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European Association for Heritage Interpretation

# Online symposium
# 26-27 February 2026

# The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation

# Proceedings

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Interpret Europe

# Online symposium
# The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation

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Interpret Europe's online symposium 2026, **The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation**, took place online on 26-27 February 2026. It brought together more than 160 participants to explore how narratives shape meaning, dialogue and responsibility in heritage interpretation today.

Developed by Interpret Europe in collaboration with UNESCO, the Learning Landscapes initiative supports heritage areas in becoming places where interpretation connects people, strengthens communities, and fosters shared responsibility for the future. Within this framework, the online symposium invited heritage professionals, practitioners, researchers and educators to reflect on the role of narratives in contemporary interpretation. Moving beyond single stories and fixed messages, the symposium explored narratives as spaces for dialogue, learning and shared meaning-making.

Why narratives? Why now?
Narratives shape how heritage is understood, experienced and valued. They influence identities, relationships and public debate. In a time marked by social change, environmental challenges and contested histories, working with narratives has become a central task for interpretation. The symposium offered a space to reflect on how narratives can connect, question and open dialogue — including when they are multiple, emerging or in tension with one another.

The Interpret Europe Learning Landscape team comprises: Lucija Gudlin (Germany) as coordinator, along with Thorsten Ludwig (Germany), Valya Stergioti (Greece) and Vanessa Vaio (Italy) as developers of the programme and mentors to the interpretive agents in the pilot areas.

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# Opening addresses

## Welcome address

### Helena Vičič
### IE Managing Director (Slovenia)

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

We have two intense days ahead of us, full of inspiration — and judging by the programme, it will be well worth staying glued to our screens from beginning to end.

Welcome to the Interpret Europe online symposium, 'The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation'. It is a great pleasure to open such a rich programme, packed with case studies, speeches, discussions and more. We have plenty of experience in online conferences, so I am sure that this will be another great event.

The symposium is part of the broader Learning Landscapes initiative, generously supported by the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe. We have Matteo Rosati, UNESCO's representative, here with us, and he will also say some words shortly.

The Learning Landscapes initiative supports heritage areas in becoming places where interpretation connects people. Over 18 months, it is empowering four pilot areas to develop interpretive strategies and plans — with an ambitious goal: fostering shared responsibility for heritage and our shared future among both local communities and their guests. Today's focus on narratives grows directly out of this work. In the real world, narratives are not abstract concepts — they are lived realities, more or less harmonious. Engaging with them is both a challenge and an opportunity.

But to understand why these topics are important to Interpret Europe, let us briefly look back.

In 2016, at a moment marked by Brexit in Europe and the first inauguration of President Trump in the USA, many of us felt that the world around us was shifting. Public discourse was becoming increasingly polarised, and heritage was, at times, being used as a line of division.

Within our network, colleagues began to ask an important and courageous question: Do we, as interpreters, have a role to play in this? Heritage is never neutral. It is interpreted by communities, by interest groups, by nations and governments. And while interpretation can foster belonging and dialogue, it can also — if misused — deepen divides and fuel exclusion.

It became clear to us that engaging critically and responsibly with narratives was not optional. It was essential. And interpreters have a chance to make people mindful of them.

Out of this reflection grew our 2017 initiative, 'Engaging citizens with Europe's cultural heritage'. The booklet that emerged from this process — and which we still proudly reference — was honoured with the Altiero Spinelli Prize. Moreover, Interpret Europe was invited to train the task force for the European Year of Cultural Heritage in Brussels — a milestone moment for a small NGO with a strong belief.

Our subsequent initiative, 'Fostering heritage communities', turned the spotlight towards inspiring examples from the Western Balkans, where communities and grassroots movements reclaimed ownership of their heritage and its interpretation.

Both publications are available on our website as a reminder to continue this important work.
The current initiative, Learning Landscapes, has, therefore, a longer beard. Seven years ago, Matteo Rosati from UNESCO spoke at our conference in Sarajevo. Since then, our two organisations have continued advancing the field of so-called 'Value-based heritage interpretation' together. Seven is said to be a magical number – and indeed, we need some magic in this partnership since we're paving the ground for the role that interpretation shall hold in future.

Both organisations believe that interpretation can be a powerful force for transformation.
By fostering dialogue, empathy and reflection, interpretation is becoming a catalyst for active citizenship and sustainable thinking.

During these seven years, UNESCO and IE have jointly organised more than 20 capacity-building events for over 300 professionals at UNESCO-designated sites across Europe. That, dear Matteo, sounds like a very good reason to celebrate.

This symposium is certainly one of the highlights of our shared journey — and it is so because of you: dear colleagues, contributors and participants. Each of you will add a piece to a growing mosaic of knowledge. By dealing with the whole complexity of narratives, you are helping to move our profession — and perhaps even our societies — a little further forward.

Without further ado, it is my great pleasure to invite Matteo Rosati, Programme Specialist and Officer-in-Charge of the Culture Unit at the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe, to bless this symposium with his words.

# Welcome address

## Matteo Rosati
## UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Italy)

**Matteo Rosati** is an expert in international cultural cooperation. He currently serves as the Programme Specialist for Culture and Intersectoral Activities at the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe (Venice, Italy).

Many thanks to Interpret Europe for inviting me to this symposium, which I do not only consider personally very interesting, but increasingly important and relevant to the work we do in UNESCO.

I could speak at length about the programmatic and technical anchorage of the joint activities that UNESCO and IE are carrying out in this region, starting from the need to respond to the requirements of different UNESCO designation systems, whether World Heritage or biosphere reserves or UNESCO Global Geoparks, and the necessity to also align with international standards in other domains such as education for sustainable development or global citizenship.

But today I would prefer to focus on a more general aspect related to the ethical foundation of our cooperation. I believe we all agree that heritage interpretation in UNESCO sites has a key role in improving the understanding, the appreciation, the protection, and the overall management of these sites.

I'm also convinced that a specialised approach to heritage interpretation at UNESCO sites can

and ought to ensure that these sites reflect and uphold the fundamental values in which UNESCO's mission is rooted. Interpretation should support sites and practising and communicating these values–even with a critical approach–thereby helping to meet the ethical commitment that should accompany any activity carried out under the aegis of UNESCO.

Peace, dialogue, sustainability, inclusion, cooperation, respect for diversity – these are not just buzzwords or boxes to be checked. They are the cardinal points of the compass that guide how the UNESCO vision is implemented. And to some extent, this should also be reflected in the territories that seek and obtain UNESCO designations, with the aim of shaping not only heritage policies and practices at site level, but also the awareness, conscience and behaviours of those who interact with heritage.

UNESCO designation systems were not created as a brand, but as platforms for international cooperation towards the achievement of shared objectives based on shared values. Designations are, therefore, the expression of a commitment in this sense. This is the assumption underlying the cooperation between UNESCO and Interpret Europe, and in particular the activities that we have jointly undertaken through the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Europe. Helena has already recalled some key steps and results in this process since 2019 when we began with a narrow focus on visitor centres and UNESCO sites. Since then, we have launched a series of innovative initiatives to develop a specific value-based approach to heritage interpretation at UNESCO sites and to strengthen the capacities of the sites to apply it.

More eloquent speakers than me will tell you more about what we mean by value-based heritage interpretation and about the activities that we are implementing in this field. Our latest joint initiative, still ongoing, aims to enhance UNESCO sites as platforms for developing interpretive strategies for broader areas, turning heritage landscapes into learning environments. Activities are underway, as mentioned, in four pilot areas, and the results of this phase will be shared later this year. You will hear more about these activities from those directly involved with them in the dedicated panel discussion, and I am myself eager to learn about their experiences.

So let me conclude with this point: UNESCO's and Interpret Europe's missions and value frameworks do share significant common ground, particularly around the transformative role of heritage for societies. It is on this shared ground and on the combination of our respective roles and responsibilities that our cooperation is built, and this is what gives deeper meaning to the work we carry out together.

Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to the rest of this very interesting programme. I must say: most of the little I know about heritage interpretation I have learnt thanks to Interpret Europe, so I'm sure I will learn even more today. I wish you a fruitful continuation.

# Introductory paper

## The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation


### Thorsten Ludwig (Germany)

**Thorsten Ludwig** studied archaeology and interpretation (MSc). He worked at a German national park until 1993, when he founded Bildungswerk interpretation as his own consultancy.

For 12 years, he was on the Board of Directors of the German Association for Natural and Environmental Education (ANU), as he spent some years as Chair of the Board of a foundation that operates a medieval castle. From 2015-2021 he was Interpret Europe's Managing Director. In this role, he received the EU Altiero Spinelli Prize for launching the initiative, 'Engaging citizens with Europe's cultural heritage'.

He became involved in the UNESCO project WH-Interp, which incorporated value-based heritage interpretation into interpretive planning at World Heritage properties, and he is currently entrusted with the role of developer for the initiative, 'Creating learning landscapes through heritage interpretation' (the Learning Landscapes initiative), which IE is delivering together with UNESCO.

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the topic of the symposium: The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation. The paper illustrates recent developments of the interpretive profession and provides some theoretical insights before the exchange of practical experiences begins.


The symposium took place within the framework of the Learning landscapes initiative of UNESCO and Interpret Europe (IE). Since 2024, there have been four pilot learning landscapes whose development is facilitated by four pairs of interpretive agents. They were trained for that purpose and are mentored in their work. The key task of the agents is to co-create an interpretive strategy around several heritage properties together with their stakeholders. The need to deal with narratives stems directly from their work.

Serving as a starting point for the symposium, the paper does not present new theses but rather summarises what has resulted from the cooperation between UNESCO and IE, and in particular from the development and practical testing of the IE training programme over the last ten years. The first part of the paper addresses the question of what 21st century heritage interpretation actually means.

The term originates from the US National Park Service, which speaks of a paradigm shift in this context. There is now less emphasis on communicating interpretation to people (which was the focus towards the end of the 20th century) and more emphasis on direct interpretation and understanding by people. This applies to both visitors and local people. The idea is that heritage becomes more meaningful to people, but also that people become more mindful of our common future. People are increasingly exposed to all kinds of information and should be able to interpret it responsibly. Reflecting on heritage experiences against the background of their own values should foster the interpretive literacy of all.

This is an ambitious undertaking. It requires the development of new skills in interpretive planning to create suitable spaces and means for interaction, but also moderation skills to facilitate individual interpretations based on different and even contradictory narratives. Some of the questions arising from this were part of the call for proposals for the symposium.

In all democratic societies, the UN sustainable development goals require citizens to engage in order to make informed individual decisions. A reason why the paradigm shift in heritage interpretation is particularly relevant in Europe, is the close connection between most listed heritage properties and local residents. The subject, therefore, resonates with several key documents from the Council of Europe and the European Union. For its Engaging citizens initiative (2016-18), IE was awarded the EU Altiero Spinelli Prize.

European intellectual history also offers numerous approaches for taking a new look at heritage interpretation. The paper touches on a few of these points, too. In continental philosophy, philosophical hermeneutics, as a general theory of interpretation, is particularly noteworthy. Although the discussion on this topic is still in its early stages, it seems as if re-examining heritage interpretation against this background could lead to a major shift in how professionals in the heritage interpretation field define themselves and their role.

In transition to the panel discussion and the case studies presented at the symposium, this paper explains the originally intended structure of the development of learning landscapes, the transformation to the iterative approach in developing an interpretive strategy that appears more like a colourful mosaic, and it ends with the question whether the interpretive agents in the pilot areas in fact perceive their emerging interpretive strategy more as a colourful mosaic or rather as an infinite maze (which was the central point of the panel debate).

**Keywords**
value-based heritage interpretation, learning landscape, interpretive literacy, interpretive agent, hermeneutic turn

## What is 21st century heritage interpretation?

During the first quarter of the 21st century, heritage interpretation began to undergo a paradigm shift. In the vicinity of IE, this shift was fuelled by considerations regarding the role of values that hold Europe together and inspired by the integration of continental philosophical traditions. This chapter illustrates the background of this shift, starting from the development in the USA.

### From interpretation to communicating interpretation – and back

The first 100 years of what is now called 'heritage interpretation' took place almost exclusively in the USA. The approach can be traced back to the establishment of the national parks, and the US National Park Service is credited with making heritage interpretation a recognised profession (MackIntosh 1986).

Regarding the European development, it wasn't until 1975 that a national association for heritage interpretation was established in the UK (AHI 2012). Despite the later foundation of further associations, the approach only began to spread more widely from the year 2000 onwards, with the initiation of Interpret Europe, first as an informal international network (Lehnes and Zanyi 2001) and then in 2010 as a registered association. At that time, many other concepts for non-formal learning were already established in Europe (Ludwig 1995), and it was difficult to explain what 'heritage interpretation' meant and why it is actually needed. This was

also due to the fact that the concept had evolved away from the generally accepted meaning of the term 'interpretation'.

When this term was first introduced in the heritage context in the USA, it was easy to understand. John Muir, a 19th century nature conservationist, is usually cited as the source for the first use of 'interpretation' in connection with nature (Sharpe 1982). In 1871, Muir wrote in what would later become Yosemite National Park: "I'll interpret the rocks [...] I acquaint myself with the glaciers and wild gardens and get as near to the heart of the world as I can" (Wolfe 1978:144).

When Muir interpreted, he did nothing other than what every person does all day, and which is a key characteristic of the human species: he was reflecting in order to make sense of his surroundings. The philosopher Jens Zimmermann states: "Interpretation is not an occasional luxury but our fundamental way of being in the world" (Zimmermann 2015:9). The essential characteristic was that Muir did this with great affection for what he believed should be protected as natural heritage – hence the later term 'heritage interpretation'.

**Figure 1. Someone interpreting (Illustration: Phil Rutt)**

As a younger friend of John Muir, Enos Mills saw the role of the 'interpreter' (Mills 1920/1990:170) as "translator of the great book of nature" (Ibid. 169). In 1902, he created an informal 'trail school' (Ibid. 112) that led to the first certified nature guides in what would later become the Rocky Mountains National Park. Mill's nature guides encouraged their guests to explore and to interpret their experiences – but they also shared their own interpretations.

**Figure 2. Someone interpreting for someone else (Illustration: Phil Rutt)**

In 1916, the US National Park Service was established. With regard to its 50th anniversary, the journalist Freeman Tilden wrote his seminal book, 'Interpreting our heritage' (Tilden 1957). In it, he proposed definitions and principles for heritage interpretation which still serve as a point of reference today.

Meanwhile, the Service included multiple natural and cultural heritage properties, and it employed professional interpretive rangers. They encouraged visitors to interpret the now-designated sites as John Muir did, they shared their own interpretations with their visitors as Enos Mills did, but above all, their task was to convey the interpretations of the Service. How to make the latter relevant to visitors and present it in an enjoyable way became the ultimate hallmark of heritage interpretation towards the end of the 20th century. Interpretation as a process by which an individual 'translates' heritage phenomena for themselves faded more and more into the background.

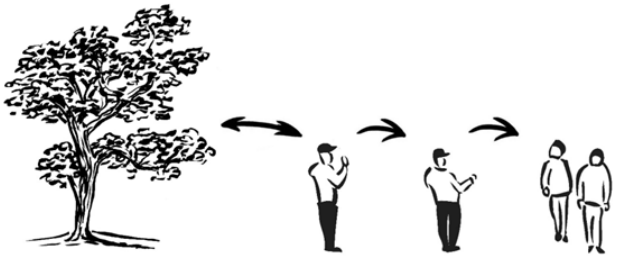

**Figure 3. Someone communicating the interpretation of someone to someone else (Illustration: Phil Rutt)**

Sam Ham (1992:4) wrote: "In interpretation […] the goal is to communicate a message". As the "central or key idea of any presentation", the interpretive theme had been introduced by Bill Lewis (1989:37-38), and Ham consequently stated, "a theme is a message". In the 1990s, 'thematic interpretation' (Ham 1992:33) became the leading paradigm for the interpretive profession. Heritage interpretation was no longer 'interpretation', it had become 'communication of interpretation'.

