



Europe's Medieval Pasts: a Manifesto

MERC Manifesto October 2020



Excavation of this well-preserved 17th-century river barge from Teerhof, Bremen, Germany reveals the physical reality of work and life in the past and provides evidence of regional and international commercial networks.

Cover image: The recent fire in Notre Dame Cathedral drew attention to the vulnerability of the material remains of the past. The speed of the loss of building fabric, cultural treasures and historical resources shocked a world-wide audience. Image credit: "Notre-Dame en feu, 20h06.jpg" by GodefroyParis is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

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This Manifesto seeks to awaken appreciation of the rich cultural resources embodied in our understanding of the medieval past. There is an urgent need to understand the foundations of contemporary Europe in order to help shape its future. Our vision promotes opportunities provided by archaeology to explore and to engage with the past, and to care for it and enjoy our shared European heritage. Perspectives grounded in the material remains of the past allow us to embrace cultural diversity over national exceptionalism. Experiencing archaeology enables and encourages us to be in dialogue with the past and, through this immediacy, its local stories of global resonance. Our Manifesto asserts that engagement with medieval archaeology is a matter of European importance.

This Manifesto addresses our political responsibility as European archaeologists as set out in the *2019 EAA Bern Statement: Archaeology and the Future of Democracy* (<https://www.e-a-a.org/BernStatement>). Our focus is on Europe, but we recognise and embrace all neighbouring regions which shared or contested the European medieval experience. Here we use the term 'medieval' to focus attention on the period from the end of Classical Antiquity or prehistory until Industrialisation. This broad, inclusive idea of medieval is not strictly delineated by dates (for instance, well into the 5th to 16th centuries AD), rather it is concerned with a range of specific cultural formations that appeared at different times in different places and which persisted well-into the post-medieval or early modern world.

The archaeology we describe seeks to understand tangible and intangible pasts through their diverse material culture, encompassing above- and below-ground remains, from single buildings to entire landscapes, environmental evidence, artefacts and written sources. We recognise that medieval pasts have been exploited, manipulated and abused for political motives in recent centuries and believe that the best way to confront such extremist appropriation is to use archaeology as a source of compelling, evidence-based counter-narratives. Medieval archaeology is



A still taken from *Govan Young*, an award-winning film about archaeology, identity and primary education, has been screened at over 25 international film festivals (<https://vimeo.com/294109808>). For the background to this project see the 'Dossier on Govan Young: Exploring children's historical consciousness through film and archaeology', *Film Education Journal* 1.2 (November 2018). Free to view at (<http://bit.ly/2AAFluP>).

therefore relevant to anyone wanting to understand, or employ an understanding of, medieval pasts, from politicians to planners, from visitors to residents, and from scholars and students to armchair researchers.

Archaeology is by its nature interdisciplinary and inclusive. Medieval archaeologists desire dialogue with everyone involved with the medieval past and hope to expand that potential audience. In Europe this includes nearly everyone, since we live in built environments and landscapes largely formed during the middle ages.

This document explains why the significance of medieval archaeology needs to be understood and proposes how best to communicate its cultural value. This Manifesto was assembled by archaeologists of the Medieval Europe

Research Community (MERC) seeking to promote a socially engaged archaeology of Europe and its neighbours. MERC acts as a transdisciplinary hub for existing organisations and researchers, supporting practitioners in Europe and the rest of the world. Our purpose is to

- foster a medieval archaeology that transcends national and regional borders;
- revitalise the collaborative practice of medieval archaeology among researchers, practitioners, and society at large;
- shape public discourse on our shared medieval pasts;
- and ensure that the values and cultural significance of medieval archaeology contributes sustainable benefits for present and future communities.

Why does Medieval Archaeology Matter?

We are more Medieval than we realise. Europe as we know it was largely created over the middle ages, and our national stories and communities' identities are mostly framed by concepts of what happened in the medieval past: the negotiation of national boundaries, the formation of our towns and cities, even the development of road networks.

The medieval past is politically relevant. It is often contested, as it corresponds with the period before the 'Enlightenment', to a time when many national groups perceive their origins. Yet, it holds important narratives concerning urban origins, craftsmanship, social cohesion and much more. European landscapes, townscapes and built heritage were mostly shaped in the medieval period and remain essentially medieval in their physical character.

Medieval heritage goes deeper than we think. These cultural roots have influenced the world through globalisation. Archaeology enables these discourses about national and civic community identities to be investigated, understood and celebrated. As a rigorous method of historical analysis it can also help challenge the misappropriation of heritage.

