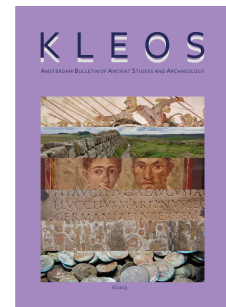




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Interdisciplinarity and Archaeology: A Review of the 2022 ARCHON Day. Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort. October 28, 2022.

Thomas Hijzen

INTRODUCTION

For as long as it has existed, archaeology has been an interdisciplinary field. Historians and earth scientists alike have held close ties to archaeology. Furthermore, with the increasingly accepted social value of archaeology in the eyes of the public, the field is continuously developing new ways of working with other disciplines. For researchers themselves, this raises the question of what archaeology is and where it stands in relation to other disciplines. The uncertainty regarding archaeology's position is seen as one of the 'Grand Challenges' of the discipline.

The ARCHON Day is a yearly event, in which archaeologists discuss a topical subject within archaeology. Organised by ARCHON, the Dutch research school of archaeology, the conference brings together graduate students, researchers, and commercial archaeologists in academic debates. The 2022 ARCHON Day, held on October 28th 2022 at the State Service for Cultural Heritage in Amersfoort, was centred around the concept of interdisciplinary archaeology. It dealt with the contribution of archaeologists working together with other fields of science. The main question was how synergy can be ensured and what is needed to work in an interdisciplinary environment. Through a lecture, a set of poster presentations, three workshops and finally a panel discussion, archaeologists in various stages of their career were able to discuss these themes. In this review, I summarise the contents of the conference and critically reflect on the results it yielded.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATIONS

After an introduction by [Dr. Philip Verhagen](#), the scientific director of ARCHON and Assistant Professor at the Vrije Universiteit (VU,

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► [Profile page](#)

¹ Halpern 1998, 60.

² Kajda et al. 2018, 97, 103.

³ Kerr 2020, 1338.

Amsterdam), the first lecture was given on the main theme of the conference. Dr. Jason Laffoon from Leiden University took the stage to talk about interdisciplinary collaboration. He began by explaining the framework in which we, as archaeologists, are working. This framework consists of divisions between disciplines, most notably between the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities, that developed in the 19th century. This system often leads to a lack of cooperation and a high degree of self-sorting in scientific fields, which hampers interdisciplinary projects, including in archaeology.

Furthermore, the division of disciplines across faculties, and archaeology in particular, is quite ambiguous. In the North American educational systems, for example, archaeology is seen as a field in anthropology, whereas Dutch universities place it in the arts, in the humanities or completely separate. As Laffoon explained, this cannot be blamed on the arrival of 'new' sub-disciplines such as archaeological sciences. It was consequently shown that archaeological sciences and many of the tools often employed in it are already more than 40 years old. This includes techniques that are often perceived as new such as GIS or 3D modelling.

In the light of these issues, Laffoon found the main challenges of interdisciplinary archaeology to be the lack of interaction, self-sorting between disciplines, the use of jargon, the academic structure and funding bodies. In the concluding remarks, several proposals on how to fix these issues were given. The ideas included the creation of incentives for interdisciplinary work, to stay curious, to get out of your comfort zone, to make the implicit explicit and to be in charge of your results. By taking these steps, archaeologists – as individuals – can contribute to a better environment for interdisciplinary work. As such, this presentation and the discussion it sparked formed an excellent start of the 2022 ARCHON Day, as it clearly demarcated the issues of interdisciplinarity, whilst offering a clear view on what to do in order to move forward.

DISCUSSING THE FUTURE

Following this introduction, the rest of the day consisted of three workshops, multiple poster presentations during the breaks and a panel discussion at the end of the day, in which the findings of the day were critically summarised. The poster sessions were set up in the main hall and were an excellent forum for (r)MA and PhD students to talk about their research. As such, this session formed a nice platform for conversation with other students from various Dutch institutions about their work. All attendees could vote on their favourite poster. Lotte Nagelhout (Leiden University)



Figure 1.
*Dr. Philip Verhagen
welcoming the attendees to
the 2022 ARCHON Day
(created by Yannic Rabou).*

received this award for her poster on mercury as a syphilis treatment in the Medieval Netherlands. It was then time for the workshops. These were set up so that every attendee could attend each of the three workshops, which allowed everyone to work on the full scope of topics.

