Fernweh

CROSSING BORDERS AND CONNECTING PEOPLE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

Essays in honour of prof. Willem J.H. Willems

edited by
Monique H. van den Dries, Sjoerd J. van der Linde & Amy Strecker

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Solving the puzzle

The characteristics of archaeological tourism

Annemarie Willems and Cynthia Dunning

ArchaeoConcept / ArchaeoTourism2012, Switzerland

Rien 'est plus ennuyeux qu'un paysage anonyme (Prosper Merimée).
[Nothing is more boring than an unnamed landscape]

Touristic activities at archaeological sites are often referred to as 'archaeotourism', but what exactly does this mean? In this paper the particularities of archaeological tourism will be defined in comparison to heritage or cultural tourism and we will argue that a better understanding and acknowledgement of the particularities of archaeological tourism will benefit the effectiveness of tourism management. We aim to build up a basic understanding of archaeology in relation to tourism because we believe this knowledge could be valuable to management plans for archaeological sites that are considered for touristic activity. We will specifically be speaking about the 'sites with little or no visible remains' as opposed to monumental archaeology.

Empty sites

According to Jonathan Culler (1990), empty [invisible] sites become sights through the attachment of markers. An archaeological site can be 'nothing' in tourist eyes until it is made visible with so-called 'markers', which exist in multiple forms like plaques, (written) guides or even visitor centres (Culler 1990). These markers represent the site, make the site recognizable and give information about its significance. A site can of course never be literally 'empty', but an archaeological site can easily go unnoticed to non-professionals without some pointers. This 'cloak of invisibility' protects the archaeological sites from bad intentions, but to make it suitable for visitors, markers are needed to provide the visitor with the right tools to visit the site in a respectful and sustainable way. Therefore, a management plan needs to be drawn up before the site is revealed to the visitor.

'Archaeological heritage' is that part of the material heritage which archaeological methods provide primary information on. It comprises all vestiges of human existence and consists of places relating to all manifestations of human activity, abandoned structures, and remains of all kinds (including subterranean and underwater sites), together with all the portable cultural material associated with them (ICAHM 1990). When dealing with archaeology and tourism one should always be aware that archaeology is a non-renewable source. When it is not

excavated properly, or when it is destroyed or damaged it cannot be undone, thus also destroying all the information it could have given us and future generations about the past. This means that protecting the site and explaining the importance of protection to the visitor are essential to the preservation of knowledge in the future.

This vulnerability also applies to other forms of cultural heritage of course, but archaeological tourism differs from other cultural heritage in two ways. First, archaeological sites are embedded in the landscape, with elements above ground, below ground and/or under water. Second, archaeological methods used to obtain knowledge of the site, such as excavations, simultaneously destroy the anthropomorphic features in the landscape.

Special requirements for archaeological sites

From the 'archaeotourism' perspective, archaeological sites come in three stages: not-excavated, partially excavated and completely excavated. In the first stage the level of knowledge will be the lowest but the site will be completely intact. Visual aid is required to help the visitors see, experience and interpret the non-excavated site. The archaeologists depend on other sources to interpret the site (*e.g.* research results from similar sites in the region or further away, written sources if they exist, oral history and remote sensing techniques).

A site in its second stage provides more knowledge to the archaeologist. Where in the first stage the interpretation possibilities can be manifold, in this second stage the collected data from the excavation will point the interpretation in a more specific direction. The story of the site is still not complete and leaves room for the 'professional interpreters' to interpret the site and pass this information on to the visitor, thus becoming a marker himself.

In the third stage the site is completely excavated, which means that most of the data of the site has been collected and interpreted. The level of knowledge at this stage is the greatest, but there is often no material culture left *in situ*, and the features in the landscape will be gone.

Each of these three stages needs its own fitting presentation techniques and needs to be considered differently. Whereas in the first stage presentation techniques are needed to show what *may be*, in the third stage these techniques are needed to show what *has been*.

Another complicating factor for 'archaeotourism' is that archaeological sites are not always visible in their surrounding landscape. They can be concealed under the ground, under water or they may be invisible for laymen's eyes. This means that if and when a site is opened to visitors, they need help interpreting the site. Markers are essential to help visitors see, or as Copeland puts it: 'Making sense of the parts once the whole has been seen is often more effective than trying the build the whole from the parts. (…) There need to be panoramic views of the site and guided routes that enable the visitor to get an image of the whole site' (Copeland *et al.* 2006: 89). Nowadays there are many presentation and visualisation techniques, such as augmented reality, that help create this panoramic view.

The big puzzle

Markers are not just essential to help visitors see, but also to protect the site because it is easy to damage something you cannot see or do not understand. Therefore the development of a process for the visitor to better comprehend the site is essential for a long-term protection of any archaeological site.

Heritage interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (Tilden 1957). Archaeological sites are open to interpretation, because research can never provide the complete story of the site, there are always blank spots and the data are always subject to interpretation. An archaeological site can be considered a puzzle with many missing pieces. Through archaeology some of the pieces are

> 'The particularities of archaeological sites – their vulnerability, invisibility and potential for multiple interpretations – form the main pull factors for the visitor.'

found, but the puzzle and thus the story will never be complete. The expert interpretation may very well differ from the visitors' perception depending on the visitor's frame of reference. Visitors are curious about what is hidden and rely on the markers and their fantasy to interpret what they see. Visiting an archaeological site is therefore an emotional activity and a personal experience. The fact that part of the story is inaccessible provokes curiosity and stimulates fantasy. Shanks (1991) describes archaeology as being a vector of emotions and feelings, and stresses on the importance of the experiences it allows to convey. According to the American Institute of Archaeology (AIA) archaeological tourism combines a passion for the past with a sense of adventure and discovery: people are fascinated with ancient and historical remains. Archaeological tourism lets visitors experience the past and allows them to share in the thrill of discovery. The inaccessible nature of archaeological sites often adds to the sense of adventure.

From the above we can conclude that for empty or invisible archaeological sites the visitors will need markers to help them see, experience and interpret them. An archaeological site is not self-explanatory and is vulnerable since it is easy to damage something you cannot see, understand or are unaware of. Archaeological tourism has many resemblances with other forms of cultural tourism, especially heritage tourism, but the particularities can be summarized as vulnerability, invisibility and a potential for multiple interpretations. It is in particular these particularities that have a strong emotional appeal and they form the main pull factors for the visitor. They can be put to use when putting a site management plan into place and equipping the site or monument to become a 'touristic experience'.

Creating a new tourism brand?

A wide range of related activities, including archaeological tourism, heritage tourism, museum tourism, arts tourism and others all fall under the umbrella of cultural tourism and they all share common sets of resources, management issues, and desired aspirational outcomes (McKercher and Du Cros 2002). We do not believe it to be necessary to create a new brand named 'archaeotourism' and to communicate it as such to the visitor. We do, however, believe that the particularities of archaeological tourism should be acknowledged (Dunning and Willems 2013), because it will benefit all parties. The first step in preparing an archaeological site or monument for tourism is to understand what can turn an archaeological site into a touristic experience and what the motives and expectations are of the potential visitors. In this realm, there is still much to learn and do.

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