Medieval archaeology is everywhere. We cannot avoid interacting with it regularly, but it is fragile, finite and precious. Decisions about our changing world and environment need to be supported by a robust, informed understanding of medieval pasts.

Medieval archaeology is empowering. It can provide alternative perspectives into the development of family life, gender roles and sexuality. It can help identify and disrupt prejudicial and racist narratives against communities of different faiths and ethnicities, which have roots in the

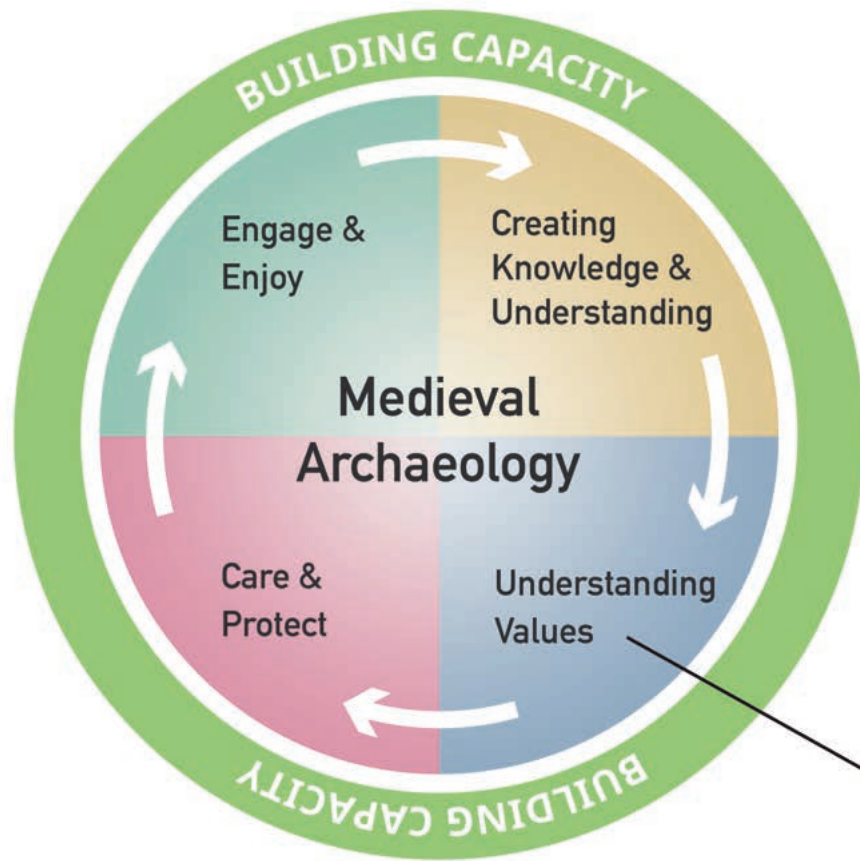


Archive photo from Borgund, Norway's first medieval excavation, led by Asbjørn E Herteig from 1954 into the 1980s. The archaeological materials recovered from these excavations are now the focus of the Borgund Kaupang Project (www.uib.no/en/rg/borgund-kaupang).

medieval period. Only through robust debate can we support economic and sustainable growth and the creation of social justice for Europe's communities.

Medieval archaeology is illuminating. Local histories and regional traditions can often only be perceived through archaeology. Such stories can challenge conventional narratives of the medieval world by making everyday multi-sensory life come alive.

Medieval archaeologists are most effective when working together. We need a vibrant, socially engaged, respectful research community. For this to work, we need to build more avenues to self-awareness and knowledge exchange within the community of practitioners across all sectors.



Top right: Pupils enjoying the new display of early medieval sculpture within Govan Old Church. (www.thegovanstones.org.uk).

Bottom right: A 1m square test pit under excavation by local residents and teenagers working under professional archaeological supervision as part of the Currently Occupied Rural Settlement (CORS) project in Coddendam, Suffolk, England. (www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/reports/cors).

Medieval Archaeology Heritage Wheel

- Evidential
- Social
- Scientific/Environmental
- Historical
- Aesthetic
- Economic

Guiding Principles

Cultural Value, as inspired by the Burra Charter, is the core of this Manifesto. It reflects our understanding of the Council of Europe’s principle that cultural heritage provides the source for collective European ideals, principles and values.

The 'heritage wheel' allows us to visualise the Manifesto's Guiding Principles: how archaeology contributes to knowledge creation and understanding and how this in turn helps us to recognise significance and to foster and develop value. Demonstrating value allows us to care for and protect medieval remains and enables everyone to engage with and enjoy our medieval pasts.





