of excavation but also into the multifaceted processes of managing and promoting cultural heritage. The content of these events was rigorously scientific, grounded in research findings, yet updated and made accessible. The language employed was carefully crafted to elucidate without neglecting scholarly technical terminology, to evoke without trivializing the dimensions of the subject, and to spark curiosity while fostering enjoyment. The content, development, and outcomes of this new vision were documented in a volume to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the excavations [13]. Over time, the dynamism and pervasiveness of this archaeological approach gradually fostered within the community a shared identity around its ancient heritage. This slow yet steady evolution became paradoxically more apparent during the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic; amid the public health emergency, public archaeology demonstrated its capacity to act as a true "transmitter of culture," showcasing its educational, identity-building, and sustainable development potential for the entire community, as will be mentioned later.

D. Recent Developments in public archaeology strategies over the past three years (2022-2024)

In the last three years, this strategy has been enhanced, aiming to reach increasingly diverse audiences through tailored approaches and differentiated languages. A prominent example is the effective initiative "*Per un cantiere aperto*" ("For an Open Worksite"), which provides a welcoming system to the archaeological site during excavation campaigns. This initiative allows visitors to observe the archaeologists' work up

close, with multilingual guides and expert professionals. For the local community, certain activities have been strengthened while new ones have been experimented with, adopting a dialogical, interdisciplinary, flexible, and pervasive approach. This is rooted in the awareness that the authenticity of a territory's value is intrinsic and primarily depends on a community that is conscious and informed about its cultural heritage, perceived as a legacy and integral to a shared identity. In this context, "*I lunedì dell'archeologia*" ("The Mondays of Archaeology") has been revitalized and further developed. These are debate meetings between citizens and invited experts, held every Monday evening during excavation campaigns at the *thermae*. These gatherings aim not only to update the community on excavation results but also to discuss issues related to the local archaeological heritage, as well as themes concerning the accessibility, management, and enhancement of cultural assets. A collaborative dialogue has thus been established between administrative and socio-cultural entities, production and hospitality sectors, educational institutions, and citizens. Through these discussions, public, scientific, academic, and ecclesiastical stakeholders engage in fruitful exchanges about cultural heritage, fostering a hybridization of skills with strong potential in terms of community value, identity, and socio-cultural and economic impacts on the city. During "*I lunedì dell'archeologia*", experts such as archaeologists, geologists, archivists, cultural heritage educators, rural and mountain development economists, public and ecclesiastical officials for archaeological heritage management, museum curators, and communication and marketing specialists participated, with many contributors from the University of Macerata. Archaeology remained the central theme of all debates, sparking curiosity, interest, concerns, and controversies. The speakers engaged with an attentive, diverse audience, fostering a productive exchange of knowledge, skills, and ideas. These were not mere "consultative forums" seeking approval but rather "hybrid forums" fostering co-production of new knowledge, diverse perspectives, and innovative actions. Another initiative, "*Facciamo il Punto*" ("Let's Make a Point"), involved weekly meetings with the city to provide constant updates on the ongoing excavation campaigns. Innovative approaches also included "*Serate/evento tra scienza e arte*" ("Evenings/Events Between Science and Art"), nighttime performances exploring themes from literary, epigraphic, and historical-archaeological research on antiquity (Fig. 1). These performances utilized choreographic, musical, and poetic language in collaboration with esteemed professionals from the artistic world. They were staged in evocative settings such as the *thermae* or the "*Domus del Mito*", drawing inspiration from these locations. Years later, the evening initiative "*Aperiterme*"—whose name combines the words "*aperitivo*" (aperitif) and "*terme*" (thermal baths)—was revived in autumn 2024 as part of the project promoted by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, "*Pesaro – Capitale della Cultura*". This initiative allowed the community to explore study trenches typically open during excavation campaigns. The event included storytelling about the spaces, furnishings, and life in the *thermae*, showcasing significant artifacts uncovered, such as those used by ancient

