



Instead of an editorial

Public archaeology has emerged as a significant field within contemporary archaeological practice and research, focusing on the relationship between archaeology and the wider public. Rather than remaining confined within academic institutions, archaeology increasingly engages with communities, cultural stakeholders, and diverse audiences, fostering dialogue and participation in the interpretation and stewardship of cultural heritage.

In Cyprus, interest in this field, particularly through community engagement initiatives, has been gradually increasing in recent years. Recognising this development, as well as the need to further promote the involvement of non-specialists in archaeological practice and discourse, the Board of Directors of the Association of Cypriot Archaeologists (ACA) initiated the present project. Its aim was to gather reflections and responses from local experts involved in relevant initiatives and to highlight the work of emerging scholars and young professionals across the broader field of archaeology. By doing so, ACA seeks to support and promote their contributions while encouraging further participation in community engagement activities in order to engage and empower local communities through interaction with the island's archaeological heritage and experiential learning

The result is this digital repository of short reports, designed to document and disseminate recent initiatives focusing on public engagement in Cypriot archaeology. The repository aims to showcase emerging voices and fresh perspectives on the ways archaeologists connect with broader audiences, whether through community-based projects, educational activities, digital media, museum programmes, or forms of heritage activism. The choice of an online open-access format reflects a commitment to accessibility and inclusivity, allowing the work of early-career scholars and professionals to reach not only the Cypriot archaeological community but also a wider local and international audience.

The collection of original reports presented here was collected by invitation, based on the Board's knowledge of ongoing or recently completed projects in Cypriot archaeology that place public engagement at their core. Together, these five papers represent important contributions to the developing field of public archaeology on the island and reflect the work of recent graduates and early-career archaeologists. They explore different approaches through which Cypriot archaeology engages the public and enhances the dissemination of archaeological knowledge. In doing so, they demonstrate how meaningful interaction between archaeologists and society can contribute to a deeper understanding of, and commitment to the protection of, cultural heritage.

The submitted papers underwent minimal editorial intervention and formatting by ACA's President, Dr. Maria M. Michael, and Vice-President, Demetra Ignatiou, in order to ensure coherence and consistency across the collection. The visual icon and the layout design for the repository's online presentation were created by ACA member Phivos Poullos.

ACA welcomes further contributions from its members whose work involves initiatives related to community engagement in Cypriot archaeology. It is anticipated that this repository will continue to expand, serving as a growing platform for collecting and sharing innovative approaches to public archaeology on the island.

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Museums for all: A Case Study of a Cultural Foundation in Cyprus

More senses – Fewer barriers – Better society¹

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Abstract

This paper explores how archaeological museums and collections can become more accessible while promoting inclusivity and community engagement by examining the “Aisthiseis” (Senses) programme of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation (BoCCF). The study analyses how inclusive design, multi-sensory experiences, and digital tools can enhance participation and promote wellbeing among people with visible or invisible disabilities, as well as other vulnerable groups. Drawing on international and national accessibility frameworks, it highlights “Aisthiseis” as an example of good practice in cultural inclusion and community engagement. The paper argues that true accessibility combines physical, sensory, and social approaches, positioning BoCCF as a model for “More Senses – Fewer Barriers – Better Society.”

Keywords: Museums; Accessibility; Multisensory Experience; Cultural Participation; Public engagement; Public Archaeology.

Introduction

This paper examines the importance of accessibility in cultural spaces in general and more specifically archaeological museums and sites, by investigating the case of the “Aisthiseis” (Senses) programme of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation (hereinafter BoCCF). Particular focus is given to the BoCCF museums: the *Museum of the History of Cypriot Coinage* and the *Archaeological Museum – Collection of George and Nefeli Giabra Pierides* (Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, n.d.). The authors present and analyse their personal involvement and experience, in their capacity as archaeologists and educational workshops' facilitators; the views expressed do not reflect those of the BoCCF. The paper investigates how the said spaces can be accessible to vulnerable groups as well as how those spaces can have a positive impact on them. Vulnerable groups include people living with mental or physical health conditions, refugees, immigrants, older adults, pregnant individuals, and others (Mishina and Eino, 2023: 376-378; Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 2024; Kruczek et al., 2024). This paper begins by discussing the terms *disability* and *accessibility*, followed by a presentation of the “Aisthiseis” programme, including the adaptations, the workshops and the museum kit that were among the programme’s deliverables. The final sections focus on the impact of the programme to the visitors and the authors, and suggestions for the future of accessibility in Cyprus’ archaeological museums and collections.