Excavations at Marienhof in the medieval city centre of Munich revealed well-preserved buildings, including wells, and a wealth of domestic and industrial artefacts. Sponsored by Archäologie München these excavations created opportunities for archaeologists to engage with the people of Munich through guided tours, exhibitions and special events (<http://www.archaeologie-muenchen.de/de/aktuelles/>).

1 Creating Knowledge and Understanding

Archaeological knowledge derives from exploration and discovery. To realise the potential of this knowledge we need to communicate our results widely, regardless of the commercial and bureaucratic contexts. Fundamental to this approach is the realisation that medieval resources are finite, that their investigation requires well thought-out research strategies, whether through re-assessing material preserved in museum collections or via new discovery by excavation. Socially embedded archaeological practice, or co-creation, provides opportunities for greatly enriching knowledge. Effective communication can challenge ignorance at various levels and encourages the recognition of archaeological significance and heritage value.

2 Understanding Values

Medieval archaeology research provides a critical means of recognising and appreciating the tangible and intangible values of the historic environment for modern society. It promotes the recognition and articulation of key values:

- evidential value – the structures and other physical remains and their potential to yield primary evidence about medieval pasts
- social value – the associations or meanings that places have for communities or cultural groups
- scientific value – the evidence for environmental change, past land-use and changes in human health, amenable to scientific dating and measurement, critically set within a narrative context

- historical value – the unique stories generated by archaeology about ordinary and extraordinary people, that recreate past worlds and illuminate social and political events. It invites dialogue with documentary history, but does not replicate it – it has equal standing with textual evidence, to which it is complementary and on which it offers material and social insights
- aesthetic value – the sensory and perceptual experiences of places, buildings and artefacts
- economic value – the heritage of our shared medieval pasts contributes to economic well-being now and into the future, through tourism, and to community well-being by creating a sense of place. Realising the value of medieval archaeology is central to sustainable decision-making.

3 Promote Care and Protection

The understanding of these values helps communities to recognise the contribution the 'past' makes to their well-being, identities and economies; this encourages active care, conservation and its protection through planning and other management decisions. Promoting these values supports good political decision making.

4 Encourage Public Engagement and Enjoyment

Conservation reaffirms these values and allows people to engage with and enjoy the physical remains of their past. Participation in archaeological research, conservation, interpretation and educational activities makes a significant contribution to community health and well-being. Public engagement with archaeology is essential if its values are to be widely recognised, particularly as a pleasurable pursuit. More public interest will fuel more exploration and improve knowledge and understanding.

5 Building Capacity and Building Communities

To deliver these aspirations requires a healthy, democratic community of researchers and medieval archaeologists, from fieldworkers to heritage managers, museum curators and academics. We need to build a creative, vibrant environment that develops and supports future generations of practitioners and professionals across Europe. Institutional infrastructure in the form of museums and government archaeological and heritage services are frequently understaffed, leaving a deficit of necessary key decision-makers in bodies responsible for the cultural heritage.



Top: A screenshot of the web portal created by the Prague Archaeological project as an accessible digital guide to the archaeological heritage of Prague. While it acts as a repository of information for archaeological researchers, a large part of the portal is dedicated to public engagement. (www.praha-archeologicka.eu/).

Left: The Old Cathedral of Vitoria-Gasteiz has been restored and re-invigorated by the Foundation Catedral Santa María for which it was awarded the 21st European Archaeological Heritage Prize by the European Association of Archaeologists in 2019. (www.catedralvitoria.eus/)

Our Recommendations

This Manifesto demonstrates that medieval and later archaeology has the potential to enhance cultural value all across Europe. While local circumstances vary substantially from place to place, there is nowhere in Europe that could not be improved by the following actions undertaken by heritage professionals (scholars, curators, managers and field-workers):

- The challenging of the political misappropriation of the knowledge generated through medieval archaeology
- The promotion of avenues for STEM careers through archaeological science and digital humanities

- Provide improved planning (Urban, Landscape and Land-use) and museum capacity to ensure that opportunities to explore, enhance and protect medieval sites are not missed
- Building capacity by investing in the necessary human resources should be led by decision-makers and politicians
- Promote open access to information and co-creative or collaborative research activities
- The heightening of genuine social engagement in all dimensions of medieval archaeology



Archaeologist sampling of the turf capping of the stone castle wall at Dunyvaig Castle, Islay, Scotland. (<https://research.reading.ac.uk/castle-geoarchaeology-heritage/>)

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Information about the development of this manifesto, more case studies and PDF versions of this document can be found at the Manifesto website.