visitors. The evening concluded with a live, refined musical performance and a tasting of local food and wine products. Special attention was given to involving schools through the initiative "*Da grande farò l'archeologo*" ("When I Grow Up, I Will Be an Archaeologist"), featuring theoretical and hands-on lessons in classrooms and the archaeological area. These activities, designed for children from kindergarten, primary, and lower secondary schools in the Sant'Angelo in Vado, Mercatello sul Metauro, and Borgo Pace districts (PU), included washing pottery fragments, simulating stratigraphic excavations with sand and discarded archaeological materials, introducing excavation tools and techniques, and explaining rules and best practices for respecting archaeological heritage. The initiative culminated in an exhibition of drawings based on the experience and a three-year agreement with the schools for the project "*La storia intorno a noi*" ("The History Around Us"). In collaboration with pedagogy professor Brunelli and co-author Bevilacqua, the project delved into historical-archaeological themes related to childhood (school and games), food and diet, and mathematics in antiquity. The project aimed to integrate archaeological heritage into school students' *curricula*, developing new disciplinary and transversal skills (critical thinking and a sense of belonging to "their" archaeological heritage), as emphasized by the Faro Convention (2005). It concluded with a final event where students participated in dramatizations of archaeological professions, living history on Roman children's lives and schooling in ancient *Tifernum Mataurense*, and the creation of artifacts inspired by the themes explored through experimental archaeology. For students of the *Liceo Scientifico* (High School) *dell'Istituto Omnicomprensivo "Montefeltro"* Sassocorvaro Auditore, two projects were developed in collaboration with Brunelli and Bevilacqua: "*La domus tra archeologia, lingua, mito*" ("The Domus Between Archaeology, Language, and Myth") and "*Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l'Orientamento* (PCTO)" ("Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation," art. 4, legge 53/2003, d.lgs. 77/2005, legge 107/2015). The first project, aimed at first- to fourth-year students, focused on analyzing tangible cultural aspects (architectural forms, furnishings, decorations, floor mosaics) and intangible ones (mythological iconography, literary sources) of the "*Domus del Mito*". It contextualized the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the dominus and deepened knowledge of significant Latin vocabulary. The second project was designed as part of educational pathways to prepare fourth-year high school students for the workforce, further studies, and the development of transversal skills related to careers in cultural heritage and tourism. The "*Domus del Mito*" served as a case study to learn about its myths, literary sources, and the cultural, spiritual, and social context in which they originated. The project concluded during the opening of the 23rd excavation campaign with a dramatization by students at the "*Domus del Mito*", open to the public.

IV. ACHIEVEMENTS (E.B.)

The data obtained from monitoring public attendance during the main initiatives, collected since 2017, have facilitated the

development of a comprehensive assessment of public archaeology activities over the past three years. The results presented herein aim to update and provide an overview extending through 2021 [14]. Upon examining Fig. 2, a noticeable improvement in the trend over the past three years can be observed, compared to previous years. However, it should be noted that in 2019, the University of Macerata's team did not conduct excavations but focused on ceramic laboratory activities, and the excavation site remained closed. As a result, public archaeology initiatives were limited to a single evening, during which an honorary inscription discovered the previous year was presented in town hall. In 2021, the excavation campaign lasted six weeks, featuring an increased number of "*I lunedì dell'archeologia*" events, which contributed to higher participant attendance. Conversely, the 2024 season was impacted by the exceptional decision to conduct excavations in June rather than July, resulting in a lower turnout of tourists and locals compared to the previous month. The total count over the years - 405 guests in 2022, 546 in 2023, and 542 in 2024 - also

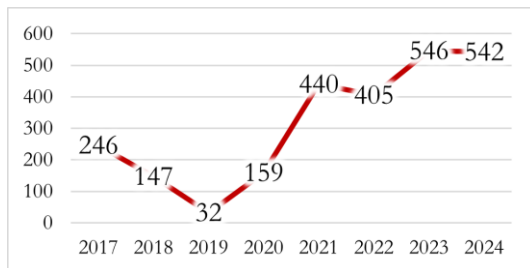


Fig. 2. Total number of participants in public archaeology activities from 2017 to 2024 (Bevilacqua 2025).

includes individuals who actively participated in multiple initiatives within the same year. In an effort to present the excavation site during typically closed periods, the "*Aperiterme*" initiative was launched in 2024, during "*Pesaro - Capitale della Cultura*." This event received a positive response relative to the average of other events, attracting a total of 91 visitors. As shown in Fig. 3, among the most successful initiatives were the debate sessions "*I lunedì dell'archeologia*." The diverse topics presented sparked considerable curiosity among the local population, who were often eager to engage with the various experts involved.