In the USA, it was henceforth described as "a mission-based communication process", communicating "meanings inherent in the resource" (NAI 2007). Opening up the field to more clients, 'heritage' eventually disappeared from the definitions. For people who were not familiar with these developments and heard of 'interpretation' in the context of heritage for the first time, the term started to cause confusion. To avoid this, some proponents actually suggested that professionals providing interpretive services should rather be called 'public relations specialists' (Novey 2008:57).

In reaction, however, voices grew louder that questioned this development. Some authors argued that, "there is not a single meaning inherent in anything" (Enright 2018). Others warned that interpretation, which was once committed to the higher goal of appreciating and caring for heritage, could "become an instrument which could be employed to achieve any goal set by those who pay" (Lehnes 2017:72).

As a result, a development began that picked up on Muir's original intention and looked like a return to the roots, but was less driven by nostalgia and had a more progressive background. It was primarily based on the realisation that citizens in democratic societies should not only be seen as recipients, but should be encouraged to think what they could learn through heritage, and be enabled to interpret on their own with interpretive services providing background support.

**Figure 4. Someone supporting the interpretation of someone else (Illustration: Phil Rutt)**

In a turn away from what he proposed at the end of the 20th century, the US National Park Service now introduced this as '21st century interpretation' (USNPS 2019:3) from which the title for the symposium was borrowed. The Service described the development such that, at the end of the 20th century, the main focus was on people taking away a fixed meaning, while around the turn of the millennium, the focus shifted more to stimulating independent thinking, but not necessarily providing space for exchange. In the 21st century, the exchange of people's own interpretations should now become paramount.

This meant "letting go of the traditional role of primary expert" (USNPS 2014:10) for a "new paradigm for interpretation" (sic!), including "21st century skills (e.g. critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, as well as communication and collaboration)" (USNPS 2014:6). Parks should become "places to ask and discuss the big questions facing our society" (USNPS 2019:4) with interpreters turning from presenters into facilitators. Accordingly, the provocation aspect of Tilden's six principles was highlighted again, aiming to put people "in possession of at least one disturbing idea that may grow into a fruitful interest" (Tilden 1957:91).

| Interpretive skills | Interpretive Development Program 1.0 | 21st century interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| Late 20th century | Turn of the century | Early 21st century |
| Craft a story and tell it well | Craft opportunities to connect intellectually and emotionally | Craft opportunities for participation and collaboration |
| Draw our meaning | Draw your own meaning, silently | Draw your own meaning, express it |
| Resource preservation | Enjoyment and understanding | New skills, capacities and behaviours |

**Table 1. Towards 21st century interpretation (according to USNPS 2019:3)**

Reflecting on what the ultimate goal of contemporary interpretive services should be, Ham (2013:56) now recommended what he called the 'provocation endgame'. More than 20 years after his previously mentioned suggestion that interpretation should communicate messages, he reminded us that Tilden wrote: "meanings and relationships are self-revealed in visitors' minds as a result of the thinking that good interpretation can provoke", and "the interpreter's role is one of facilitating or stimulating" (Ham 2013:7). He further explained: "Tilden saw in the 1950s what it took nearly three decades of research to demonstrate later: that the only meanings a visitor can attach to a place, thing, or concept are those that he or she makes in his or her own mind" (Ham 2013:7). And while 20th century interpretive services had almost exclusively been tailored to visitors of heritage properties, they now aimed to also include local residents (Brochu and Merriman 2011) who could hardly be seen as recipients of the heritage with which they lived daily.

Regarding narratives as the topic of this symposium, the US National Park Service (USNPS) explains that a "site's resources […] possess multiple meanings that can be viewed from multiple perspectives" and asks its staff members "to recognise, acknowledge and truly respect the concept of multiple perspectives" (USNPS 2012:1). It confirms that "the primary purpose of interpretation is to enrich people's lives through meaningful learning experiences […] to build community and sustain the health of the planet […as] primary reasons for preserving natural and cultural resources", referring to "the essential questions these places pose to society today", and considering all people including visitors as "stakeholders and primary contributors to the meaning-making process" (USNPS 2019:1). According to this policy, "it is the diversity of resource meanings that provides the possibility of constituency building and a growing stewardship ethic" (USNPS 2012:1).

This also requires a shift in roles. The USNPS (2012:2) distinguishes the role of a presenter and the role of a facilitator as follows:

Presenter

- Transmits information
- Provides the right answers
- Relies on one-way communication
- Is primarily self-focused

Facilitator

- Guides discussion for self-discovery
- Provides the right questions
- Relies on two-way communication
- Actively focuses on the resource and visitors

What is assigned to the 'presenter' (and, of course, still required) is 'communicating interpretation'. For example, ICOMOS' 'Charter for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites' (Ename Charter) suggests that 'presentation' means "communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information" (ICOMOS 2008:2). However, in the Ename Charter as in other documents referring to the two terms 'presentation' and 'interpretation', their demarcation is not entirely clear. The more recent 'draft definitions' of the UNESCO International Centre for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage (WHIPIC) offer a closer approximation: "Heritage Interpretation is a meaning-making process through communication, participation and experience.

Heritage Presentation is a range of methods of interpretation delivery" (UNESCO 2023:56). However, the major organisations are still reflecting on these questions, and there will be further developments.

In any case, the current challenge for the interpretive profession lies not so much in professional presentation but in the professional handling of people's interpretations in order to build their interpretive literacy.

## The role of Interpret Europe

In 2015, IE launched a survey on trends and developments affecting heritage interpretation in Europe. Findings highlighted the relevance of people searching for purpose (IE 2016).

In preparation for its 2016 conference, 'Heritage interpretation – for the future of Europe', IE related this trend to the political relevance of heritage interpretation. IE's 'Engaging citizens initiative' (IE 2017), pointed out that, "the most significant feature of heritage interpretation is that it actively encourages participants to interpret their experience themselves in searching for their own meaningful context behind the facts" (IE 2017:10). Within the interpretive community, IE advocated that interpretive themes should be understood less as messages and more as offers that encourage reflection upon human values and frames (referring to Schwartz 1992 and to Holmes et al. 2011).

In 2017, IE promoted this view in training events for the EU (DG Education and Culture) and the Council of Europe (CD Culture and Cultural Heritage) and was appointed to the European Commission's Expert Group on Cultural Heritage. Its 'Engaging citizens initiative' was awarded the EU Altiero Spinelli Prize.

In 2019, IE began its collaboration with UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe. This resulted in UNESCO's recommendations for 'value-based heritage interpretation' (UNESCO 2020:29) and in IE's new focus on fostering "interpretive literacy […] to cope with the challenges of our time" (Ludwig 2021:44). Subsequently, three key steps were taken: IE reviewed its training programme to better align it to these requirements; UNESCO conducted a WH-Interp project to test the results in two pilot courses with representatives from UNESCO World Heritage sites (UNESCO 2022); and IE and UNESCO together launched the 'Learning landscapes initiative' (Ludwig 2023) to merge the work of the past years and to develop a concept for co-creating interpretive strategies with multiple heritage stakeholders in local areas.

Within this initiative, interpretive literacy is defined as the "ability to make sense of the world in a way that fosters contextual understanding and responsible judgement" (IE 2025). Essential for growing this ability through heritage experiences is the training of local planners, writers and guides, but above all, the development of joint strategies in co-creative workshops facilitated by trained interpretive agents.

The initiative will end in spring 2026, when the approach will be incorporated into the IE training programme. The central question of this symposium – how to deal with multiple narratives – arose directly from the work of the interpretive agents in their four pilot areas.

## Developments in organisations that are not focused on interpretation

Of course, it is not only the associations for heritage interpretation that encourage more engagement with human values to foster participation in society.

UNESCO, particularly within the frameworks of education for sustainable development (ESD) and global citizenship education (GCED), devoted considerable attention to the question of how the 17 sustainability goals (UN 2015) can be implemented and how people can be involved in these processes. The ideas behind 21st century heritage interpretation can be found anywhere within these concepts (Ludwig 2020).

Many documents at European level have also been written in this spirit. Among the guidelines, charters and agreements of the Council of Europe that deal with participation, the 2000 Florence Convention (CoE 2008) and the 2005 Faro Convention (CoE 2005) are of particular interest for heritage interpretation.

Regarding the European Union, the Treaty of Lisbon (EU 2007) led to the establishment of the European Heritage Alliance of more than 50 organisations (including IE). Two landmark initiatives of the European Commission were the European Heritage Label (since 2011) and the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, which has set a multitude of processes in motion.

Non-governmental umbrella organisations reacted accordingly. With regard to natural heritage, the Europarc Federation has presented a charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas (Europarc 2010), which promotes not only heritage interpretation but also a partnership-based approach with local stakeholders. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) agreed upon a new definition of museums as places that foster sustainability and the "participation of communities" (ICOM 2022). This also happened in response to a strong trend towards a more "participatory museum" (Simon 2010). As far as the latter is concerned, the ecomuseum approach from the 1970s is experiencing a renaissance, since it focuses on the involvement of local people (De Varine 1996; Davis 1999).

The purpose of this sub-chapter is only to draw attention to all these developments. Coordinated by Europa Nostra, the European Heritage Alliance is working to provide an up-to-date overview (EHI 2026).

### Unleashing the potential of continental philosophy

While the first part of this chapter described how the interpretive profession has developed since its launch about 150 years ago, this part will look at the nature of interpretation in European intellectual history, which is much further-reaching. Some of these considerations provide valuable insights into the challenges that the new paradigm of heritage interpretation presents.

Here, too, the depth to which this paper can go is limited. Earlier considerations can be found in Lehnes and Carter (2016) and, with regard to value-based HI (UNESCO 2020), in Ludwig (2023), from which some of the following passages are taken.

Independent from the origins of heritage interpretation as a profession, interpretation in itself has been subject to publications in Europe for more than 2,500 years. The earliest source is generally considered to be Aristotle's text, 'Perí hermēneías' (Περὶ ἑρμηνείας), whose Latin version is 'De interpretatione' (Cook and Tredennick 1957). While Aristotle focused on the logic of language, and 'interpretation' in the following two millennia was primarily concerned with the interpretation of legal and biblical texts, this focus shifted at the beginning of the 19th century with the development of late-modern

philosophical hermeneutics[1] which established a more fundamental 'theory of interpretation' (Caputo 2018:4).

In the 19th century, a central question was to what extent the approaches of the emerging natural sciences could be applied to the processes of the human mind. Hermeneutics was understood as the foundation for the latter.

In the 20th century, high points of this development were Martin Heidegger's work, 'Being and time' (Heidegger 1927/1962), and especially Hans-Georg Gadamer's work, 'Truth and method' (Gadamer 1975/2013).

In his research, Gadamer draws heavily on Aristotle's 'Nicomachean ethics' (Irwin 1999). He follows the idea that individuals develop understanding only through constant exchange with their surroundings in order to gain better judgement or practical wisdom (phronesis – φρόνησις) and come to a 'sensus communis' as "the sense that founds community" (Gadamer 2013:19). Gadamer explores the conditions for this to happen responsibly and challenges the notion of just one fact-based truth.

According to philosophical hermeneutics, there can be multiple and even conflicting truths, as there can be different ways of learning, not all depending on objective facts and methods (e.g. learning through creating or experiencing art). Explanations based on facts might then lead to certainty on specific points but not to deeper understanding.

According to Aristotle (Irwin 1999:84), "the standard applied to the indefinite is itself indefinite" which means that exact rules aren't useful where something eludes exact measurability. In terms of understanding, Aristotle therefore argues for flexible rules. In hermeneutical terms:

Certainty requires:
- Gaining objective distance
- Asking closed questions
- Winning definite results.

Understanding requires:
- Seeking personal connection
- Asking open questions
- Coming to shared insights.

The first approach is primarily about explanation, the second is primarily about interpretation. Both approaches also reflect the two branches of science that emerged in the 19th century: natural sciences and human sciences (or humanities).

However, "the intention of a philosophical hermeneutics is not to ask how understanding occurs in the human sciences, but to ask the question of understanding relative to the entire human experience of the world and the practice of life" (Risser 1997:9 as quoted by Kim 2013:5). It suggests that we put a strong focus on experiences in their immediacy, before starting to analyse them. "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon" (Heidegger 1927/1962:207). 'The creaking wagon' appears as one undivided experience.

Architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980:8) claimed: "Being qualitative totalities of a complex nature, places cannot be described by means of analytic, 'scientific' concepts". "When a 'stone' is mentioned in a poem, it is, of course, important what can be meant by 'stones'; but what matters in the poem is this stone, the one the poem mentions. This is the secret to the capacity for judgement: that one makes

1 IE members may access the recording of the 2022 webinar 'Hermeneutics and its relevance for practical heritage interpretation' through the member area on the IE website.

something general concrete with respect to the given situation" (Gadamer, referring to Paul Celan as quoted by Misgeld and Nicholson 1992:70). Here we have a strong argument for "whole interpretive experiences" (Ludwig 2021:46), which include first-hand experiences of heritage properties.

We all experience heritage phenomena from a limited perspective. This can be caused by limited knowledge and by limited access (including all sorts of barriers), but it can also result from traditions and popular opinions, causing presumptions. Gadamer uses the term 'prejudice' in a rather neutral way, taking it as a given. We are only partially aware of our prejudices and should, therefore, train our "consciousness of being affected by history (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstein)" (Gadamer 2013:312). This includes both historical traditions in which we stand and our personal history with all the influences to which we have been subjected.

People tend to visit heritage properties because they help them materialise their preconceived notions – while they avoid visiting those that challenge them. One task of HI can then be to thoughtfully broaden the horizons at familiar properties. Whole interpretive experiences and exchange with others may then open new insights, and by actively reviewing previous points of view against this new input, people may enter a new and wider loop in the circle by merging the different perspectives. Gadamer calls this "fusing of horizons" (Gadamer 2013:317).

Another interesting aspect that Gadamer addresses relates to the transparency of an interpreter, e.g. in an artistic performance. Considering a piece of music or a play, if the interpreter and their medium come to the fore too much, it is difficult for their guests to access that piece of art. "Total mediation means that the medium as such is suspended [...] the work presents itself through it and in it" (Gadamer 2013:123-124).

In heritage interpretation, we would say that the amount of information or the way it is presented (which could also include a frame set by a strong interpretive theme) might obscure the phenomenon and its experience by the people, rather than support it. The same is true when an interpreter 'steals the show' from the heritage phenomena and hinders rather than promotes direct exchange.

Philosophical hermeneutics developed primarily in Germany and France, where it was mainly discussed in intellectual elite circles. Although Gadamer's work was first published in 1960, almost simultaneously with 'Interpreting our heritage' (Tilden 1957), it was not only ignored during the emergence of heritage interpretation in the USA, but Tilden's book was explicitly welcomed as a counterpoint to such theoretical considerations. Christopher Crittenden wrote in the preface: "Under the influence of the German graduate schools, [...] professionals had sought to become more and more scientific in their research and writing, with the result that their publications had tended to become more and more abstruse" (Tilden 1957:ix). If one strives to understand original literature on hermeneutics, this accusation cannot be completely dismissed. It requires considerable effort to examine the sources and the neologisms they contain in order to filter out what is essential for heritage interpretation.

Even in European literature on HI, only isolated references appeared in the late 20th century to what is called 'continental philosophy' in English-speaking countries. Its relevance for heritage interpretation was first recognised by Don Aldridge. He wrote: "We are forced [...] to consider the hermeneutic philosophers" (Aldridge 1989:86). István Fehér (1998:11-12)

claimed that "hermeneutics has also some considerable political relevance: hermeneutic openness […] may help educate and bring up young people to be critical and self-critical citizens able to understand and respect alien conceptions and cultures". Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (1999:4) suggested that "interpretation can become a more useful concept in the museum context if re-analysed from a perspective grounded in the philosophical approach know[n] as hermeneutics".

However, it was an essay from Australia that finally brought the approach to wider attention within the interpretive community and established a connection to Tilden's ideas by stating: "In Tilden's view, interpretation is not simply about cognition but is a fundamentally transformative praxis in which visitors come to re-experience nature or history in a holistic manner" (Ablett and Dyer 2009:213). "The neglect of hermeneutics is understandable given the relative absence of European social science perspectives in the founding of heritage interpretation in the United States" (Ablett and Dyer 2009:210).

