

Rescuing our archaeological legacy

A silent catastrophe has been taking place in large portions of the Mediterranean area. It may not have affected the lives of citizens directly, but, in the long run, it does have an irreversible impact on their collective memory and identity. I am referring to the destruction of the Mediterranean landscape, as a consequence of mechanised agriculture and increasing urbanization. It has dramatically damaged the soil and the archaeological heritage contained therein.

In most cases, the only archaeological data we have about these landscapes have been collected in field surveys. But since these data-sets are often old and forgotten, there is a serious risk that they will be inaccessible and lost forever. To prevent this from happening, the KNIR has started a data crowdsourcing project with the [FASTI Online Survey](#) digital platform (FOS onwards). The implementation of the project is a matter of urgency and cannot be postponed. Therefore, in June 2020 a new [KNIR online \(and COVID-19 proof\) internship](#) has begun to rescue these data (see below).

For decades now archaeological students and fellows of the KNIR have been investigating on foot the ground surface of large Italian territories searching for ancient finds that were ploughed up from buried archaeological sites. This reconnaissance method for landscape archaeology is known as field-walking survey. Since WWII, international field-walking survey projects have covered millions of hectares of the Mediterranean landscape, registering data on tens of thousands of archaeological sites. Survey data were mapped across vast territories, and thus provide the most suitable archaeological record to address large-scale historical questions and discover ancient behavioural patterns. Regrettably, teams conducting survey archaeology only rarely have made their data openly accessible in online digital repositories, and as time goes and scholars retire or sadly pass away, the risk of losing knowledge of these (meta)data increases.

As landscape destruction accumulates over time, survey data cannot always be reproduced: legacy data from earlier surveys often remain the only source to study the past, containing unique information about sites and landscapes that have been destroyed. Moreover, especially in this time of COVID-19 that prevents or dramatically delays new fieldwork for collecting new data, legacy survey data assume an even greater importance. If we are unable to secure and share such data, this importantly disadvantages both our heritage preservation strategy and future

archaeological and historical analysis. The goal of this long-term collaborative project is to bring to light the legacy survey data of the most data-dense and endangered landscape in the world, the Mediterranean, and guarantee open-access to these data.

At the KNIR we have started to unlock these data through FOS. FOS is a web-based platform for the online publication of survey projects and data that was recently developed by scholars from the KNIR, the [International Association for Classical Archaeology](#) (AIAC) and [L – P : Archaeology](#). FOS consists of a webGIS and open-access archive for the storage, integration, publication and permanent availability of Mediterranean survey data. This data crowdsourcing platform allows researchers who conducted field-walking surveys in the Mediterranean to publish open-access the (legacy) survey data and metadata of their projects, and share them for open exchange and reuse with other researchers and heritage professionals. The early projects often, however, used different field methods, which makes it difficult to compare and combine the different data-sets. To understand larger scale developments in ancient society, we need first of all to enter these data in one platform, and FOS can be this platform.

The new KNIR online internship for both Dutch and Italian master students in archaeology aims to support data-entry into FOS. Under the supervision of Dr. Tesse Stek and Dr. Anita Casarotto students collect, digitise and upload in FOS the legacy survey data from survey projects conducted in two Italian regions, namely Molise and Apulia. They furthermore assist international researchers with the data-entry into FOS, and take care of data archiving and management. Moreover, students engage with networking through social media, and propose solutions to develop the website in order to promote FOS, increase its outreach, and thus incentivise data crowdsourcing among researchers and heritage professionals. Future generations of archaeologists, historians and other scientific or non-scientific users will be most grateful to our interns for their efforts!

Anita Casarotto