¹ Motto of the “Aisthiseis” programme

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Collaboration with the BoCCF

The authors collaborated with the BoCCF in the context of the “Aisthiseis” programme, contributing to various stages of its development and implementation. The paper is based on their involvement, providing insight into the challenges and approaches of making the BoCCF’s museums more accessible to all.

Ioanna Pandeli collaborated with the BoCCF as an external collaborator and as one of the “Aisthiseis” project coordinators, alongside art therapist Lenia Georgiou. Her initial contribution focused on planning and implementing the project, under the guidance of the former Director of the BoCCF, Dr Ioanna Hadjicosti. She collaborated with people with disabilities, as well as with the School for the Blind and the Deaf, whose input was essential for the design of the project. Subsequently, she contributed as an archaeologist to the development of guided tours for the BoCCF’s museum, for diverse audiences, in collaboration with other external partners.

Andrea Oratiou, worked on the “Aisthiseis” project, by contributing as a workshop facilitator and as the designer of the museum-kit sub-project, under the guidance of Dr Hadjicosti. In relation to the workshops, she was involved throughout the entire process—from conceptual development to implementation—working collaboratively with professionals from diverse backgrounds. In this context, she shared her scientific expertise on artefacts displayed in the two museums.

Disability and Accessibility

Before discussing various solutions and ideas related to accessibility, it is necessary to clarify the definition of disability. As Granjon et al. (2025: 2) eloquently note *“Disability is now widely characterized as an impairment of the body or mind that substantially limits functioning [...] and constrains participation in regular daily activities [...]”*. Disabilities may be visible or invisible, including physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health conditions (Hendry et al., 2022; Javaid and Yusuf, 2024; Ruiz-Rodrigo et al., 2024: 1; Granjon et al., 2025; Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, n.d.).

The United Nations Charter of Human Rights states that: *“Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits”* (United Nations, 1948: Article 27). Consequently, cultural institutions must rethink the concept of accessibility (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010; Mastrogriuseppe et al., 2021: 114). According to the RelnHerit Project (2024: 76), a handbook on communication and collaboration for people working within the European cultural heritage sector, *“Accessibility refers to providing equal access to all people, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or experiential ability, and also refers to the process by which organisations enable multiple audiences to make sense of culture in different ways”*.

Accessibility in Museums

Research has shown that museums do not provide equal access for everyone, especially for people with disabilities (Leahy and Ferri, 2022: 69-71; González-Herrera et al., 2023; Chaidemenaki and Kolokytha, 2025: 494-495). Museums should not only be seen as places for collection, restoring, and displaying artefacts, but as dynamic spaces for education, cultural experience, and social engagement (Argyropoulos and Kanari, 2015: 131).

Many museums encourage an interactive process between public archaeology and public engagement, as its main purpose is to share knowledge in accessible, participatory, and meaningful ways (Christophilopoulou and Burn, 2020: 7; Wang, 2020: 2). In this context, multisensory experience serves as an essential tool for promoting interaction and experiential learning. Thus, public archaeology, engagement, and multisensory approaches can convert museums into spaces of dialogue, experience, and active participation (Christophilopoulou and Burn, 2020: 7; Wang, 2020: 2).