The authors also claimed that the US National Park Service's 20th century concepts had led to "a predominantly cognitivist approach [that] risks reducing Tilden's rich and transformative conception of interpretation to the unilateral presentation of 'information', which Tilden explicitly sought to avoid" (Ablett and Dyer 2009:211). In accordance with what has been said in the first part of this chapter, particularly with regard to 21st century HI, this suggests rereading Tilden from this perspective and examining which considerations from continental philosophy can help to better develop his holistic perspective.

This is not limited to hermeneutics alone. Based on the principles of Enlightenment, philosophers such as Kant considered what is needed to enable people to interpret. Looking at any object, Kant distinguished between the thing as we perceive it through our senses (phenomenon), what we can factually know about it, and our uncertain but necessary exploration of the unknowable (noumenon), which cannot be an object of absolute knowledge but only an object of our interpretation (Kant 1787/2007). As human beings, we depend on interpretation, although (and because) it does not guarantee one final truth.

Also, in the early 19th century – the era of Idealism, Romanticism and New Humanism – the Humboldt brothers favoured lifelong learning to become autonomous world citizens ('Weltbürger'). This became known as 'Humboldtsches Bildungsideal' (Herdt 2019). In German philosophical tradition, 'bildung' is related to 'education' (German: 'erziehung') but has a somewhat different meaning. In French, the term 'formation' is sometimes used in a similar sense (also being distinguished from the French 'éducation').

Bildung is the formative shaping of the self through its interaction with the world. A person develops their own bildung over the course of their life. As Jeong-Hee Kim (2013) points out, Gadamer defines 'bildung' as "the properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities" (Gadamer 2013:10). It is rather 'self-educational', to use a term suggested by Ham (2013:82).

Tilden defined heritage interpretation as "an educational activity" (Tilden 1957:8). If we look at it "in the Bildung tradition, the goal of education is self-determination and autonomy based on reason, combined with mutual respect between human beings" (Carter 2016:10). To continue to describe heritage interpretation as

an educational activity, therefore, requires emphasis on the self-educational aspect.
This corresponds to what is meant in 'value-based heritage interpretation' by "self-interpretation and value-exchanging" (UNESCO 2020:29). The role of interpretive services that follow this claim is to provide an environment that helps people to explore personal meaning and to unfold the potential of interpretation by individuals through their own personal experiences.

Carter recalls that "as an educational activity, it [heritage interpretation] reflects the principles of progressive education, aiming to stimulate thoughts and ideas rather than communicate a defined syllabus of facts, and to help individuals find their own understanding and meaning in heritage" (Carter 2016:17). He suggests the term 'progressive interpretation' (Carter 2016:8).

As one of the most prominent representatives of progressive education, John Dewey wrote: "A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognise in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth" (Dewey 1938:40). Including the ideas of progressive education opens the door to a much wider range of approaches in Europe that have so far only been marginally addressed in research on heritage interpretation but lie outside the scope of continental philosophy and, therefore, also outside of these considerations.

However, Carter (2016:17) also points out that interpretation requires "a sense of ethics". With its strong drive towards stewardship, heritage interpretation is not value-neutral. Ablett and Dyer (2009:213) state: "The ethic which drives interpretation according to Tilden […] is 'love' in the sense of care for the thing interpreted and the people who come to experience it". The latter becomes all the more challenging as more actors in the field of heritage interpretation assume the role of facilitators.

Building on the fundamental ideas of hermeneutics, the philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas calls for a 'discourse ethics' (Habermas 1990), suggesting that "hermeneutic understanding is designed to guarantee, within cultural traditions, the possible action-orienting self-understanding of individuals and groups as well as reciprocal understanding" (Habermas 1972:176). This means that seeking mutual understanding also requires seeking understanding oneself. "It makes possible the form of […] consensus and […] intersubjectivity on which communicative action depends" (Ibid.).

In this context, it is also important to distinguish 'intersubjectivity' from 'objectivity'. Reaching an agreement on a shared heritage, for example, is an intersubjective act that necessarily remains fluid. On the one hand, it lacks the independence of subjective convictions, and on the other hand, it lacks the certainty of definitive facts. "Empirical analysis discloses reality from the viewpoint of possible technical control over objectified processes of nature, while hermeneutics maintains the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding (on the horizontal level of interpreting foreign cultures as well as on the vertical level of appropriating one's own traditions)" (Habermas 1972:191). As already mentioned, the latter dimension also includes one's own life story.

To address all this, Habermas proposes striving for 'ideal speech situations'. The IE training programme incorporates various sets of recommendations in this direction, primarily influenced by citizenship education. Those derived directly from Habermas's philosophy include:

- All individuals have equal rights.
- No pressure may be exerted on them.
- The aim is to find common understanding.
- Arguments must be logical and based on facts.
- Individuals should really mean what they say.
- Everyone must know what is meant.

21st century interpretive planning should involve creating spaces and situations in which people can exchange different interpretations within this or similar framework conditions.

### Why is it important to address the topic of narratives right now?

All of this opens the stage for what we wanted to investigate during the symposium: the challenges and opportunities that arise from considering different interpretations and the narratives underlying them.

When Interpret Europe launched its training and certification programme in 2015, interpretive themes were only introduced as offers. This means that, for example, that IE certified interpretive guides should be able to pick up on their guests' own themes. If these first appear as rather vague ideas, guides should initially help with their formulation. The themes originally assigned to heritage phenomena could change as a result of this exchange.

This becomes more challenging when planning non-personal services. How do we ensure that people's voices can be expressed – beyond just replying to closed questions by pressing some button? What possibilities do we have to initiate a peaceful and productive exchange around heritage experiences? When used carefully and wisely, new technology can open new horizons. There are already some good examples of this.

However, while shaping the work profile of the interpretive agents, we felt we entered a new dimension. It is no longer just about temporary gatherings of visitors during an interpretive walk or museum visit, where it is not so essential what the other person thinks. Co-creating interpretive strategies for areas including diverse heritage properties means that the people share a place for living, and the way they live in their local area is informed by different beliefs, which are closely linked to their understanding of heritage. Such beliefs are often based on different and sometimes even opposing narratives that should be explored to find common ground.

### What are narratives and how important are they?

The following reflects our current understanding of narratives in the Learning landscapes initiative. This is work in progress, even including the definition of the term 'narrative' itself. We provisionally defined it as:

> "A broad interpretive frame that is shared by many, puts things or events into a meaningful context and influences as a proposed truth what people believe and how they interpret their surroundings" (IE 2025).

We have dealt with several related concepts that are based more or less on facts and lead to beliefs on which attitudes and actions can be based, including 'legend', 'myth', 'proverb', and 'saying'. Our glossary also includes terms such as 'storyline', 'plot', 'brainscript', 'mindset', 'frame', 'gestalt' and 'schema', which are used in neighbouring domains for concepts that overlap with what we are concerned with. We intend to pursue them further and examine their relationship, but for now, we suggest focusing on narratives and their relation to stories, and in the next sub-chapter we will briefly touch on mental frames and storylines.

In Freeman Tilden's book, 'Interpreting our heritage' (1957:26), the chapter that argues that interpretation is an art is titled: "The story's the thing". Jonathan Gottschall (2012) popularised

the idea that man is a 'storytelling animal', and according to Angus Fletcher (2023), we all are not just storytelling but constantly 'storythinking'. The stories we share about who we are, why things happen, and what is true or not are shaped by a complex interplay of psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Are narratives stories that help us to create order, comfort, and meaning out of our chaotic, often unpredictable experiences?

Referring to Jerome Bruner, Zimmerman et al. (2018:345) states: "Bruner (1986) argued that human beings operate according to two complementary modes of thinking: the paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode. The paradigmatic mode of thinking relies on logic and empirical evidence, whereas the narrative mode of thinking employs stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences".

We sense and perceive a heritage phenomenon which we then often try to explain through our intellect. We rely on this factual knowledge, usually based on scientific research and discursive reasoning. But how can we come to a deeper understanding of heritage – understanding in the same way that we understand each other? As humanists once declared: "Science gives the means but science itself does not propose the ends" (World Humanist Congress 1952). In the sub-chapter on continental philosophy, we already referred to the connection with Kant's 'Critique of pure reason' (1787/2007).

To think about the ends, we need to interpret our environment. Interpretation is the domain of ideas that brings the facts to life by giving meaning to them and can, therefore, foster understanding. Based on this, we draw conclusions that we consider reasonable. Almost all personal and political decisions are subject to such 'narrative reasoning', in which facts are incorporated into a narration that is meaningful and provides a deeper understanding. The latter is critical in determining whether people adopt a narrative for themselves.

According to Fisher (1987), besides the rational world paradigm, the narrative paradigm is more decisive for most. Key factors for accepting a narration are coherence and fidelity (trustworthiness). However, stories may also appear coherent and trustworthy without being factually correct. Another often more important question regarding a narrative's acceptance is whether it is shared by others.

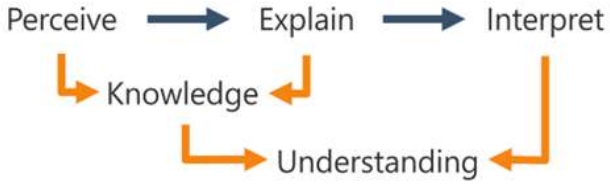


**Figure 5. From factual knowledge to deeper understanding**

In this simplified representation, 'knowledge' is limited to factual knowledge, while 'understanding' means a deeper understanding that is (inter)subjective and not only determined by facts. Although perceiving, explaining, and interpreting may seem like a linear sequence, this is not necessarily the case. First-hand experience is a special quality of heritage interpretation. Most judgements of modern people are no longer based on direct experience, as people often tend to interpret without any prior engagement with the facts.

### The role of mental frames

When dealing with narratives, their relationship to mental frames, which determine our actions, is also critical. According to George Lakoff (2008:250), "narratives are frames that tell a story [...] A narrative has a point to it, a moral. It's about how you should live your life – or how you shouldn't. It has emotional content: events that

make you sad or angry or in awe". Framing includes "interpretive processes in the human mind based on connected ideas and feelings stored in the memory" (Castells 2013:158).

Roughly following Darnton and Kirk (2011), we distinguish surface frames from deep frames. Surface frames are rather superficial. If we take, for example, the concept of 'home', this could be linked at the surface level to the idea of a house, carpet, sofa, etc. – all that makes home a place worth living in. This might be mentioned when describing home, but the real value an individual connects with their home, its deep frame, is far below that surface and can barely be described. What happens on that deeper level touches a person's values and results from previous experiences of the person. All of us have our own scripts in mind which we then connect or even transfer to a particular phenomenon, once the frame is activated. They are individual but they can be similar within a community of people.

The ability to frame information is a crucial requirement of meaning-making. We are surrounded by frames that vary across time, across cultures and across social milieux. Mental frames can encode meaningful stories with one word, provide orientation (or lead us astray), trigger values (or hinder them).

An example of how setting a frame can result in far-reaching decisions was brought up by George Lakoff (2008) when he referred to the 'war on terror'. He explained that one week after the attack on the New York World Trade Center, US President George W. Bush started to introduce this idea. The frame of 'war' comes with a storyline suggesting what will happen next. It includes offenders, armies, battles and guns. Its endgame is victory. However, immediately after the attack, President Bush was first talking about 'crime', and Lakoff asked what would have happened if he had stuck to the 'crime' frame. The acceptable storyline for crime wouldn't have included armies but criminals, courts and trials based on laws. The endgame would then have been justice. Had the incident been framed that way, world history would have been different for the 20 years to follow. Lakoff's (2008:250) statement, "narratives are frames that tell a story", is, therefore, by no means harmless.

## The curse and the blessing of storytelling

From politics to the economy, storytelling has recently gained such prominence that facts are essentially only taken seriously when introduced through a personal story. Whereas previously one could ask what a story is worth if it is not supported by facts, people now often have the impression that facts are not convincing if they are not accompanied by a story. This was much in line with late-20th century heritage interpretation. But what was once a fringe phenomenon became almost mainstream. New markets are now opening up for interpreters who follow the old paradigm, which doesn't make it easier to convince people of the new one.

On a political level, the use of the term 'alternative facts' for statements that were not factually verified but nevertheless claimed to be true, was a wake-up call that also influenced the question of what role heritage interpretation should play in this (IE 2017). In particular, Patrick Lehnes (2017) discussed this issue and explored what the rise of populism means for heritage interpretation.

Although no prominent author has yet questioned that in heritage interpretation, stories must be based on facts, interpretation is generally (inter)subjective. A person or a community has to select and arrange the facts in such a way that they result in a meaningful narration. The fact that Interpret Europe aims to foster interpretive literacy so that people deal

with their stories and with the stories of others more consciously and responsibly is a consequence of these observations.

### Narratives can represent different positions at different levels

As mentioned above, a narrative typically doesn't represent absolute truth. In the end, we are talking about interpretation. Two narratives that are factually correct can still contradict each other because the facts are weighed and classified differently.

For example, the following two narratives are valid and can be attributed by different people to the same heritage property, although they may lead to opposing attitudes and behaviours:

- Before the start of industrialisation, people here led a miserable existence.
- Before the start of industrialisation, people here lived in harmony with nature.

If one aims to give voice to different stakeholders (and stakeholders also include interest groups who may feel their interests are being curtailed by heritage designations), then all justifiable narratives must be taken seriously.

Narratives also exist on different levels. Fundamental beliefs like those mentioned above are not always expressed directly. In co-creative workshops, one is more likely to hear statements like the following:

- My grandmother had to carry every single drop of water from the well.

In the working definition mentioned above, we proposed that narratives are held by many. Nevertheless, such an almost private narration is sometimes referred to as micronarrative. Micronarratives include "the telling of a story about ordinary people in their local setting" (Burke 1993:241). Encouraging their sharing is critical to assign them to more widely represented narratives – as is asking questions and prompting further elaboration to avoid hasty judgements.

On the other side of the spectrum, overarching belief systems that are decisive for entire cultures are called metanarratives (or grand narratives). A metanarrative that corresponds to one of the narratives mentioned above could be:

- To ensure the wealth of nations, there must be constant progress and growth.

The term 'metanarrative' was coined by Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984). A key metanarrative that has shaped our lives in Europe for about 250 years is that of the Enlightenment; but political belief systems like liberalism, communism, fascism, etc., can be considered metanarratives, too.

Lyotard questioned the grand narratives that legitimised modernity and defined 'postmodern' as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Ibid. xxiv). He suggested that smaller, local narratives and a plurality of interpretations are taking the place of the more universal explanatory models. Authors of this postmodern tradition often emphasise that metanarratives reinforce questionable power structures. Although these concerns include heritage and interpretation (e.g. Smith 2006 or Deufel 2016 referring to Mouffe 2013), we cannot delve deeper into this here.

The term macronarrative is sometimes used synonymously with metanarrative, but occasionally also to describe an intermediate stage. Macronarratives then refer, for example, to narratives that are associated with the characteristics (or clichés) of regions, or with the formation (and separation) of peoples or nation states.

### What challenges did we meet when dealing with multiple narratives?

The summary above should sufficiently highlight the more theoretical aspects that concerned us during the Learning landscapes initiative with regard to narratives. We will now look at the first panel discussion of the symposium, in which our interpretive agents described their practical experiences from the pilot areas. We titled that panel: 'Colourful mosaic or infinite maze?'

These metaphors refer to the current work on the interpretive strategies – but in 2022, when the Learning landscapes initiative was outlined, the planning process was more straightforward than vivid. Interpret Europe still promoted working with hierarchies of interpretive themes.

The idea was that co-creative workshops with multiple stakeholders would first explore the heritage properties in the pilot area and their underlying narratives. Because all areas included World Heritage sites, the outstanding universal value defined within the framework of the UNESCO designation played a significant role in this.

In an IE Certified Interpretive Planner (CIP) course, staff members of heritage sites that promise some lever effect would then be empowered to develop interpretive plans for their site, based on main themes related to the particular narratives. Finally, Certified Interpretive Writer (CIW) and Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) courses would enable local people to get into exchange with visitors, inviting interpretations of specific heritage phenomena based on interpretive themes matching the main themes.