The first workshop dealt with interdisciplinary fieldwork and was chaired by **Professor Dr. Bleda Düring** (Leiden University). This workshop took an open approach. The participants were asked to sit in a circle and discuss their experiences with fieldwork and which steps they would take to facilitate proper interdisciplinary research. It was noted that archaeology is quickly becoming more technical, with new scientific tools being employed regularly. The increasing number of applications of 3D modelling and of remote sensing techniques were mentioned. With this development, the discussion group agreed that it is necessary that specialists on these techniques be involved, who voice their opinions, as they are the ones who understand the possibilities and limitations of certain approaches. This means that there is the need for open communication. It was also brought up that these techniques are often employed when it is not necessary. The attendees of this workshop concluded that techniques and methods should be set up to answer specific research questions. It was noted that the opposite quite often still happens. Research starts from the tools, without considering the goal of using these tools first. However, in this academic climate, the use of state-of-the-art methods is often the best way to attract funders. One of the consequences of this trend is that archaeology is becoming more exclusive. Institutions with access to newly developed tools thrive, whilst other, less well funded, institutions fall behind in the academic environment.

The next workshop was given by **Prof. Dr. Ir. Hans Huisman** from the University of Groningen and the Cultural Heritage Agency. The topic was science-based archaeology, which entails the application of scientific techniques in archaeological studies. This workshop employed a more hands-on approach. On a poster, many scientific techniques often employed in archaeology were listed. Each member of the workshop was given a piece of paper containing a specific field of archaeological studies. If a scientific technique on the poster could, according to us, be applied in the archaeological field on the piece of paper, it was written down. At first, all attendees did this individually for their assigned field of study. Then, everyone shared their ideas with the group. In doing so, it became clear that many techniques can be used in a lot of research and that each participant had their own ideas about the use of certain methods. It was further demonstrated that researchers need to think about the use of these scientific methodologies early on in the project, ideally in the conceptual phase. This requires the

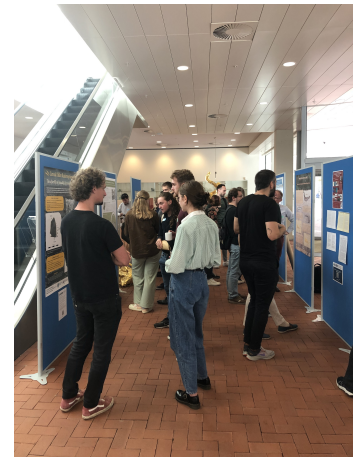


Figure 2.
The conference's poster session (created by Yannic Rabou).

researcher to understand what they are working with. The necessary knowledge should come from discussions with experts, although this is currently not always the case.

Finally, **Dr. Gertjan Plets** (Utrecht University) moderated a workshop about story-telling. Through a series of anecdotal stories of the moderator's personal experiences, he started an active discussion with the participants on how stories and the way they are told relate to archaeology. It was noted that story-telling in a scientific context is often data-centred. Plets gave the example of studies on ancient DNA. These studies serve to study mobility and genetic relations between different groups of people in the past. Results in this field are often presented as a map or as percentages of similarity in the DNA, which people interpret in their own way without having much regard for the context of the data. This has on occasion led to aDNA being used as an advocate for political ideologies, for example in border conflicts. The group noted that archaeologists can, and perhaps should, be the ones to speak up and provide the necessary context. Plets thus concluded that 'scientists are loud, so archaeologists need to be equally loud.'

REMARKS AND CONCLUSION

The workshops on the 2022 ARCHON Day offered a broad view on interdisciplinarity in archaeology. They provided a place to talk amongst peers about experiences and desires. In this sense, the programme was successful in creating awareness of the issues that surround interdisciplinary archaeology. However, I find that no concrete results were offered. Talks about what the future should hold held little detail. It was noted, for example, that there is the need for communication and reflection on the techniques we use, which is already widely known. Unfortunately, the workshops did not bring concrete proposals on which steps to take on a personal level starting today either. Hopefully, the following ARCHON event on the topic will lay more focus on such ideas.

In general, the 2022 ARCHON Day succeeded in providing a platform for students, researchers, and other archaeologists to discuss interdisciplinarity together. Especially the keynote lecture offered some great insights and ideas. The workshops further allowed discussion on the topic, but in my opinion lacked in-depth problem fixing, which is something that I hoped for in the light of the conference's main goals. Nevertheless, this conference was an excellent place to meet your peers and talk to them about their work and experiences. In that aspect, the ARCHON Day can be called a success.

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