“AISTHISEIS”

Recognising the importance of accessibility and engagement of every individual in museum spaces, the BoCCF introduced the multi-sensory programme, titled “Aisthiseis” (meaning Senses), with former director, Dr Ioanna Hadjicosti being the initiator. The programme started in January 2023, two years prior to the establishment of the Law for Accessibility of Products and Services of the Republic of Cyprus (Accessibility of Products and Services Law, 2024). The primary goal was to redesign the spaces of the BoCCF, and mainly its museums, to accommodate the needs of visitors, including vulnerable groups. The BoCCF collaborated with various partners, including individuals belonging to vulnerable groups, who contributed to organising and implementing the programme.

Adaptations

First, it was essential to consider accessibility in all its dimensions: physical and information access, sensory and context accessibility (Kanari, 2020: 3; Kruczek, 2024: 13; Chaidemenaki and Kolokytha, 2025: 501-503). Adapting the existing museum spaces to facilitate full accessibility was a significant challenge, as it required careful planning, inclusive design, and attention to the different needs of visitors. Due to the historic character of the building, the process was even more complex, as any changes had to respect its original architectural features.

In terms of museum practice, accessibility increasingly involves multisensory approaches to engaging visitors with collections. Studies indicate that interacting with sensory objects offers social and even therapeutic benefits. In response, museums recognise the importance of “touch” as a form of therapy and cultural communication, “sound” as a means of creating immersive sensory experiences, and “smell” as a powerful tool for unlocking personal memory, imagination and emotional connection (Wang, 2020: 3; Koustriava and Koutsmani, 2023: 12). By engaging multiple senses, visitors can interact deeper with artefacts making cultural learning more approachable and memorable (Harada et al., 2018: 2222; Chaidemenaki and Kolokytha, 2025: 505).

Tactile engagement with exhibits represents one of several meaningful ways of interacting with collections. For people with visual impairments, direct contact with original artefacts, or accurate replicas is essential to enrich the whole experience (Piscitelli and Everett, 2003; Argyropoulos and Kanari, 2015: 136-138; Young et al., 2022: 210, 214). In this context, the BoCCF developed replicas of selected archaeological and other artefacts, imitating their material, size, texture, and details. Such replicas include pottery vessels and limestone statuettes. Additionally, 3D printing technology was used to create a model of a life-size limestone statue of a male figure, dating to the 6th century BC, which is now permanently exhibited at BoCCF’s archaeological museum (Fig. 1). Enlarged replicas of ancient coins from the Classical to the Roman periods were also produced using the same technique, emphasising the relief features of the depictions (Fig. 2).

The “virtual seat” is another aspect of “Aisthiseis”, providing live-streaming of BoCCF events for individuals unable to attend in person, accompanied by sign language interpretation or subtitles depending on the occasion. Audio guides and video guides in Cypriot Sign Language with subtitles, were recorded for the permanent collections of the BoCCF’s museums to provide an engaging experience. These guides can be accessed via QR codes (Fig. 3).

Museum guides were designed and printed in large-font format, using language that is suitable and easy for everyone to understand (Ginley, 2013). The guides follow the “easy-to-read” text, to assist individuals with written information difficulties. The guides were also printed in Braille, a tactile writing system of raised dots used by blind or visually impaired people (Kanari, 2020: 3; North Yorkshire County Council Health and Adult Services, n.d.).

Moreover, two tactile stations were designed, one for each of BoCCF’s two museums, according to European standards, ensuring that they can accommodate wheelchair users (Fig. 4). For safety reasons, the wooden station has a rounded, non-sharp shape. Visitors can touch a variety of sensory materials, such as clay, metal, and stone, and understand the process of creating an ancient artefact from the BoCCF’s collection, such as clay vessels and figurines or coins, depending on the collection of each museum. This approach helps visitors to understand not only the texture and the feeling of the materials, but also the stages of making and the craftsmanship behind the finished work.

Multisensory guided tours in the museums and the temporary exhibitions are offered with simultaneous interpretation in Cypriot Sign Language (Fig. 5). To assist sign language users, who need space and light to see the sign language interpreter, it is essential to provide adequate lighting, respecting also the conservation requirements of the artefacts (Koustriava and Koutsmani, 2023: 6). Higher lighting levels are important also for individuals with visual impairments, autism, or dementia (Charr, 2024).