Figure 6. Developing learning landscapes

Of course, many things turned out differently in the pilot areas, which represented a wide variety of conditions. The lessons learnt are reserved for a dedicated publication that will conclude the Learning landscapes initiative. Here, we focus solely on the role of narratives in the context of the co-creation of the interpretive strategies.

Anyone familiar with interpretive planning knows that it always involves a back-and-forth process that doesn't really suggest a strict sequential planning approach. However, this was so significant during the development of the interpretive strategies that the linear progression could only serve as a rough guideline. The metaphor of the 'colourful mosaic' refers to the idea that mosaic tiles (as narratives):

- differ in size, representing various levels (from meta- to micronarratives)
- differ in colour, representing various points of view
- differ in shape, with some fitting smoothly while others are more pointy.

The idea was that, in the course of the strategy development, a colourful and balanced overall picture should emerge that reflects the 'heritage landscape'. This would be an open process that is further informed with each homework assignment submitted as part of one of the

training courses, thus continuously changing the overall picture in a big or small way.

But can this ideal model stand up to practical testing, or will our agents end up in despair, becoming confronted with an infinite maze without a clearer planning framework? This was one of the central questions addressed in the panel debate, a summary of which is included later in these proceedings.

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# Panel discussions

## Colourful mosaic or infinite maze? Co-creating interpretive strategies from multiple narratives

**Vanessa Vaio (Italy)**

Panel moderated by: Valya Stergioti (Greece)
Panel interpretive agents: Dimitris Ioannidis and Kalliopi Stara (Greece); Jelena Čečur and Mileva Mršić (Montenegro); Iulia Balint and Constantin Zainea (Romania); Renate de Backere and Sander van Dijk (Netherlands)

**Abstract**

This paper presents the edited proceedings of an interpretive agents' panel held during the Interpret Europe online symposium on narratives in heritage interpretation. The panel brought together eight interpretive agents from four heritage sites — Zagori (Greece), the Bay of Kotor (Montenegro), Roșia Montană (Romania), and the Wadden Sea (Netherlands) — facilitated by Valya Stergioti. Working within the framework of Interpret Europe's Learning Landscapes initiative (LLI), each team had engaged in a process of co-creating interpretive strategies with local stakeholders, collecting and negotiating multiple, often conflicting, narratives about their sites.

The paper addresses three interconnected questions: How does the co-creative process shape — and sometimes destabilise — narratives? How can practitioners navigate the tension between dominant and marginalised voices? and, What methodological tools have proven effective in collecting, mapping, and negotiating plural narratives in practice?

Drawing on the direct experiences of the interpretive agents, the discussion reveals that the process of co-creating interpretive strategies is less a linear journey toward consensus than a generative encounter with complexity. Stakeholder workshops consistently produced unexpected outcomes: narratives that initially appeared contradictory often shared deeper common values; participants shaped each other's stories through the act of being in dialogue; and the agents themselves had to confront their own positionality as non-neutral actors within the sites they were interpreting.

Key methodological contributions described in the panel include the use of material objects as narrative triggers, Schwartz's human values framework as an analytical lens, participatory mapping, and World Café formats. Across all four contexts, the panel underscores a shared insight: co-creation is not simply a technique for collecting stories — it is a relational and political process, one that requires practitioners to move beyond storytelling and toward mediation, active listening, and a willingness to sit with unresolved tension.

The paper concludes by reflecting on the structural challenges of sustaining interpretive strategies beyond the LLI project lifecycle, including questions of institutional power, policy integration, and community ownership.

**Keywords**

heritage interpretation, co-creation, multiple narratives, stakeholder engagement, participatory methods, Learning Landscape initiative, World Heritage

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between heritage and narrative has never been straightforward. Heritage sites do not speak for themselves: they are given meaning through the stories told about them, by whom, and for whom. In the recent development of the interpretive profession, it has become commonplace to consider different narratives surrounding heritage properties.

This paper documents a panel discussion held during the Interpret Europe online symposium dedicated to the role of narratives in 21st-century heritage interpretation. The panel gathered eight interpretive agents from four sites participating in the Interpret Europe Learning Landscape initiative (LLI): Zagori in northwestern Greece; the Bay of Kotor in Montenegro; Roșia Montană in Romania; and the Wadden Sea in the Netherlands. All four teams had been engaged in a process of co-creating interpretive strategies — working with local stakeholders to surface, collect, and negotiate the multiple narratives that shape their sites.

The framing question for the panel was deliberately provocative. The symposium's introductory session had offered an optimistic image: that co-creation leads not to a rigid hierarchy of themes but to a "colourful mosaic or puzzle made of different-sized stones, representing stories on different levels told from different perspectives". The panel was invited to test this image against the reality of practice. Is the process indeed a mosaic — complex but ultimately coherent — or does it more often resemble an infinite maze, where meaning multiplies faster than it can be organised?

The discussion that followed was candid, grounded, mentally stimulating and at times deliberately uncomfortable. What emerges from it is a richer and more nuanced account of what co-creation actually involves: its unexpected rewards, its structural limitations, and the irreducible human complexity at its core.

## 2. Co-creative workshops: From maze to mosaic

All four teams described their entry into co-creation as an encounter with overwhelming complexity. Renate de Backere, interpretive agent for the Wadden Sea, captured this vividly: "The start of the initiative felt like an infinite maze, but slowly we see it more as a puzzle and try to work that way: To find more pieces of the puzzle and try to cover the whole of the area with narratives. There are many people working on and with the Wadden Sea (management, protection, recreation, fishery), and that makes it a challenge to get everyone on board."

The Wadden Sea — a trilateral World Heritage site shared between the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark — presented particular challenges of scale. The interpretive agents began with a network of stakeholders already familiar with the site and gradually extended outward, using each workshop to deepen both their own understanding of the narrative landscape and participants' understanding of what heritage interpretation means in practice.

Sander van Dijk described the progression between workshops as a process of iterative clarification. In the first session, the focus was largely on collecting topics — what participants felt was missing in the stories of the Wadden Sea. By the second session, the team was able to go deeper: "We quite literally asked them: What is your narrative, and which narratives do you know? And that led to a very interesting map. We got more pieces of the puzzle."

A recurring observation across all four sites was that co-creative workshops produced more than their intended outputs. Bringing stakeholders into the same room did not simply extract pre-existing narratives — it actively transformed

them. Sander reflected on a striking example: when Dutch participants encountered the fact that the Danish section of the Wadden Sea has no dyke, it destabilised something they had taken for granted about their own identity.

"Our narrative is very much shaped even by this physical object of the dyke. Participants were invited to be at the table with different people and get into a conversation about narratives and beliefs rather than problem-solving. And we got feedback that they really liked this approach."

In Zagori, Dimitris Ioannidis described a similar experience of the workshop exceeding expectations. The team had invited 70 stakeholders, anticipating attrition; 37 attended, which proved to be an ideal number. The diversity of participants — farmers, small hotel owners, municipal officials, Ministry of Culture representatives, academics — created conditions for an exchange that none of them had previously experienced:
"Local people — the farmers, the small hotel owners, people in small businesses — were thrilled to be invited, thrilled to have their opinion heard, and to stand up in front of a large crowd of people from different backgrounds who had equal opportunity to share their views."

Not all participants engaged with equal openness. Dimitris noted that some stakeholders, particularly from institutional positions, arrived with fixed agendas prepared to defend their position rather than carefully listen. The vice-mayor of Zagori, for example, before the topic had even come up, stated that the people living in the area of Eastern Zagori should not feel neglected, a remark that seemed out of place at the time it was made. Yet this very dynamic — the contrast between those who came to defend a position and those who came to share a perspective — was itself instructive.

In Montenegro, Jelena Čečur highlighted a different but related outcome: the co-creative process revealed that stakeholders were, in many respects, at the same early stage of developing an interpretive framework, regardless of their institutional affiliation. Despite tensions — particularly between the local community and civil society on one side, and national and municipal institutions on the other — a shared vision for the area eventually emerged:
"The most important outcome was that all stakeholders became aware of the key issues and recognised that they are generally on the same side."

### 3. Navigating dominant narratives: Positionality, power, and the common thread

One of the most intellectually rich threads in the panel concerned the question of which narratives tend to prevail — and why. The discussion moved quickly from external power dynamics to something more personal and harder to acknowledge: the positionality of the interpretive agents themselves.

Constantin Zainea, interpretive agent for Roșia Montană, offered a remarkably candid account of his own process. Roșia Montană is a site with more than two millennia of mining history, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List and surrounded by intense political controversy over a proposed large-scale gold extraction project. Working in this context, Constantin found himself drawn to a particular narrative — the brotherhood and solidarity of miners — shaped by his own values and historical attachments:
"I let myself be guided by my personal hobbies or political views or certain historical periods in which I find myself. And I did this in an unconscious way. I thought at some point that I had created a narrative that would have prevailed over the others — and I think every stakeholder at some point faces this."

The realisation came, he explained, through conflict with another stakeholder who was doing exactly the same thing — unconsciously privileging their own perspective. The recognition of this mirror dynamic prompted both of them to step back and look for a common denominator: the driving force behind different gold extraction techniques across historical periods, which turned out to be a shared motif of human ingenuity and the relationship between people and water.

Iulia Balint, also from the Roșia Montană team, offered a complementary insight about how apparent contradictions in narratives often dissolve when examined at greater depth:
"It wasn't necessarily the narratives that were contradicting, because the same narrative had the potential to be framed into opposing interpretations. If we step out of the black-and-white type of judgement and dive into the grey zone, we soften our judgements. Behind the interpretation and the framing, there are people with needs and values and traditions — and if we look to those, then it is easier to portray the narrative in a more appealing and understandable way."

Valya Stergioti, the panel's moderator, drew attention to what she described as the 'macro scale' move — the analytical gesture of zooming out until apparently opposing narratives reveal a shared universal concept. This resonated across the panel as a practical as well as intellectual strategy.

The Wadden Sea presented yet another dimension of the challenge. The site's World Heritage designation is focused on its natural values — a framing that, as Sander van Dijk acknowledged, has historically tended to exclude people. Within this already contested framing, the team encountered sharply opposing narratives: gas drilling interests supported by the government, local fishermen who perceived the nature organisations (including the interpretive agents' own institutions) as adversaries, and communities that felt their connection to the sea was being denied by the heritage label itself.

Sander was frank about the limits of what the co-creative process had so far achieved: "We have not collected all the pieces of the puzzle. But we have some leverage points, some key people that can help us bridge the gaps to these really conflicting narratives."

In Montenegro, Mileva Mršić pointed to the structural weight of economic narratives — particularly the pressure of over-tourism and cruise traffic in the Bay of Kotor — as a force that consistently threatens to dominate over interpretive and sustainability-oriented framings. Addressing this required not just interpretive work but policy change and infrastructure development:
"To address this, it is important to simultaneously strengthen sectors in an aim to obtain long-term tourism while developing high quality interpretation services and media that support this more sustainable model."

## 4. Tools and methods for narrative collection

The panel devoted significant attention to the practical question of how to collect narratives — not as data points, but as living expressions of values, memories, and identity. Each team had developed methodological approaches suited to their specific context, and the exchange between them produced a rich toolkit.

### 4.1 Material objects as narrative triggers

The Wadden Sea team developed a particularly effective technique: beginning stakeholder workshops with a single material object and inviting all participants to respond to it. In the first session, a stuffed peregrine falcon was placed in the centre of the room. In the second, a glass fishing float — a traditional tool used

before plastic — was passed from hand to hand. Renate de Backere described the effect:
"Everybody answered something different, and it all came from their own experience. The last person in the circle said: Wow, this is amazing — it's just one object, but everybody's saying something different. And that was exactly what we wanted to achieve."

The objects served as what Renate called a tool for "amazement and wonder" — a deliberate disruption of participants' expectations that opened them to a different mode of conversation. The technique was transferable: Renate noted using the glass float in other professional settings with similar results.

### 4.2 Stimuli and participatory mapping in Zagori

The Zagori team faced a distinctive challenge: a region of 46 villages with a large diaspora population, meaning that a significant proportion of people with deep connections to the area no longer lived there. Kalliopi Stara described the team's approach of using three carefully chosen stimuli to open the workshop: a traditional female costume, a shepherd's crook, and a specimen of Ganoderma ludicum fungus — chosen to reflect narratives of living heritage, traditional livelihoods, and the growing contemporary interest in nature and foraging.

The workshop venue — a school — also proved unexpectedly generative. Participants who might otherwise have maintained professional distances found themselves in a role associated with learning and openness, engaging freely with post-it notes and cards. The most animated and productive discussion emerged around the topic of authenticity — a theme the organisers had included almost as an afterthought, expecting it to be less contentious than gastronomy or nature.

"There is not much to fight when you talk about food or when you talk about nature", Dimitris Ioannidis observed, "but I was surprised to see how much tension was created on issues of authenticity. What is authentic, and why? Building a new building on top of the remains of a 19th-century house — is that authentic? Or food that uses the recipe from the area but ingredients from elsewhere?"

The authenticity debate, Dimitris noted, could have continued indefinitely — a sign of its depth and its unresolved nature within the community itself.

The team also used questionnaires to reach stakeholders from a wide range of backgrounds and expertise. Responses to these questionnaires then informed the design of the participatory session. Kalliopi described how the analysis of questionnaire data revealed the possibility of creating maps and networks based on traditional songs connected to different villages — a discovery that opened a new dimension of the narrative landscape.

### 4.3 Schwartz Values framework

The Wadden Sea team introduced a methodological innovation that attracted particular interest from the panel: the coupling of collected narratives with Schwartz's theory of basic human values. After participants had identified and discussed their narratives, they were asked to link each narrative to values drawn from Schwartz's framework — a structured typology of universal human values organised around motivational goals.

Sander van Dijk acknowledged the apparent paradox of bringing a systematic analytical framework to bear on deeply subjective material, but argued for its practical utility:
"You could at least say: we collected so many of these values — and that represents where these narratives are coming from, and where people

feel a missing connection between their values and the heritage."

The approach offered a way of making the landscape of narratives at least partially legible — not by reducing it to data, but by identifying the motivational structures underlying apparently disparate stories. It also connected to the insight, raised by Constantin and Iulia, that seemingly conflicting narratives often share common values at a deeper level of analysis.

### 4.4 Blank maps and spatial anchoring

In Roșia Montană, the team used a geographical map — blank, with no names or data — as a starting point. Participants were invited to identify points that held meaning for them and to name the value associated with that place. The results were revealing:
"The same point, people were choosing it — but they had different names for the same point, and yet the same value. It was interesting to see how people were making space: "Give me some space, I want to put my point here!"."

This technique combined spatial anchoring with values elicitation, revealing both the distribution of meaning across the landscape and the degree of convergence (and divergence) in how different people related to the same places. It also introduced a productive element of competition and negotiation — participants literally jostling for space on the map — that made the underlying dynamics visible.

## 5. Towards implementation: Power, policy, and sustainability

The final question put to the panel — What steps will you take to ensure the interpretive strategy makes a difference? — produced some of the discussion's most honest and sobering moments. The gap between producing an interpretive strategy and actually implementing it is, for several of the teams, very wide.

The Montenegro team described the most structurally secure pathway: by incorporating elements of the interpretive strategy into the management plan of their protected area, they created a mechanism for legal enforceability tied to the site's UNESCO listing obligations.
The Wadden Sea team spoke with cautious optimism. They have secured funding for a further three years of interpretive work, and are currently developing a narrative map — a visual tool designed to make the landscape of stories accessible to stakeholders and to enable people to recognise themselves within it.

The picture in Zagori and Roșia Montană was more uncertain. Both teams were frank about the limits of their institutional leverage. Dimitris Ioannidis described the situation plainly:
"We submit our report, our strategic plan, and we have no actual power whatsoever to make sure it will be implemented. We are not in the position as we do not represent a formal stakeholder with authority; we were selected to work on this project as individuals, as local experts."

Yet the response from his colleagues was not resignation. Constantin Zainea offered a deliberate reframing: "We have our stubbornness. And we can use our stubbornness to lobby."
He also articulated a different measure of success — not institutional adoption, but the degree to which the strategy could be used by local communities to strengthen their own sense of stewardship over their heritage.

