

# Vignale - Riotorto, archaeology that builds community

## Participation, communication, and well-being in heritage value creation

### The project

*Uomini e Cose a Vignale* is a long-term community archaeology project, active since 2004 in the Vignale-Riotorto area (Tuscany, Italy). The archaeological research focuses on the remains of a Roman villa-mansio, which underwent a major building phase in Late Antiquity, as indicated by a large and unique polychrome mosaic (Fig. 1, top). The discovery of a series of burials that were part of a wider cemetery demonstrates that the site continued to be inhabited into the early Middle Ages. In 2023 the archaeological activities were expanded to include a nearby hill, where the remains of a medieval castle and a parish church are located. The aim is to explore the medieval occupation of the area and its relationship with the earlier Roman settlement.

Originally the investigations primarily focused on an emergency evaluation of the extension of Roman site, following a deep plough. Over the years, the project has evolved into a multilayered practice of shared, participative, and community archaeology. It has gradually become an ongoing and shared engagement process involving schools, volunteers, local associations, cultural institutions, and – more recently – well-being-oriented groups.

This transformation stemmed from a shift in perspective: archaeology was conceived not only as a means of generating knowledge, but also as a practice capable of building relationships – while allowing decision-making to become increasingly community-driven. Fieldwork, storytelling, and the surrounding landscape became tools for fostering dialogue and cooperation between experts and non-experts, across generations, and among people with different needs and abilities. Communication was reframed not as simple dissemination, but as a shared process through which individuals could see themselves reflected in the narratives of their own territory.

More recently, well-being has become a central focus: projects such as Archeologicamente, within the broader LOGGIA framework, have brought together psychiatric patients, volunteers, and citizens in activities aimed at restoring the historic path to the parish church. Through hands-on work and co-created interpretation, participants experienced the archaeological landscape as a supportive environment for social inclusion and community well-being (Fig. 3, right).

Across all these experiences, communication and audience involvement have played the role of engines for the project's sustainability, and this feeling of shared ownership has been instrumental in supporting, protecting, and carrying the project forward.



Fig. 1 Top: Late antique mosaic from the Roman villa. Bottom: Remains of the San Giovanni church near the medieval Castle of Vignale.



Fig.2 One of the first public meetings with the Riotorto community in the streets of the town.



Fig.3 Left: video-storytelling activities with the children of the Riotorto school. Right: guided visits to the castle with patients from the mental health institute.

### Community building & engagement

*Uomini e Cose a Vignale* has achieved many of its most significant results in close collaboration with the local community. It has fostered a strong sense of connection to the past and to the territory, and has helped build a shared chain of knowledge in which archaeological understanding is no longer transmitted solely by specialists. Instead, this knowledge circulates within the community itself, carried by people who have grown up alongside the project and who actively contribute to keeping its stories alive. These outcomes provide the basis for the project's current objectives.

Within this framework, the project is now focusing on adapting its community engagement strategies to meet new needs that have emerged over time. Over the past two decades, communication has developed across multiple platforms, including the project website, YouTube, and social media channels. The present goal is to refine these practices, ensuring that they remain inclusive and multivocal, while responding to the expectations of new publics and younger generations. The challenge is to preserve the familiarity and trust accumulated over twenty years without allowing the project to become static: communication must continue to evolve as the community itself evolves. For instance, a virtual tour has been developed and made available online (see QR Code below), with an additional version accessible through an information totem located at the headquarters of the local Coop supermarket that sponsors the project.

Community engagement is therefore understood as an ongoing relationship that requires care rather than construction. The priority is to strengthen and expand the long-standing network of people who have accompanied the project's growth, and to encourage those who have gained experience over the years to assume increasingly active roles. New objectives also stem from needs recently expressed by the community. Concerns such as improving access to the parish church and castle hill, promoting slow and sustainable tourism, and ensuring the long-term maintenance of paths and heritage landscapes have become increasingly important. Addressing these issues means integrating the practical care of the site with the collaborative spirit that has always characterised the project, ensuring that the archaeological landscape remains accessible, meaningful, and cared for.

In this sense, the project's objectives today are both retrospective and forward-looking: they consolidate what has been achieved together so far while opening new paths for the years ahead.

### Public archaeology in Vignale-Riotorto: an evolving assessment

The case of Vignale–Riotorto shows how the engagement of audiences and effective communication can completely transform the role of archaeology within a community. In fact, when people find themselves in the stories told by the earth, then archaeology stops being an intervention from the outside and becomes a resource held in common. This project demonstrates how participation generates familiarity, belonging and responsibility, and how communication creates channels through which these relationships can flourish.

The collaboration with schools has become a cornerstone in building a shared identity. Activities on the villa and castle hill have shown how heritage places engender memories and emotions, strengthening the landscape-community linkage. Wellbeing initiatives have broadened the scope of engagement, demonstrating that archaeology can support the inclusion of vulnerable groups and provide benefits to them.

As the project unfolds, its future will involve sustained care and expansion of this ecosystem of shared practices. By nurturing open lines of communication, co-designing experiences with diverse audiences, and supporting community-led stewardship, *Uomini e Cose a Vignale* offers continued proof that archaeology is most powerful when participatory, relational, and embedded in daily life.



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