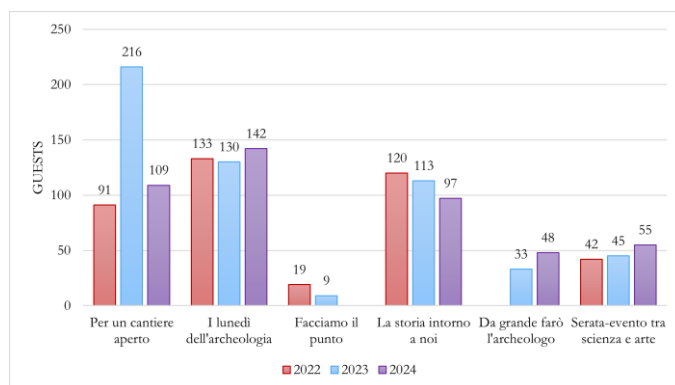


Fig. 3. Attendance for each public archaeology activity over the last three-year period (Bevilacqua 2025).

Equally successful was the "*Per un cantiere aperto*" initiative, which attracted numerous citizens and tourists interested in observing both excavation and university équipe at work. In contrast, the "*Facciamo il punto*" initiative was notably less successful, as it proved less appealing to the public, who likely appreciated the spontaneity of witnessing an "active excavation" and interacting with archaeologists about daily findings and new discoveries, rather than attending regular, scheduled scientific updates. Regarding projects with younger students, children actively and enthusiastically participated in all activities. Some of them even encouraged their parents, grandparents, or relatives to visit the excavation site. Numerous local operators from the hotel and restaurant sectors also participated in the "*Lunedì dell'archeologia*," during which Professors A. Cavicchi and M. Cerquetti discussed the economic value of food and local products for regional development, within the context of history, archaeology, and tradition. Unfortunately, the anticipated developments of collaborations with hotels and restaurants did not materialize, partly due to the ongoing crisis faced by the sector in the aftermath of the pandemic [15].

Based on data regarding the place of residence of the guests, as shown in Fig. 4, it was possible to know who is: resident in Sant'Angelo in Vado; from a municipality in the province of Pesaro-Urbino; from a municipality in another province of Marche region; from outside the Marche region.

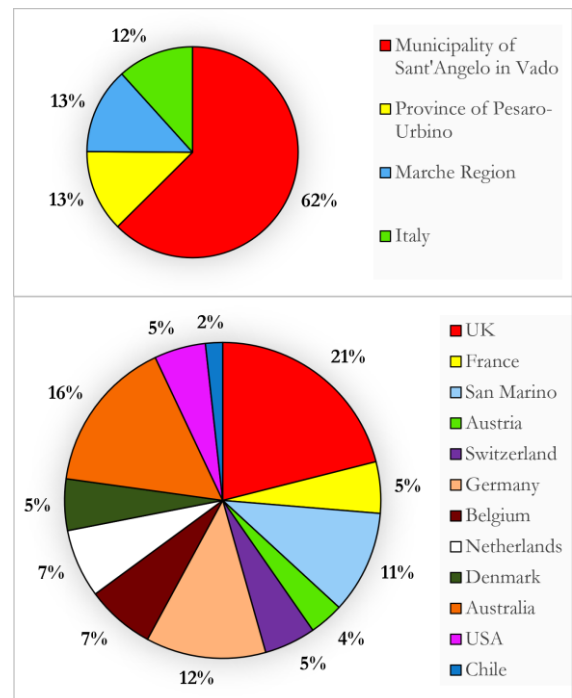


Fig. 4. Data obtained from monitoring public attendance during the main initiatives regarding residence (Bevilacqua 2025).