Kalliopi Stara emphasised the importance of keeping the networks alive — not just as instruments for future project bids, but because the relationships built during the process had generated trust in communities that were deeply suspicious of initiatives "that will have an end". The goal now was to hold at least one public presentation of the strategy and its

interpretation plans by the summer of 2026, as a way of maintaining momentum and demonstrating commitment.

Iulia Balint spoke of the strategy as a 'North Star' — something that would not be formally adopted but would nonetheless orient the interpretive projects she and her colleagues coordinate through their NGO, shaping decisions incrementally and in baby steps.

## 6. Discussion: What co-creation actually requires

Several cross-cutting themes emerge from the panel that have broader implications for the field of heritage interpretation.

First, co-creation is not a neutral facilitation process. Every interpretive agent in this panel found themselves confronted, at some point, with the partiality of their own perspective. Constantin's account of unconsciously privileging the miners' narrative is not an exception — it is the norm. Interpreters are not objective conduits for community voices; they are stakeholders themselves, shaped by their own histories, affiliations, and blind spots. Acknowledging this does not undermine the process; on the contrary, it is a prerequisite for honest co-creation.

Second, apparent narrative conflict often signals depth rather than an inability for situations to be resolved. Across all four sites, what initially appeared as contradictions dissolved — or at least became more navigable — when the conversation moved from the level of position to the level of value. This is not a technique for eliminating disagreement; it is a way of locating the disagreement more precisely and understanding what it is actually about. Some conflicts, particularly those driven by structural economic interests or by institutional power, cannot be resolved through interpretive work alone.

Third, the act of bringing people together transforms the narratives themselves. The co-creative workshop is not just a method for collecting pre-existing stories — it is an event in which new stories begin to form. This has implications for methodology: the quality of the relational container matters as much as the specific techniques used. The choice of venue (a former school in Zagori), the use of unexpected objects (the peregrine falcon in the Wadden Sea), the careful sequencing of questions — all of these shape what becomes possible.

Fourth, the field may need to take its aversion to conflict seriously. Several contributions in the panel pointed toward the same diagnosis: heritage interpretation has long preferred consensus, smoothed-over complexity, and the avoidance of politically sensitive terrain. But in sites like Roșia Montană, the Wadden Sea, or the Bay of Kotor — where heritage intersects with contested development, extraction, and over-tourism — the refusal to engage with conflict is itself a political choice.

Fifth, interpretive strategies require institutional homes. The structural vulnerability of the Zagori and Roșia Montană teams — doing work of real quality with no formal mandate for implementation — is not a failure of effort or imagination. It reflects a systemic gap in how interpretive work is resourced, mandated, and sustained within heritage governance frameworks. The Montenegro model of integrating the strategy into the management plan offers one pathway; others need to be developed.

## 7. Conclusion

The image of the colourful mosaic is, in the end, both accurate and incomplete. It captures something real about the richness and plurality of narratives that co-creation can surface — the sense that heritage, seen from enough angles, reveals a beauty that no single perspective could

produce. But it perhaps underplays the labour involved in getting there: the patience required to sit with conflict, the honesty required to acknowledge one's own partiality, the structural conditions that make sustained work possible or impossible.

The eight interpretive agents represented in this panel have each navigated the maze — with varying degrees of institutional support, with different outcomes, and with a shared commitment to doing the work honestly. Their accounts offer not a methodology but something more valuable: an honest account of what co-creation actually asks of those who undertake it.

What stays, as with the best symposia, is not a resolution but a set of better questions. How do we build the relational conditions in which genuine narrative exchange becomes possible? How do we navigate the tension between our own positionality and our responsibility to the communities we serve? and, How do we sustain this work — not just for the duration of a project, but as an ongoing practice of care for the places and stories that make up our shared heritage?

**Acknowledgements**

We thank all participants in the panel discussion, as well as the broader community of the Interpret Europe online symposium whose contributions shaped the context in which this dialogue took place. This paper is an edited and expanded version of the live panel; quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and readability while preserving the substance of contributions.

# How does the symposium influence our thinking about interpretive themes?

## Vanessa Vaio (Italy)

Panel moderated by: Thorsten Ludwig (Germany)
Panel experts: Lisa Keys (UK); Patrick Lehnes (Germany); Madeleine Theochari (Greece)

**Abstract**
This is a summary of the experts' panel held during the online symposium. The panel brought together three practitioners with complementary backgrounds — Lisa Keys, an interpretive planner with 20 years of field experience; Patrick Lehnes, one of the founders of Interpret Europe and a researcher and practitioner who bridges academic and applied work; and Madeleine Theochari, a professional facilitator with 20 years of experience in participatory process design — facilitated by Thorsten Ludwig, former managing director of Interpret Europe who runs his own interpretation consultancy. Their discussion was framed by a single guiding question: How has the symposium, and the broader developments it reflects, influenced professional thinking about interpretive themes?

The panel engaged with one of the most enduring debates in the field: the role of the interpretive theme as a planning tool. Beginning with the canonical tradition established by Tilden (1957) and developed through successive landmark texts by Lewis (1980), Ham (1992, 2013), and Kohl (2018), the discussion examined how the concept of the interpretive theme — long treated as the central organising tool of heritage communication — is being rethought in light of two converging pressures: the growing imperative toward participatory and co-creative planning processes; and the increasing recognition that heritage sites are contested spaces carrying multiple, divergent, and sometimes irreconcilable meanings.

Three interlocking arguments emerge from the panel:
First, that the hierarchical thematic model, while still useful as a training tool and an organisational aid, is insufficient for the complexity of contemporary interpretive work — particularly in participatory contexts where meaning is co-constructed rather than transmitted.
Second, that the field needs to reorient its professional identity away from the role of the thematic storyteller and toward that of the interpretive facilitator — a practitioner equipped to design inclusive processes, work with diverse and sometimes reluctant communities, and navigate the tension between professional expertise and democratic meaning-making.
Third, that this reorientation requires not only methodological expansion but a renewed clarity of purpose: a shared and explicit answer to the question of why interpretation exists, what it is for, and what it is willing to do.

The panel also addressed structural challenges that any such reorientation must confront: the economics of interpretive planning, the risk of performative participation, the need to develop the understanding of people as a professional discipline, and the question of how far interpreters can and should absorb the competencies of specialist facilitators.

The panel concluded by suggesting that the theme — rather than being abandoned — should be understood as one element within a larger, more holistic framework of interpretive practice, oriented by purpose and animated by genuine dialogue.

**Keywords**
interpretive themes, heritage interpretation, participatory planning, facilitation, co-creation, purpose-driven interpretation, narrative, audience engagement

## 1. Introduction

The interpretive theme has been the central organising concept of heritage interpretation practice for more than 50 years. Since Freeman Tilden's foundational articulation of interpretation as an activity aimed at revealing a "larger truth" rather than merely communicating information (Tilden 1957), successive generations of practitioners have built their planning frameworks around the idea that a site's stories should be organised around a unifying idea — one that gives direction to content, coherence to structure, and purpose to the visitor's experience.

The development of this concept into a teachable and replicable methodology was the work of several key texts. Lewis (1980) provided an early practical framework centred on a strong central idea supported by subsidiary facts. Ham's highly influential 'Environmental Interpretation' formalised the distinction between topics and themes, arguing that interpretation should always operate at the level of theme — a complete, specific, and engaging idea — rather than at the level of subject matter (Ham 1992). Kohl's 'Interpretive Theme Writer's Field Guide' remains, as Thorsten Ludwig noted in his framing of the panel, the most practically focused resource specifically dedicated to theme development (Kohl 2018).

These texts shaped the professional formation of an entire generation of interpreters, and their influence remains evident in training programmes, accreditation frameworks, and planning guidance across Europe and beyond. Yet the symposium was convened precisely at a moment when this tradition is being subjected to a level of critical scrutiny that it has not previously encountered within the mainstream professional community.

The panel discussion here brought together three practitioners whose different professional backgrounds — interpretive planning, interpretive research, and professional facilitation — provide complementary lenses on this question. Their discussion ranged across the history and logic of the thematic framework, the implications of participatory and co-creative approaches for interpretive planning, the structural and economic constraints that shape practice, and the deeper question of professional identity and purpose. This summary offers an edited and annotated account of that discussion.

## 2. The thematic tradition: Enduring value and emerging limits

The panel's opening exchange established a picture that was more nuanced than a simple critique of the thematic approach. Lisa Keys began by acknowledging the genuine and continuing value of the hierarchical thematic model for certain purposes. The framework of central theme, subthemes, and supporting stories remains a useful scaffolding device for early-career interpreters learning to distinguish between information and meaning, between fact-delivery and idea-communication. It provides a structure that prevents interpretive work from dissolving into undifferentiated storytelling, and it remains the basis of best-practice guidance in the UK and, more broadly, in the European interpretive community.

The critique that Keys offered was not of the model itself but of its adequacy to meet the full range of what interpretive practice now requires. During the last approximately five years, a significant shift has occurred in professional expectations: interpretive planners are no

longer simply commissioned to produce plans. They are increasingly expected to design processes — processes that involve communities, stakeholders, and the public in the production of meaning, not merely in its reception. This shift was not present, or at least not visible, 20 years ago; it represents a genuine change in the professional landscape.

Patrick Lehnes located a deeper tension at the heart of the thematic approach. Drawing on his long-standing engagement with the political dimensions of heritage interpretation (Lehnes 2017), he argued that the use of predefined themes in participatory contexts carries a structural risk. A theme, as traditionally understood, is a message: a proposition that the interpreter wants visitors to take away. But if interpretation is genuinely open to co-construction, to dialogue, to the emergence of meanings that neither the interpreter nor the researcher could have anticipated, then the predetermination of a theme is not merely limiting — it is potentially incompatible with the process.

Lehnes drew on the Faro Convention — the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society — as an authoritative European articulation of this position (Council of Europe 2005). The Faro Convention is explicit in its demand that heritage interpretation should be democratised: that the multiple meanings attached to heritage by people from different social, cultural, and biographical backgrounds should not merely be tolerated but actively included in processes of interpreting and reinterpreting heritage. Any approach that predefines what diverse heritage communities and visitors should think or feel risks foreclosing precisely the kind of inclusive meaning-making the Convention demands.

Jon Kohl, contributing from the plenary, offered a developmental account that helped to contextualise this shift historically. He described the evolution of his own approach over the course of his career: from co-equal themes (several themes of equivalent weight) to hierarchical themes (a structured subordination of subthemes to a central organising idea) to what he now characterises as a more holistic approach, in which the theme is one element among several — including what Van Matre calls the "essence" of a site and the "universal processes" that created and continue to transform it (Van Matre 2008) — rather than the dominant organising principle.

Van Matre's largely unknown work on interpretive design introduces concepts that have begun to circulate more widely in the field. The idea that a site has an overriding characteristic, a set of universal processes that shaped it, and an essence that interpretation should help visitors apprehend, positions the theme within a larger framework of understanding. The conclusion that the theme is no longer the dominant tool and must be used in collaboration with other elements is significant precisely because it comes from practitioners who have spent decades refining and teaching the thematic approach.

Lehnes made an additional distinction that proved productive: between ‘interpretation’ and ‘presentation’, as differentiated in the World Heritage Convention framework and in the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005). Presentation — the mediation of heritage to a general public, including visitors with limited time and no prior relationship with the site — may legitimately be more directed, more structured, and more explicitly thematic than interpretation understood as a co-creative meaning-making process. This distinction does not dissolve the tension between the two modes, but it creates a conceptual space in

which both can operate without one entirely displacing the other. Ham's three "endgames" of interpretation — entertainment, teaching, and provocation (Ham 2013) — were cited by Ludwig as a frame within which provocation, in particular, might serve as a productive aspiration for interpretive practice: not telling visitors what to think, but giving them something genuinely new to think about.

### 3. The case for purpose-driven planning

The most consistently reiterated argument in the panel was that the interpretive theme cannot do its work in the absence of a prior and explicit understanding of purpose. Lisa Keys articulated this most directly, proposing a reorientation of the planning process around purpose rather than themes as its starting point.

The argument proceeds as follows. Interpretive planning has often begun with the resource — what is the heritage, what are its stories, what themes can be extracted — and then proceeded to consider how those themes might be communicated to various audiences. Keys proposes inverting this sequence: beginning with the question of why interpretation is being developed at all, what it is intended to achieve for the place and for the people connected to it, and then working outward toward the stories and frameworks most appropriate to those purposes. This is not a rejection of themes but a recontextualisation: the theme becomes a response to a prior purposeful question, rather than the primary organising framework from which everything else follows.

This approach has practical implications for how co-creative processes are designed and justified. One of the structural challenges of participatory interpretation, as Keys noted, is that communities and stakeholders need to understand what will happen to the stories they share. If people are invited to contribute their perspectives and their memories, they need to know — and to believe — that these contributions will actually shape the interpretive outcomes. A purpose-driven framework makes this commitment explicit: the purpose of the process, and the standards by which its outcomes will be evaluated, are visible from the beginning.

Lehnes complemented this argument by returning to Tilden's foundational statement of the purpose of interpretation: that it exists for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit, and that its highest aim is to provide every visitor, whatever their background, with at least one genuinely disturbing idea — an idea capable of provoking further thought, of unsettling a settled assumption, of opening a perspective previously unavailable (Tilden 1957). This is an educational purpose understood in the broadest sense: not the transmission of information, but what continental European traditions call ‘formation’ in French or ‘Bildung’ in German — holistic personal formation through encounters with the unfamiliar, expanding the boundaries of one's current understanding.

In this framing, the ‘so what?’ question that Lehnes attributed to Ham (1992, 27) — the demand that every interpretive theme should answer the question of why what is communicated matters — becomes not merely a communication strategy but a professional and ethical commitment: to take seriously the potential of heritage to provoke genuine thought and genuine change.

Theochari reinforced the centrality of purpose from a facilitation perspective, observing that in participatory processes, the objective is what drives the entire design. Every methodological choice — which tools to use, which communities to engage, in what sequence, with what level of participation intensity — flows from a prior answer to the question of what the process is

trying to achieve. Without this anchor, participatory processes risk becoming either superficially consultative or genuinely directionless.

### 4. From interpretive planner to interpretive facilitator

The question of professional identity ran through the panel's discussion as both an explicit topic and an implicit frame. The emerging consensus — arrived at through genuine argument rather than assumed — was that the role of the interpretive professional is shifting, and that the field has not yet fully acknowledged or responded to the scope of that shift.

Keys proposed what amounted to a reconceptualisation of the professional role: from interpretive planner to interpretive facilitator. The distinction is more than terminological. A planner, in the traditional model, is primarily an expert in heritage content and interpretive structuring: someone who understands the resource deeply, can identify its significant stories, and knows how to organise them into a coherent and engaging framework. A facilitator, by contrast, is primarily an expert in process: someone who knows how to create conditions in which different people can share their perspectives, in which dialogue can occur, and in which meaning can emerge collectively rather than being designed individually.

Keys was careful not to suggest that interpretive planners should simply become facilitators, abandoning their content expertise. Rather, she argued for an expansion of the professional repertoire — one that retains the distinctive interpretive competencies (knowledge of heritage, skill in narrative construction, understanding of how meaning is made) while adding the facilitation competencies that participatory planning requires. This expansion has training implications: the field needs to develop programmes that build facilitation literacy not as an optional specialisation but as a core professional competence.

Lehnes reflected on the relationship between traditional heritage interpreters and facilitators, suggesting that the two roles are better understood as complementary rather than competing. Traditionally, heritage interpreters bring a value-based, resource-centered approach, while facilitators contribute expertise in interpreting the minds of people and mediating between participants — understanding what they mean, what they bring to an encounter, and how to help a group move toward shared understanding. Integrating these people-centered competencies, he argued, is essential to the evolving professional profile of the heritage interpreter as a facilitator of meaning-making.