Workshops

Building on the understanding that people of all ages with physical and mental health conditions benefit from engagement with culture, museums and arts activities (Veall et al., 2017; Chatterjee et al., 2018; Whyte and O’Kelly, 2022; Fares et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Curability, 2024; EC: DG EAC, 2025), “Aisthiseis” integrated educational activities and creative workshops, inspired by the permanent collections, focusing on themes of art therapy, museum education, therapeutic ceramics, experiential storytelling, creative writing, theatre, and music, facilitated by experts (Figs. 6-7). The authors’ participation in the workshops ensured the scientific accuracy of the information presented and the effective communication of key details about the museums’ exhibits, while collaborating with other professionals. An example of how different disciplines can collaborate, is a workshop held for a closed group during which participants engaged with the archaeological museum exhibits to better understand the importance of self-care and routines using relevant exhibits such as mirrors [Cypro-Archaic (750–475 BC), Cypro-Classical (475–312 BC), Roman (58 BC – AD early 4th) periods] and unguentaria [Hellenistic period (312–58 BC)].

A “walk-in theatre” workshop incorporated theatrical practices in museum spaces, using theatre as a tool for engaging people with the past in an interactive way. The workshop was designed by one author in collaboration with actress and theatre educator Natalia Panayiotou, for visitors with hearing impairments. The activities included reenactment of ancient rituals and representations of *symposia*, inspired by the artefacts of the two museums (Fig. 8). Theatre

activities within a museum showed that people can learn and create together, enriching public understanding of archaeology.

Another example is the treasure hunt that took place at the BoCCF Archaeological Museum. The facilitators, including one of the authors, designed a workshop in which participants had the opportunity to discover various artefacts through the use of their senses. For instance, to help participants understand the function of a Mycenaean amphoroid krater [Late Bronze Age (1650–1050 BC)], which was used for mixing water with wine, wine was poured in a glass and participants were asked to use their sense of smell to infer its use.

Senses Museum Kit

The BoCCF's multi-sensory museum kit, "Mouseiovalitsa Aisthiseon" (Senses Museum Kit), is a mobile educational programme designed to connect people who cannot visit museums with museum objects and Cyprus' cultural heritage (Fig. 9). It includes replicas from the BoCCF's museums (described above), enabling hands-on exploration and interactive learning. Parallel activities enhance the experience and can serve as an introduction to the BoCCF's museums. Information is also provided through QR codes linked to sign language, and audio descriptions. Adaptable for all ages, the kit is tailored to the needs of each group.

The museum kit was hosted by multiple institutions and schools, serving diverse audiences, including summer schools and after-school centres, secondary schools, kindergartens, the School for the Deaf in Cyprus, and care facilities. As in the "Aisthiseis" workshops, the kit also circulated through a collaborative model during visits to the Matera Group, accompanied by Andrea Oratiou and Natalia Panagiotou. The latter supported the recollection of lived experiences over time while fostering familiarity with Cypriot culture through engagement with the replicas.

Evidence of success

Feedback provided by participants, both formally and informally, constitutes a key indicator of the success of the Aisthiseis workshops and their overall impact on the visitor experience. In feedback relating to an art therapy workshop for individuals over the age of 60, participants reported feelings of gratitude and calm, while also emphasising the positive impact of such workshops for this age group (Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 2024).

In addition, oral feedback received by the authors at the conclusion of several workshops indicated that participants gained a deeper understanding of the exhibits, including artefacts and coins, as well as of the past more broadly, and that museum visits were perceived as enjoyable and engaging experiences. It is of high importance to mention a project that combines both the understanding of the past as well as accessibility.