The vast majority, as one might expect, appear to be residents of Sant'Angelo in Vado. The numbers significantly decrease for those living outside the municipality, indicating a lack of both short- and long-range tourism circuits. The tourists of the Marche are relatively low, with the distribution as follows: 48,7% from the same province of Pesaro-Urbino, 32,34% from

the province of Ancona, 14,13% from the province of Macerata and 4,83% from the province of Fermo. Outside, the guests most attracted were from Northern Italy (75.41%), then from Central Italy (22.13%) and Southern Italy (2.46%). At the international level, tourists predominantly came from Europe (77%), with major representation from the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and the nearby Republic of San Marino.

An ongoing challenge is the development of a tourist circuit, both at the provincial/regional and national levels, that integrates archaeology and local archaeological heritage. Unfortunately, this aspect has been marginalized during periods of high visitor influx, particularly during the annual National Truffle Fair. However, there is also a need to strengthen the communication network, from that offered by the Municipality and the University of Macerata's website to social networks and the dedicated Wikipedia page. Furthermore, the search for new funding is necessary to assist the Municipality in financing the University's activities. In the future, the University of Macerata's efforts will focus on fostering greater synergy with local authorities to promote a unified offering, where archaeology, local products, and traditions can contribute to creating a bigger value for the region—an initiative that will not only raise awareness within the local community but also has the potential to attract tourists.

V. CONCLUSION (E.S.)

Archaeology in Sant'Angelo in Vado, once unknown and even opposed, has become, following the initiatives proposed by the University of Macerata, a topic of discussion within the community and is frequently the subject of political debate. Around archaeology, the community seems to reflect an emerging awareness of the opportunities stem from this shared heritage for collective and economic growth. The success of the initiatives can also be seen as the result of a grassroots push to "restart" from archaeology following the recent and dramatic situation caused by the pandemic. Sant'Angelo in Vado, an example of a marginal inland context, illustrates how public archaeology can produce meaningful results for the sustainable development of the community, as demonstrated by the positive trend of recent years.

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Emanuela Stortoni was born in Macerata on July 28, 1962. She obtained a master's degree in Humanities (specialization in archaeology) from University of Macerata, Italy, in 1990, a postgraduate specialization in General and Museum Didactics from Roma Tre University, Italy, in 1996, and a PhD in Ancient History and Classical Archaeology from University of Macerata, Italy, in 2005.

She was awarded a research grant at the University of Macerata on *Tifernum Mataurense* (Sant'Angelo in Vado, PU, Italy) from 2000 to 2004 and she was adjunct professor at the University of Macerata from 2002 to 2011. She has participated in numerous archaeological excavations and surveys in Italy and abroad (Libya). Since 2013, she has served as Director of archaeological excavations of the archaeological site in Sant'Angelo in Vado. She has been involved in various research projects, conferences, and scientific consultancy activities, focusing particularly on: ancient funerary architecture in central Italy and *Cyrenaica* (Libya), public and private archaeological collecting, archaeometry, roman water supply systems and thermal facilities, archaeology of inner areas, terracotta votive offerings and roman decorative terracotta, ancient glyptic, sites in *Regio V Picenum*, heritage education, and public archaeology with a specific emphasis on inner areas.

Prof. Stortoni is currently a research fellow in Classical Archaeology and holds a national scientific qualification as an associate professor. She teaches Landscape Archaeology and Research Methodologies in Archaeology at the University of Macerata.



Elia Bevilacqua was born in Macerata on December 22, 1996. He obtained a master's degree in Archaeology from the Roma Tre University, Italy, in 2024.

He was awarded a post-graduate research scholarship at the University of Macerata on the ancient area of the Villa Vitali Park (Fermo, Italy). He has participated in archaeological excavations and surveys in various roles of responsibility both in Italy and abroad (Greece). His main research areas include: ancient funerary architecture and burial assemblages in central Italy and *Cyrenaica* (Libya), ceramology, public and private

archaeological collecting, heritage education, and public archaeology.

Mr. Bevilacqua is currently a Ph.D. student in Classical Archaeology at the University of Macerata.