Theochari confirmed this from the facilitation perspective, emphasising that genuine participation relies on a high degree of methodological flexibility, which can be further strengthened and expanded within heritage contexts. Different communities and different individuals communicate in different modes: some through words, some through images, others through spatial or embodied activity. A facilitation practice adequate to the diversity of heritage stakeholders needs a broad toolkit and the diagnostic skill to match methods to people rather than applying a single standard approach. Crucially, this also means accepting the limits of participation: no one can be forced to share their story, and when a community is absent or unwilling to engage, their perspectives may need to be sought through other means — literature, archival research, proxy representation — rather than extracted through a process they have not chosen.

### 5. The risks of participation: Authenticity, economics, and the ladder of involvement

The panel's most critical intervention concerned a risk at the intersection of professional ethics and institutional practice: the risk of performative participation. Ludwig introduced Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein 1969) as a reference point for assessing the quality of participatory processes. Arnstein's model distinguishes between genuine participation — in which community voices actually influence outcomes — and various forms of nominal participation that serve primarily to legitimise decisions already made. Much contemporary participatory heritage practice, Ludwig observed, falls closer to the nominal end of this spectrum than its promoters are typically willing to acknowledge.

Theochari offered what amounted to a professional injunction on this point: if a practitioner is not genuinely willing to change their work based on what they hear from stakeholders and communities, they should not ask. The act of inviting participation creates an expectation of responsiveness; if that expectation is systematically disappointed, it damages trust — not only in the specific project but in participatory heritage practice more broadly. Better, Theochari argued, to be transparent about the limits of the process — to say clearly that this is a communicative encounter rather than a co-creative one — than to describe something as participatory when it is not.

Ludwig added a closely related observation about the economics of participatory planning. The expanded interpretive process that the panel was advocating — involving communities, engaging specialist facilitators, designing flexible and responsive workshops — is substantially more expensive and time-consuming than the traditional desk-based planning model. Clients who have been accustomed to receiving a plan within a few weeks and at modest cost may resist the more complex proposal, particularly if their relationship with local communities is already fraught.

The field faces not only a methodological development challenge but an economic and advocacy one: the case for participatory interpretation needs to be made persuasively to the institutions and clients who commission it, and the additional costs need to be justified in terms these clients find compelling.

Keys noted that this economic argument connects back to the question of purpose. If the purpose of interpretation — and the objectives of a specific interpretive project — can be articulated clearly, and if the value of community involvement in achieving those objectives can be demonstrated, then the case for the additional investment becomes much easier to make. The objectives framework is not merely a planning tool; it is also a professional communication and advocacy instrument.

The panel also addressed the question of audience — or, as Ludwig and Keys agreed, the preferred term of 'people': those for whom interpretation is ultimately produced. Keys argued that understanding the characteristics, motivations, and prior knowledge of the people who will engage with the interpretation is as important as understanding the heritage resource itself, and that this dimension of interpretive practice remains underdeveloped as a professional competency. Knowing who the people are — not in demographic abstraction but in terms of what brings them to a place, what they already carry with them, and what kinds of encounter might genuinely disturb their existing understanding — is a prerequisite for creating themes and stories that are meaningful rather than merely informative.

## 6. Discussion: Themes as one element among many

What emerges from the panel is a picture of a field in productive transition — not abandoning its foundational concepts but rethinking their place within a larger and more complex professional framework.

The theme, in this picture, does not disappear. Lehnes's closing observation was that the enduring contribution of Ham's thematic tradition (Ham 1992, 2013), the demand to answer the 'so what?' question, to provide every visitor with a relevant and resonant takeaway, remains valid. The interpretive themes, understood as crystallised answers to the questions of why this matters and to whom, retains its value as an aspiration and as a quality criterion. What changes is its status within the planning process: from the primary organising framework, from which everything else derives, to one element within a more holistic interpretive design that includes essence, universal processes (Van Matre 2008), objectives, audience understanding, and process design.

This is, in some respects, a matter of sequence as much as substance. The traditional model asks: What is the theme, and how do we communicate it? The emerging model asks: What is the purpose, who are the people, what process will best serve both, and what themes — plural, provisional, responsive — might emerge from that process? The theme remains, but it arrives later, and it arrives from a different direction.

The facilitation turn in interpretive practice also implies a rethinking of what interpretive expertise consists of. The interpreter who approaches a heritage site as its authoritative explicator — the person who knows what it means and knows how to communicate that meaning — is giving way, at least in some contexts, to the interpreter who approaches a heritage encounter as a relational and dialogic event: one in which meaning is negotiated, contested, and co-produced. This is a more uncertain professional position, and it requires a kind of professional confidence that is different from content mastery: the confidence to sit with ambiguity, to hold open questions, and to trust that dialogue, properly facilitated, will produce something more valuable than any pre-constructed theme.

The risk of buzzword inflation — the appropriation of the language of 'co-creation' and 'participation' to describe processes that are in practice neither — was identified by Ludwig as a significant reputational and ethical danger for the field. The Arnstein ladder (Arnstein 1969) provides a useful diagnostic here: practitioners should be asking themselves honestly where their processes sit on the spectrum of participation, and being honest with their clients and communities about the answer. The alternative — systematically overpromising and underdelivering on participation — will ultimately discredit the participatory model and make genuine co-creation harder to achieve.

## 7. Conclusion

The question posed to the panel — How does the symposium influence our thinking about interpretive themes? — received an answer that was at once specific and expansive.

Specifically, the symposium reinforced a growing professional consensus that the hierarchical thematic model, while not without value, is insufficient as the sole framework for interpretive planning in an era of participatory practice. More expansively, it raised questions about professional identity, institutional economics, the ethics of participation, and the purpose of interpretation itself that will require sustained engagement well beyond any single event.

The theme is not dead. But it is no longer king. What replaces it at the centre of professional practice is something harder to name and harder to teach: a combination of purposeful clarity, facilitation skill, audience understanding, and the intellectual and relational courage to engage with the full complexity of what heritage means to different people in different contexts.

The field has the conceptual resources for this expansion — in Tilden's ethics of provocation (Tilden 1957), in Ham's demand for relevance and purpose (Ham 2013), in Van Matre's holistic design thinking (Van Matre 2008), and in the Faro Convention's democratic vision of heritage (Council of Europe 2005). What it now needs is the professional infrastructure: the training programmes, the economic models, and the community of practice that can realise this vision at scale.

As Ludwig observed in his closing remarks, the symposium was not a conclusion but a beginning. The colourful mosaic that the broader event sought to celebrate is only valuable if its complexity can be held together — if the richness of perspectives, methods, and purposes does not collapse into an infinite maze of unresolved questions. That requires precisely what this panel advocated: clarity of purpose, honesty about process, and a professional community willing to keep the conversation going.

## Acknowledgements

We thank all members of the expert panel and the broader participant community whose contributions — including responses and observations shared via the symposium chat — enriched the discussion documented here. Contributions from Jon Kohl, Valya Stergioti, and other symposium participants that arose during the panel session have been integrated where relevant. This is an edited summary of the live panel discussion; contributions have been lightly reworked for clarity and readability while preserving the substance of the original exchange.

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# Full papers

## Stories in stone: The role of heritage interpretation in shaping the Mont'e Prama Giants narrative in 21st-century Italy


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**Abstract**

Over the past two decades, Italy's archaeological heritage has become a contested space where local identity and political power intersect, exemplified by the Mont'e Prama Giants—Bronze Age statues discovered near Cabras, Sardinia, in 1974. Their split display between the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari and the Civic Museum of Cabras sparked debates on cultural ownership, revealing tensions between regional identity, national policies, and global museology. This study uses multimodal storytelling analysis, drawing on Roppola's exhibition design, Hein's educational theories, and Ferguson's literary museology to examine how heritage interpretation shapes narratives. It shows how interpretive practices embed the statues in ongoing struggles over identity, legitimacy, and territorial claims, highlighting heritage interpretation's role in mediating power through narrative.



**Keywords**

heritage interpretation, museum narratives, Mont'e Prama Giants, narrative authority, exhibition design.


### 1. Introduction

The discovery and subsequent exhibition of the Mont'e Prama Giants have generated one of the most significant recent debates in Italian archaeological heritage. The monumental limestone statues, dating to the late Bronze Age and unearthed near Cabras in western Sardinia, became the focus of controversy following their restoration between 2007 and 2011, when the sculptures were divided between two institutions: the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari and the Civic Museum 'Giovanni Marongiu' of Cabras (Figure 1). What initially resulted from practical infrastructural constraints soon evolved into a broader political and cultural dispute involving local authorities, regional actors, and national heritage institutions, centred on questions of display, territorial belonging, and symbolic ownership.

This situation provides a useful lens through which to examine heritage interpretation as a process of narrative construction. Museum exhibitions do not simply present archaeological objects; they organise them into narratives that structure how the past is interpreted, who speaks with authority, and how visitors engage with heritage. Spatial design, textual mediation, and curatorial choices shape both the cognitive

and emotional dimensions of visitor experience while reflecting broader institutional and political contexts (Lindauer, 2006; Moser, 2010; Somers, 1994; Van Dyke, 2011 & 2019). While previous studies have documented the restoration and display of the Mont'e Prama statues (Bedini, 2012; Bedini et al., 2012; Bernardini, 2014; Bernardini, 2015; Bernardini, 2016; Tronchetti, 2005; Usai & Zucca, 2015; Zucca, 2014), less attention has been given to how narrative, authority, and spatial strategies differ between Cagliari and Cabras and what this reveals about heritage interpretation.

Against this background, this paper investigates how the Mont'e Prama Giants are narratively presented in the two museums. It asks how the exhibitions structure their narratives, how authority is articulated, and how spatial and curatorial strategies shape visitor engagement. To address these questions, the study employs a multimodal storytelling analysis (MSA) combining Tina Roppola's (2012) exhibition design framework, George Hein's (1998) theories of museum learning, and Bruce Ferguson's (1996) reflections on authorship and representation in exhibitions.

Section 2 of the paper outlines the theoretical framework and methodology. Section 3 presents the archaeological context of the discovery and the debate over the distribution of the statues. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 analyse the exhibitions in Cagliari and Cabras, respectively. Section 5 discusses the implications for heritage interpretation and museum narratives, highlighting how museums, local communities, and national institutions negotiate authority and meaning in the presentation of archaeological heritage.

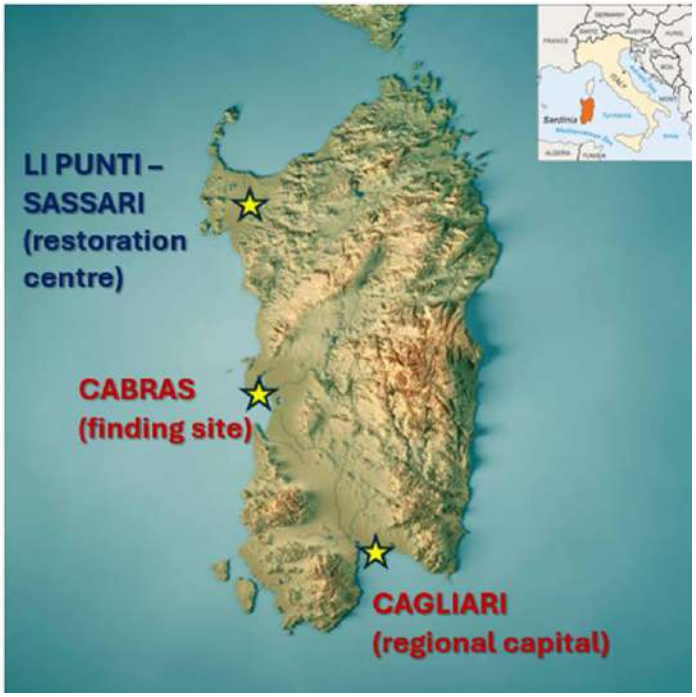


**Figure 1. Map of Sardinia indicating the places involved in the discourse about the Giants of Mont'e Prama (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

## 2. Theoretical framework

The methodological approach adopted in this research is multimodal storytelling analysis (MSA), a framework used to examine how narratives are constructed within museum exhibitions through the interaction of spatial design, objects, media, and textual interpretation. Following the approach proposed by Emilie Sitzia (2023), MSA allows the analysis of exhibitions as complex narrative environments in which multiple communicative elements operate simultaneously.

The empirical fieldwork for this study was conducted in July 2025 and consisted of multiple visits to the permanent exhibitions of the Mont'e Prama statues in Cagliari and Cabras. During these visits, observations were systematically recorded through written notes, photographs, and video recordings documenting spatial arrangements, interpretive media, lighting, visitor movement, and curatorial choices. These materials were subsequently analysed using the MSA framework to identify

how the exhibitions structure narrative meaning and guide visitor engagement.

The principal analytical tool employed in this study is Tina Roppola's (2012) framework for exhibition design analysis, which focuses on the relationship between visitors and exhibition environments. Roppola identifies four key processes through which visitors interact with exhibitions: framing, resonating, channelling, and broadening (Figure 2). These processes provide a useful lens for examining how narrative meaning emerges through spatial organisation and curatorial mediation.

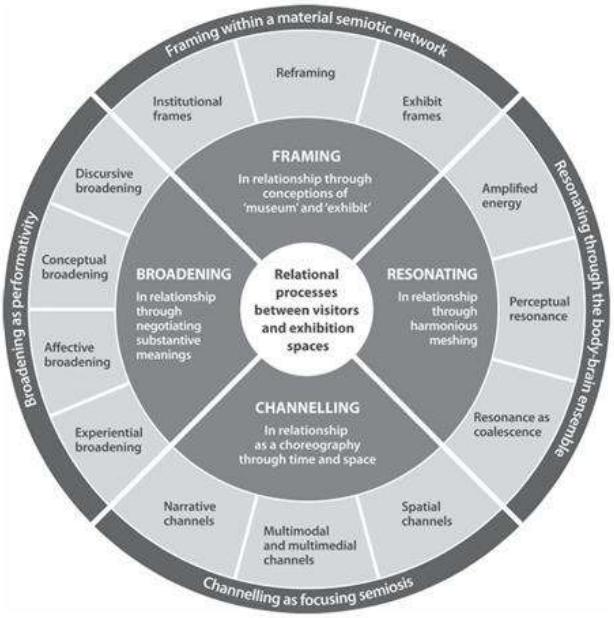


**Figure 2. Relational processes between visitors and exhibition spaces (Image: Roppola, 2012)**

Framing refers to the ways exhibitions establish interpretive contexts, positioning objects within broader cultural or historical narratives. Resonating describes the immediate relational connection visitors may experience with exhibition elements, often produced through spatial design, atmosphere, or emotional cues. Channelling concerns the ways exhibitions guide visitor movement and attention through architectural layout, media, and display strategies. Finally, broadening refers to moments when visitors' understanding of the exhibition is expanded or when the displayed objects are connected to wider cultural, historical, or conceptual contexts.

While Roppola's framework constitutes the primary analytical structure, the analysis also draws on George Hein's (1998) model of museum learning theories to interpret the educational strategies underlying the exhibitions. Hein distinguishes several approaches to museum learning, including the didactic–expository model, in which knowledge is transmitted through structured interpretation, and the discovery model, which encourages visitors to construct meaning more actively through exploration. These categories help clarify how different exhibition designs position visitors in relation to knowledge and interpretation.

Finally, the analysis is, more briefly, informed by Bruce Ferguson's (1996) reflections on authorship and representation in exhibitions. Ferguson emphasises that exhibitions function as discursive spaces in which multiple voices interact, raising questions about who is speaking and to whom. This perspective helps illuminate how curatorial authority and interpretive voice are articulated within the narrative structures of the two displays.

Taken together, these approaches provide a methodological framework for examining how the Mont'e Prama exhibitions organise narrative meaning through spatial design, interpretive mediation, and institutional positioning.

## 3. The Mont'e Prama case

The so-called Giants of Mont'e Prama are a group of limestone statues that were discovered at the archaeological site of Mont'e Prama, located within the territory of the municipality of Cabras (Oristano, Sardinia, Italy) (Usai & Usai, 2016). The sculptures were accidentally uncovered in 1974 when local farmers were

ploughing. Following this initial discovery, the statues were recovered during multiple phases of excavations conducted between 1974 and 1979 and then again between 2014 and 2022 (Rendeli, 2014).