Following a guided tour designed for people with visual impairments, evaluation forms were completed to assess participants' experience of touching replicas. One visitor stated, "*I appreciate attention towards blind people with examples to touch*", while another noted that: "*It was interesting to have the opportunity to touch coins and vases and statues*". The visitors highlighted the significance of tactile access to museum exhibits, even with replicas, particularly for people with visual impairments, in ensuring a meaningful museum visit. It is important to note that the selected artefacts have features and characteristics for sensory engagement, such as relief decoration, vessels with unique body shape, etc. (Christophilopoulou, 2020: 122).

Further indicators of success include the number of returning visitors, who chose to participate in the “Aisthiseis” workshops after a positive initial experience. Finally, the fact that 65 workshops were held in 2023 demonstrates the strong resonance of “Aisthiseis” within the local community (Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 2024).

Influence on the authors

It is of great importance to draw attention to the lessons gained by the authors during their “Aisthiseis” journey. This involvement shaped their understanding of how the public receives and interprets archaeological information. Such insights emerged through direct engagement with visitors and through the workshop design process with other professionals. Additionally, they attended networking events where they had the opportunity to meet and discuss with people working on making cultural heritage more accessible. A networking event was the two-day “Culture for All” conference, organised by the BoCCF promoting research exchange and collaboration among cultural heritage and museum professionals. Lastly, they participated in seminars and lectures advancing their knowledge around working with various vulnerable groups, including the importance of inclusive language use (Richardson and Kletchka, 2022; American Psychological Association, 2023; Javaid and Yusuf, 2024; Accessibility Unit of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, n.d.; The United Nations Office at Geneva, n.d.).

The way forward

While “Aisthiseis” was an innovative programme that stood out in 2023, there’s still room for improvement. BoCCF—and any cultural institution—can enhance accessibility by involving vulnerable groups in the co-creation process from design to implementation (Richardson and Kletchka, 2022; EC: DG EAC, 2025: 65). These groups are experts on accessibility and should not only be consulted but included as active team members (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010: 40; Richardson and Kletchka, 2022). Moreover, when developing strategies, museums must consider not only their existing audience but also the audiences they aim to reach (ReInHerit Project, 2024).

It is essential that more attention is given to people with invisible disabilities who are often misunderstood. These include a wide range of conditions that affect daily functioning, such as sensory impairments, cognitive and neurological disorders, chronic illnesses, and mental health conditions, among others (Hendry et al., 2022; Javaid and Yusuf, 2024; Granjon et al., 2025; Invisible Disabilities Association, n.d.; Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, n.d.). Culture-based activities should provide a safe and inclusive environment in which all participants can explore and interact without fear of judgment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010; ReInHerit Project, 2024; Granjon et al., 2025; North Yorkshire County Council Health and Adult Services, n.d.).

A key improvement would be the permanent display of replicas in archaeological museums and collections, either beside the original artefacts or in a dedicated space. Braille labels should accompany both originals and replicas, offering detailed descriptions. Additionally, tactile maps and floor signage would enhance orientation and allow visitors to navigate independently (Braille Authority of North America, 2010; Ginley, 2013). Equally important is access for visitors using sign language; videos in International Sign Language should be recorded and displayed in museums’ permanent collections (Constantinou et al., 2016).

Museums' websites could be redesigned to make accessibility information easier to locate, including clear details about building access, entrances, ramps, lifts and parking (Argyropoulos and Kanari, 2015: 137, 139; Leahy and Ferri, 2022: 77; Kruczek et al., 2024: 5–7, 10). Pre-visit information is vital for accessibility, as visitors need to know what facilities are available to feel safe and independent. This information should be clearly provided on museums' websites. A useful tool would be a sensory map, designed to help people on the autism spectrum, and social stories with photos and simple instructions, as seen in the Museum of English Rural Life, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Leeds City Museum (see for the Museum of English Rural Life: Accessibility, n.d.; Sensory Map, n.d.; Social Story, n.d.; see for the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Resources for Visitors on the Autism Spectrum, n.d; Sensory Friendly Map, n.d.; Social Narrative, n.d.; see for the Leeds City Museum: Access Information, n.d.).