Associated with a necropolis, the statues were identified as part of a funerary area interpreted as dedicated to celebrating deified ancestors, known in archaeological terminology as a heroon, and erected between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (10th to first half of the 8th centuries BCE) (Minoja & Usai, 2020; Usai & Del Vais, 2016). The statues appear to have been deliberately damaged in later periods and more precisely around the end of the 4th and beginning of the 3rd centuries BCE, possibly through a process of damnatio memoriae or other forms of destruction by a new, different group of people who had settled on the island, namely the Carthaginians or Punic civilisation (Tronchetti, 2015). Therefore, they were found in numerous fragments. During a major restoration campaign carried out between 2007 and 2011 at the Li Punti restoration centre near Sassari (Boninu, 2014; Boninu & Costanzi Cobau, 2014), restorers were able to reassemble many of these fragments, making it possible to recognise three main iconographic typologies: warriors, archers, and boxers (Usai, 2014).

Once the restoration was complete, the statues were ready to be exhibited, but the Civic Museum 'Giovanni Marongiu' of Cabras (in whose territory the site of Mont'e Prama is located) was not prepared to host all of them due to limited infrastructural capacity. For this reason, a parallel restoration and expansion programme was initiated to enlarge and refurbish the museum, although its timeline depended on the availability of funding.

For that reason, the ministerial Superintendency for Archaeology of Cagliari and Oristano decided to move about a third of the statues from the restoration centre of Li Punti (SS) to the Cabras Museum, and to transfer the majority to the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari (which was directly under the same ministerial authority until 2019, before it received autonomous status, especially in economic and financial terms, alongside other Italian cultural institutions through the Franceschini reform of cultural heritage) (Casini, 2019; Erbani, 2015).

What had originally resulted from a practical infrastructural constraint soon became the fulcrum of an intense public and political debate. Local administrators in Cabras, civic committees, and several provincial, regional, and national politicians began advocating for the complete reunification of the statues in Cabras, transforming the issue into a broader cultural and political campaign.

Eventually, in July 2021, the charter of the Fondazione Mont'e Prama was signed, the founding members of which were the municipality of Cabras, the Sardinia region, and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism (MiBACT). Among the foundation's aims is the eventual exhibition of the whole Mont'e Prama statuary complex in the Cabras museum, and, since then, the debate has gradually begun to fade, as an increasing number of statues have been transferred from Cagliari to Cabras (Fondazione Mont'e Prama, 2025).

## 4. Exhibition narrative analysis

### 4.1 Cagliari

The current permanent exhibition of the Mont'e Prama Giants in Cagliari was established in 2014 following the extensive restoration campaign carried out at the Li Punti centre. At that time, the museum had not yet become an autonomous institution and was still administered by the local ministerial superintendency. Between 2020 and 2021, the presentation of the giants was reorganised:

what had initially been conceived as a temporary exhibition distributed across several floors became a permanent display concentrated on the museum's top floor (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. View of the Cagliari exhibition (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

Applying Tina Roppola's exhibition design analysis framework, the overall framing of the space evokes a rather traditional museum aesthetic. The decorative apparatus is dominated by cold tones—grey, black, and white—with reinforced concrete elements particularly prominent (Figure 4). A minimalist approach characterises the display's infrastructural components: simple, squared, dark blocks structure the exhibition, and metal supports that hold the artefacts remain visible. This minimalism contrasts with the explanatory panels, which are relatively dense and strongly didactic. Conceptually, the exhibition combines chronological and thematic organisation, with a clear educational intention.

The architectural configuration of the floor largely functions as the exhibition frame, with limited attempts to create explicit temporal connections between the ancient past embodied by the statues and the contemporary museum environment. The display is structured through bilingual explanatory texts, in Italian and English, written in white against the black blocks that shape the exhibition, reinforcing a strong explanatory approach.

**Figure 4. Detail of a warrior-type giant with its shield exhibited separately aside (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

Within this setting, the exhibition produces a relatively contained sense of resonance. Visitors' bodily engagement with the statues remains limited, as most of them are displayed frontally, restricting the possibility of moving around them freely. Reinforced by a metallic protective barrier separating the statues from the public, this arrangement emphasises visual observation from a restrained distance, rather than immersive experience, strengthening the impression of the statues as archaeological artefacts to be studied rather than as monumental presences to be encountered physically. In this sense, the exhibition consolidates the museum's role as a site of scholarly authority, framing the giants primarily as objects of archaeological knowledge rather than as elements of a locally embedded heritage landscape. Lighting contributes to this restrained atmosphere: spotlights softly illuminate each artefact, producing a mild chiaroscuro effect without strongly emphasising individual pieces. A notable exception is the decision to place a single statue at the beginning of the exhibition (Figure 5). This isolated figure functions as an introductory focal point, almost as a symbolic host welcoming visitors into the display.

**Figure 5. Detail of the giant exhibited isolated at the beginning of the exhibition alongside the introductory panel (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

An element suggesting inclusivity is the presence of a video screen where the story of the statues is narrated, also in LIS (Italian Sign Language). This feature indicates an attempt to broaden accessibility, although its relatively isolated placement may limit its visibility.

The visit is designed as a flexible experience. Visitors may follow a chronological or thematic path, but can also move relatively freely between sections. The spatial layout resembles a simplified labyrinth in which moments of visual impact appear gradually. At the same time, numerous benches encourage slower contemplation and allow visitors to focus on individual artefacts.

A multimedia console placed at the end of the thematic path represents the exhibition's main technological element (Figure 6). It presents a descriptive video and an interactive multilingual interface through which users can explore detailed information about each statue. The console also indicates whether a specific giant is displayed in Cagliari or in the museum of Cabras. Despite this feature, the exhibition appears relatively isolated in narrative terms, since each floor of the museum is dedicated to a specific topic, potentially weakening the perception of a broader storyline.

**Figure 6. Detail of the multimedia console (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

In terms of narrative broadening, the exhibition establishes only limited connections with wider contexts. One internal conceptual link is created between the giants and small bronze figurines frequently associated with them in scholarly literature (Lo Schiavo 2014). These figurines are displayed on cylindrical pedestals placed in front of the statues, inviting visitors to compare the pairs of 'figurines–giants' (Figures 7 & 8). The relationship between the two categories appears largely interpretive, as the connection is mainly explained in the thematic panels introducing each section.

**Figure 7. Detail of a boxer-type giant with a typologically similar small bronze figurine exhibited in front of it (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

**Figure 8. Detail of a small bronze figurine of an archer on an acrylic pedestal (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

References to the statues exhibited in the museum of Cabras provide another form of narrative extension, although this aspect is addressed only briefly. The separation between the two display locations is mentioned in the introductory panel and more implicitly within the multimedia console, where the location of each statue is indicated. However, the exhibition does not develop this point into a broader narrative explaining the reasons for the division.

From an educational perspective, and drawing on George Hein's model of museum learning theories, the exhibition can be interpreted primarily as a didactic-expository one. Communication relies heavily on written texts presented through large panels introducing thematic sections, while individual artefacts are accompanied only by short labels reporting catalogue number, material, description, and provenance.

Despite the exhibition's overall didactic tone, the language used in some panels conveys a degree of emotional engagement (Figure 9). Descriptions emphasise aesthetic qualities, such as the statues' "magnetic eyes", and their symbolic local value as "signs of a territorial peculiarity". Anthropomorphic expressions also appear when describing the restoration process as an act of care that allows the statues to "communicate" again. Through this narrative strategy, the curator, corresponding to the 'Who' in Bruce Ferguson's model of representativity, invites visitors, the 'To Whom', to engage emotionally with the statues.

However, the exhibition frames the experience as an educational journey in which the giants occupy the central narrative role, while visitors remain primarily observers encountering these monumental figures.

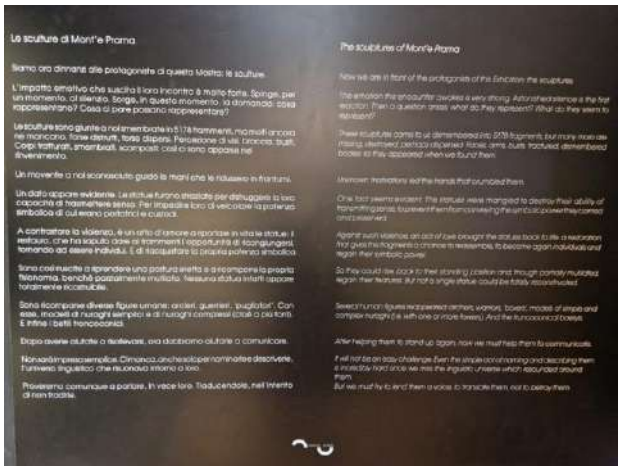


**Figure 9. Wide black-and-white bilingual explanation panel (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

## 4.2 Cabras

The permanent exhibition of the Mont'e Prama statues in the Cabras museum represents a transitional configuration, established in May 2025, between the earlier arrangement inaugurated in 2014 and a potential future, more definitive display (Figure 10). Although officially described as temporary, the term 'permanent' is used here to indicate that the statues are currently intended to remain stably within this institutional context, bridging past curatorial decisions and future strategies. This framing allows the exhibition to be understood as both a continuation of previous choices and a preparation for a broader interpretive plan that may evolve as the museum develops its narrative and spatial logic.

**Figure 10. Overview of the Cabras exhibition (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

Following Tina Roppola's exhibition design framework, the exhibition unfolds within a relatively small square room, where the stark white upper walls contrast with black lower sections and dark curtains that prevent direct sunlight. Multiple spotlights illuminate the statues, producing soft shading and subtle chiaroscuro effects while maintaining overall visual uniformity (Figures 11 & 12). The entrance, similarly screened by curtains, contributes to an atmosphere of anticipation and wonder, heightened by background instrumental music. These elements collectively establish a controlled yet intimate environment that primes visitors for engagement with the artefacts from the moment of entry.

The framing strategy is minimalist. Written mediation is deliberately sparse, while affective engagement is encouraged through carefully selected elements, such as quotations from Sardinian archaeologist Giovanni Lilliu and black-and-white photographic reproductions of the findspot and archaeological site. Such choices leave interpretive space for visitors whilst fostering a sense of proximity to the statues, enhanced by the room's modest dimensions. The exhibition thus privileges experiential and emotional engagement over dense explanatory texts.

Visitors are not guided along a prescribed path, as the statues occupy the room's centre without an enforced sequence. This apparent freedom is moderated by two practical constraints: a maximum stay of seven minutes, indicated outside the room, and the constant presence of a security guard (Figure 13). For some visitors, these factors may temper the immediacy suggested by the absence of physical barriers. Within the broader museum itinerary, the exhibition is ideally positioned at the end of the route; following this progression is not compulsory, but doing so may intensify the emotional impact when encountering the

statues behind the curtains, creating a staged moment of discovery.

Figure 11. Frontal view of a statue (Image: Andrea Berettera)

Figure 12. Rear view of a statue (Image: Andrea Berettera)

Figure 13. Warning panel set outside the exhibition room (Image: Andrea Berettera)

Several elements contribute to a comparatively high degree of resonance. Background music, a slideshow narrating discovery and restoration, free movement around the sculptures, Lilliu's quotation, and a monumental photographic reproduction of the findspot (Figures 14 & 15) combine to stimulate bodily and emotional involvement. A particularly meaningful example is the inclusion of the statues' nicknames, coined during the most recent restoration campaign by the restorers (Figure 16). These Sardinian names recall aspects of local tradition or commemorate individuals connected to the statues' modern history, humanising the artefacts and fostering a closer connection to the surrounding community.

Figure 14. Giant black-and-white poster on one of the exhibition room's walls (Image: Andrea Berettera)

**Figure 15. Slideshow video and soundbar on the exhibition room's bottom wall (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

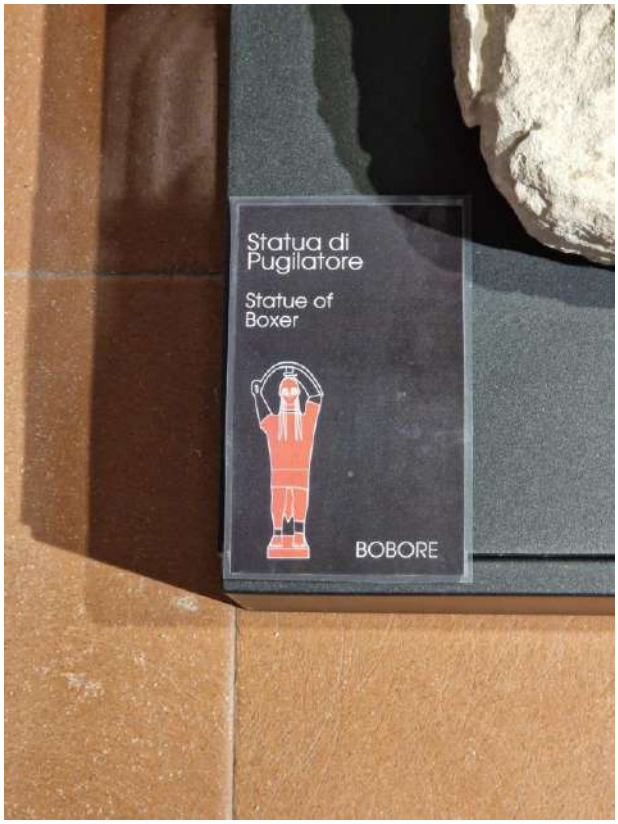


**Figure 16. Example of exhibit label with black-highlighted missing parts and the statue's nickname in Sardinian (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

Social resonance is further emphasised through language. Sardinian accompanies Italian and English in the main written texts (the historical quotation and introductory panel) and occupies a prominent position, signalling the exhibition's engagement with local identity. The same principle is reflected in the QR-code platform, where Sardinian is included among the languages providing detailed information, allowing visitors to deepen their understanding independently (Figure 17).

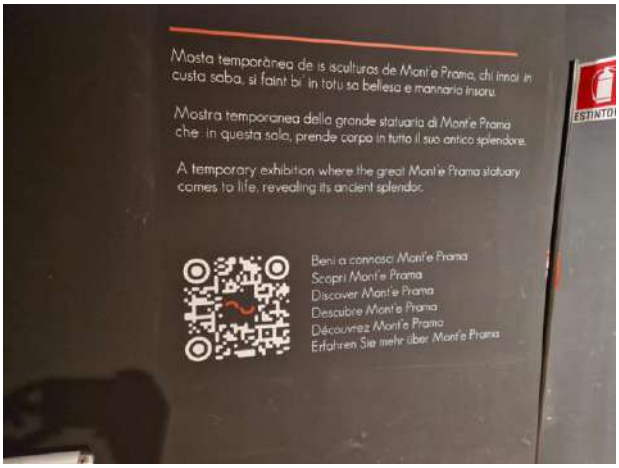


**Figure 17. Trilingual introductory panel and QR code (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

The QR code, the only interactive multimedia device in the room, allows for conceptual broadening beyond the immediate encounter, offering a digital extension of the exhibition experience whilst preserving the minimalist aesthetic. This approach supports visitors' curiosity without overwhelming the visual and spatial coherence of the room. Lilliu's quotation (Figure 18) similarly situates the statues within a broader Mediterranean archaeological context, connecting Sardinian heritage with wider scholarly discourse (Usai 2018). References to statues displayed in the Cagliari museum are absent, consistent with the temporary redistribution of the works, yet this absence also highlights that the separation is not fully integrated into the room's interpretive narrative.

From an educational perspective, using Hein's model of museum learning theories, the exhibition aligns primarily with a discovery-based approach. Visitors occupy a position between recipients of structured knowledge and autonomous meaning-makers. Although extensive interpretive material is accessible digitally, the physical arrangement and limited

written content indicate that curatorial guidance shapes the learning experience. Visitors are encouraged to actively engage with the statues' story, while remaining within parameters set by the museum's design.

Authority within the exhibition is anchored in the historical narrative embodied by the giants themselves and reinforced through expert citation, particularly Lilliu's voice. The result is an interpretive environment where emotional proximity and institutional guidance operate simultaneously. The statues' monumental presence, combined with spatial framing, lighting, and sound, positions them as central actors in an ongoing story, while visitors function as reflective observers engaging with curated knowledge.