New digital technologies allow visitors to engage with museums on sensory, emotional, and physical levels, creating multi-layered experiences that attract diverse audiences (ReInHerit Project, 2024). As technology rapidly evolves and continues to captivate children and young adults, museums must integrate digital tools to stay relevant and engaging.

Museums and cultural spaces should recognise the unique characteristics and strengths of their communities, adopting strategies that actively involve them. Building long-term relationships with local groups and stakeholders is essential, as it is investing in staff training and professional development. Strengthening visibility through effective online communication can further raise awareness of their work and the role of culture in health and related actions (Lackoi et al., 2016; ReInHerit Project, 2024; EC: DG EAC, 2025: 77).

Social and culture-based prescribing have been shown to have a significant positive impact on both physical and mental health. Social prescribing refers to the practice whereby healthcare professionals refer individuals to social and community-based activities as part of a broader approach to care. Culture-based prescribing constitutes a subcategory of social prescribing and includes cultural (heritage) and arts activities (Veall et al., 2017; Chatterjee et al., 2018; Whyte and O'Kelly, 2022; World Health Organisation Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2022; Bekkering et al., 2023; Mishina and Eino, 2023; Cieslak et al., 2024: 7; Curability, 2024; Fares et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region Project Partnership, 2025: 7; EC: DG EAC, 2025). "The Compendium: health promotion through cultural learning experiences" (Whyte and O'Kelly, 2022) is an output of the "Culture on Prescription" project, providing numerous examples of such practices worldwide. More examples can be found in the sources cited above.

Conclusion

Research and observations from "Aisthiseis" highlight the importance of selecting workshop leaders based on their background and expertise to ensure effective community-based work (Cieslak et al., 2024: 14). Through the involvement of the BoCCF's archaeological collections, the project introduced a more inclusive model of public engagement with Cypriot archaeology, as museum activities benefit diverse audiences with visible or invisible disabilities (Veall et al., 2017; Fares et al., 2024). By using multisensory and accessible approaches, the programme engaged vulnerable groups, fostering participation, inclusion, and interest in Cypriot archaeology and cultural heritage. "Aisthiseis" demonstrated how accessibility-driven practices can strengthen community

connections with archaeology, advancing the principle “More Senses – Fewer Barriers – Better Society.”

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Captions

Fig. 1: Life-size statue, created with 3D printing technology, now permanently exhibited at the BoCCF’s Archaeological Museum – Collection of George and Nefeli Giabra Pierides. Photograph by Ioanna Panteli.

Fig. 2: Replicas of ancient coins from the Classical to Roman periods. Photograph by Kyriakos Xristodoulides - Courtesy of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig. 3: Audio guides and videos with interpretation in Cypriot Sign Language for the permanent collection of the BoCCF’s museums are accessible via QR codes. Photograph by Kyriakos

Xristodoulides - Courtesy of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig. 4: Tactile station was produced in order to be used by anyone who is interested in experiencing the materials of selected ancient Cypriot artefacts. Photograph by Ioanna Panteli.

Fig. 5: Multisensory guide tour with simultaneous Cypriot Sign Language translation/narration in the Museum of History of Cypriot Coinage of Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation. Photograph courtesy of a participant.

Fig. 6: A workshop in the Museum of the History of Cypriot Coinage. Photograph by Kyriakos Xristodoulides - Courtesy of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig. 7: A workshop in the Archaeological Museum – Collection of George and Nefeli Giabra Pierides. Photograph by Kyriakos Xristodoulides - Courtesy of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig. 8: Theatrical workshop in the Archaeological Museum Collection of George and Nefeli Giabra Pierides. Photograph by Kyriakos Xristodoulides - Courtesy of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation © Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

Fig.9: “Mouseiovalitsa Aisthiseon” - Senses Museum Kit (Designed and Photographed by Stefan Prokopiou - Interior Designer) Copyrights to the museum kit belong to the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.