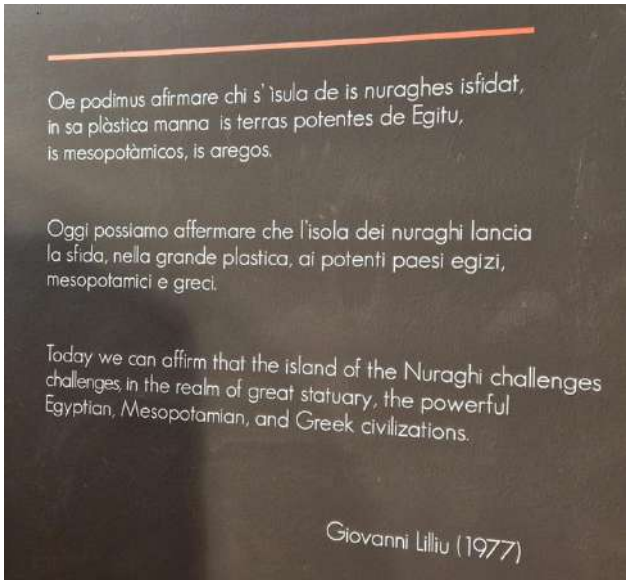


**Figure 18. Trilingual quotation from Sardinian archaeologist Giovanni Lilliu (Image: Andrea Berettera)**

## 5. Discussion

The permanent exhibitions of the Mont'e Prama statues in Cagliari and Cabras offer a revealing case study for examining heritage interpretation and narrative authority within museum environments. Although both exhibitions present the same Bronze Age sculptures, they construct markedly different interpretive frameworks, reflecting distinct institutional positions, curatorial priorities, and relationships with the surrounding territory. These differences become particularly visible when considering how narrative structures, interpretive authority, and spatial strategies shape the visitor's encounter with the statues.

In Cagliari, the exhibition adopts a structured and didactic narrative approach in which interpretation is explicitly mediated by curatorial expertise. Extensive textual panels, archaeological contextualisation, and comparisons with bronze figurines frame the giants within a broader chronological and cultural narrative of Bronze Age Sardinia. In this configuration, interpretive authority is clearly embodied by the museum itself, which assumes the role of primary mediator of knowledge. The visitor is, therefore, positioned within a predominantly didactic framework that privileges institutional expertise and structured learning. In terms of museum educational models, this strategy aligns with an expository approach in which knowledge is transmitted through curated textual and visual mediation. More broadly, the exhibition reflects the traditional role of national museums as institutions that integrate local archaeological discoveries into wider historical narratives, situating them within regional and Mediterranean contexts.

The exhibition in Cabras, by contrast, privileges a more immersive and affective interpretive strategy. Here, narrative is less dependent on textual explanation and instead relies on spatial arrangement, atmospheric elements, and symbolic references to foster engagement. The statues are presented in a darkened room revealed at the end of the museum visit, creating a carefully staged moment of encounter intended to generate awe and emotional resonance. Visitors are encouraged to move freely around the sculptures, establishing a more immediate physical relationship with the artefacts. At the same time, this apparent

openness is subtly structured through the organisation of the space, the limited time allowed within the room, and the presence of a security guard, revealing how participatory experiences remain institutionally mediated.

Narrative authority in Cabras is also configured differently. Rather than relying primarily on curatorial textual mediation, interpretive meaning is distributed across a combination of artefacts, spatial design, and symbolic references. The use of nicknames attributed to the statues during restoration, displayed in the Sardinian language, plays a particularly significant role in shaping this narrative framework. Together with the presence of Sardinian language in exhibition texts and QR-code content, these elements reinforce a strong connection between the sculptures and the local cultural context. In doing so, the exhibition situates the giants not only as archaeological artefacts, but also as symbols embedded in the social and territorial identity of Cabras. The authority of interpretation is, therefore, partially redistributed, allowing local language, memory, and symbolic associations to contribute to the narrative construction of the past.

These contrasting strategies can be understood within a broader process of heritage territorialisation, whereby archaeological objects become closely associated with specific places and communities that claim them as markers of identity and cultural continuity. In this sense, the Mont'e Prama giants function simultaneously as archaeological artefacts and as symbols within contemporary negotiations of belonging and cultural ownership. The exhibition in Cabras reinforces this territorial dimension by emphasising the statues' relationship with their place of discovery and with the community that hosts the site.

Conversely, the museum in Cagliari situates the same objects within a wider institutional framework, integrating them into broader narratives of Sardinian and Mediterranean prehistory.

This contrast also reflects a wider centre–periphery dynamic within heritage governance. National institutions, such as the museum in Cagliari, traditionally operate as centres of interpretive authority, where archaeological objects are contextualised within large-scale historical narratives. Local museums, by contrast, often emphasise the relationship between heritage and place, foregrounding the role of communities in defining the meaning of archaeological remains. The Mont'e Prama case illustrates how these two perspectives may coexist but also compete, generating different narrative strategies that correspond to different institutional scales and cultural priorities.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparison between the exhibitions in Cagliari and Cabras demonstrates how museum displays actively shape the meanings attributed to archaeological heritage. Although both institutions present the same statues, they construct clearly different frameworks of understanding: Cagliari situates the giants within a broader archaeological narrative mediated by institutional expertise; whereas Cabras foregrounds emotional engagement and territorial belonging, emphasising the sculptures' relationship with their place of origin and the surrounding community.

These contrasting strategies show how exhibition design, language, and spatial organisation function not merely as communicative tools but as mechanisms through which interpretive authority over the past is negotiated.

The Mont'e Prama case, therefore, illustrates how archaeological objects become embedded

in contemporary debates about identity, ownership, and representation. Approaching exhibitions as narrative constructions rather than neutral presentations encourages greater reflexivity about whose perspectives are foregrounded and how alternative voices might be integrated into heritage interpretation.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining visitors' responses to these different narrative environments and by considering how the ongoing institutional reconfiguration of the statues' display may reshape the relationship between local and national heritage discourses. This study represents only part of a broader PhD project investigating the use of archaeological heritage in Italy in the 21st century within public and political discourse, drawing on parliamentary speeches, media statements, and exhibition narratives, and employing discourse, narratological, spatial, and ethnographic analyses to understand how archaeological objects shape memory, identity, and public narratives.

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# Altervia Multivox in Croatia: Heritage interpretation through multiple narratives and performative practice

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**Abstract**

Altervia Multivox is an Erasmus+ transnational project that explores heritage interpretation through itinerant, bicycle-based residencies combining ethnographic research, performative art, and informal learning. Across rural and protected landscapes in France, Belgium, and Croatia, young European participants collect oral histories from local residents and transform them into site-specific performance-walks. By embodying multiple narratives within the landscape, the project highlights heritage as a plural, lived, and dialogic process, fostering ecological awareness, intercultural exchange, and critical reflection on identity, belonging, and sustainable relationships between people, place, and environment.

**Keywords**

heritage interpretation, multiple narratives, ethnography, performative art

## Introduction

### Heritage interpretation as a dialogical process

Heritage interpretation has increasingly moved beyond the traditional model of transmitting expert knowledge to passive audiences. Contemporary heritage theory emphasises participation, community engagement, and the recognition of multiple perspectives in the construction of heritage narratives. Rather than presenting heritage as a fixed set of facts, recent approaches conceptualise it as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between people, places, and memories (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013).

Within this context, artistic and participatory methodologies have emerged as powerful tools for exploring heritage as a lived experience. These approaches emphasise storytelling, embodiment, and sensory engagement with landscapes, enabling participants to experience heritage through dialogue and shared exploration rather than through authoritative interpretation.

The Erasmus+ project Altervia Multivox represents an example of such an approach. The

project combines ethnographic research, performative arts, and informal learning through itinerant bicycle-based residencies that take place in rural and protected landscapes in France, Belgium, and Croatia. This paper focuses on one of the locations in Croatia (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Location of Vransko Lake Nature Park, Croatia**

During these residencies, young European participants explore local territories by bicycle, conduct interviews with residents, and collect oral histories that reflect everyday life, cultural practices, and historical transformations.

The collected narratives are later transformed into site-specific performance walks, in which participants embody and perform the words of local inhabitants whilst guiding audiences through the landscapes in which the stories were originally experienced. In this way, the project creates a dialogical encounter between past and present, between local knowledge and external perspectives, and between narrative memory and physical landscape.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the methodology of the Altervia Multivox project and to examine its transformative impact on participants, local communities, and audiences (Figure 2). The analysis focuses particularly on the role of narrative, embodiment, and landscape in the interpretation process.

**Figure 2. Collective warm-up in the landscape above Vransko jezero Lake before the performance (Image: Gentiane Désveaux)**

## Participatory heritage interpretation

Traditional heritage interpretation often relied on hierarchical models in which experts produced knowledge that was subsequently transmitted to visitors. This model reflected a broader perception of heritage as a collection of monuments, artefacts, and historical facts managed primarily by institutions.

However, heritage scholars have increasingly criticised such approaches for overlooking the role of communities and lived experiences in the construction of heritage meanings. According to Smith (2006), heritage should be understood as a cultural process through which societies negotiate values, identities, and memories. Rather than existing independently of social practices, heritage emerges through acts of interpretation, narration, and engagement.

Similarly, Harrison (2013) emphasises that contemporary heritage practices increasingly involve multiple actors, including local communities, artists, activists, and visitors. These actors contribute to the ongoing reinterpretation of heritage sites and narratives.

Although these ideas may appear relatively recent, they resonate with earlier principles of heritage interpretation. Freeman Tilden, whose work remains foundational for the field, argued that interpretation should not simply present facts but should provoke emotional and

intellectual connections between visitors and the meanings embedded in heritage places (Tilden, 1957/1977).

The Altervia Multivox project builds upon these principles by combining participatory research and artistic performance. Instead of presenting historical information through explanatory panels or guided tours, the project creates opportunities for participants and audiences to engage directly with stories shared by local inhabitants.

### Narrative, time, and experience

Narrative plays a central role in shaping human understanding of time and experience. According to Carr (1986), human experience is inherently structured through narrative forms that connect past events with present interpretation and future expectations. Narrative is, therefore, not merely a retrospective way of organising historical events but a fundamental dimension of lived experience.

Within heritage interpretation, storytelling becomes a powerful means of connecting individual memories with broader historical processes. Personal narratives reveal how historical transformations are experienced at the level of everyday life, allowing listeners to perceive history not as an abstract sequence of events but as a series of lived experiences.

Oral history research has demonstrated the importance of narrative in revealing emotional, social, and cultural aspects of the past that are often absent from official archives. Portelli (1991) emphasises that oral testimonies are valuable not only for the factual information they contain but also for the meanings and interpretations that narrators attach to their experiences. Similarly, Thompson (1978/2000) argues that oral history can democratise historical knowledge by incorporating the voices of individuals who are often excluded from institutional narratives.

In the context of Altervia Multivox, narrative becomes both a research method and an artistic medium. Interviews conducted with residents provide the material for storytelling, while performance walks transform these narratives into embodied experiences shared with audiences (Table 1).

| Phase | Audience | Role |
|---|---|---|
| **Immersion** | Experts + artists | Co-creators of interpretation |
| **Collection** | Local residents | Bearers of memory |
| **Collection** | Young participants | Researchers + recipients |
| **Performance** | Young participants | Interpreters |
| **Performance** | Locals + tourists | Participants in the experience |
| **Entire process** | Landscape | Active interlocutor |

**Table 1. Different audiences in different phases of the process of co-interpretation in the Altervia Multivox project**

## Methodology of the Altervia Multivox project

The methodology combines ethnographic research, artistic practice, and experiential learning. The project unfolds through three interconnected phases: immersion in the territory, collection of oral narratives, and the performance walk.

The artistic partner in the project, Theater du Chemin, led by Raphaël Faure, made a preparatory field visit before including the students, who then conducted the interviews and collected the testimonies to be made into the interpretive performance walk.

During the preparatory visit, Raphaël undertook the immersion phase, also on a bicycle as the

students will later do, and interacted with researchers, the park staff, and some members of the local community. This helped to create an idea for the walking route that was added to during the collection phase. The original idea has to be fluid enough to be transformed by the content of the interviews. The back-and-forth process is mostly led by the artist, but also takes into account elements of interpretation from the students and all other stakeholders included in the process.

### Immersion time

The first phase of the project involves immersing participants in the local environment. During this intense one-week period, participants explore the landscape, meet local experts, and learn about the ecological and cultural characteristics of the region.

Local experts such as park rangers, historians, and community members provide insights into the environmental and historical features of the territory. At the same time, artists and participants explore the landscape intuitively through cycling and walking.

This dual approach creates a dialogue between expert knowledge and sensory experience. Participants not only learn about the territory but also develop personal impressions through their encounters with the landscape.

### Cycling residencies as a research method

One of the distinctive features of the project is the use of cycling as a means of exploring the landscape. Cycling allows participants to move through the territory at a pace that encourages observation and interaction. Unlike faster modes of transportation, bicycles allow participants to experience environmental features such as terrain, weather conditions, and distances in a direct and embodied way.

Cycling also creates opportunities for spontaneous encounters with local inhabitants. These encounters often play an important role in the research process, opening conversations that might not occur within more structured research frameworks.

Furthermore, cycling introduces an element of vulnerability and unpredictability. Mechanical problems, weather conditions, or unexpected detours can become moments of discovery. For example, during one exploration in the Vransko Lake region in Croatia, a flat tyre led to an encounter with a local resident who initiated a conversation about the surrounding landscape. Such chance encounters illustrate how the methodology embraces both planning and improvisation.

### Collecting time: Oral histories

The second phase involves collecting oral histories from local residents. Groups of young European participants conduct interviews, often working in pairs to facilitate conversation and reflection.

These interviews frequently take place in informal settings such as homes, farms, or village squares. The conversational nature of the interviews allows participants to explore a wide range of themes related to everyday life.

Common topics include agricultural work, livestock farming, community relationships, childhood memories, romantic encounters, and the social dynamics of rural life. Interviewees often recall experiences of collective labour, seasonal migration, and economic transformations brought about by mechanisation or tourism.

In addition to everyday life stories, many interviews also address more difficult historical experiences. In the Croatian context, several

testimonies refer to the war of the 1990s and its lasting impact on local communities.

The intergenerational nature of the interviews plays a particularly important role. In many rural regions, younger generations have migrated to cities or abroad, leaving older residents with limited opportunities to share their experiences with younger people. Encounters with young international participants, therefore, often carry strong emotional significance.

### Performance time: The walk

The final phase of the project consists of a performance walk through the landscape. The walk usually lasts several hours and includes multiple stops where participants perform excerpts from the collected testimonies (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Walk performance in the village of Vrana (Image: Gentiane Désveaux)**

The route relies on existing paths, but the choice of the one that will be used for the performance, its direction, the number of stops, is considered according to the script that has been created during the research phase. The rhythm and length are managed by Raphaël Faure, the artistic coordinator of the company who has been creating walking performances for 20 years, to ensure there is a cohesive overall vision for the final aspect. It requires a certain level of trust from the participants, accepting that they do not always fully understand what is happening during the preparation of the performance. Everyone has their role to play, but the final work is ensured by an artistic 'conductor'.

These performances may involve reading narratives, singing songs, or inviting moments of silence and reflection. The route of the walk is carefully designed to connect specific stories with particular locations.

Audiences typically include both local residents and visitors. The presence of these different audiences creates a layered interpretative experience. Local residents may recognise familiar places and memories, while visitors encounter the landscape through narratives that reveal its hidden histories.

### Discussion

#### Narrative construction and transformative processes

The Altervia Multivox project demonstrates how heritage interpretation can emerge through narrative interaction rather than through the presentation of fixed historical information.

During the collection of oral histories, researchers often observed recurring motifs across different interviews. For example, several residents described similar experiences of youthful encounters in the hills where sheep were grazed. These stories initially appeared as individual anecdotes, yet as more testimonies were collected, common narrative structures began to emerge.

Such repetitions suggest the presence of shared cultural narratives embedded within collective memory. Rather than treating repeated motifs as redundancy, the project recognises them as expressions of a shared cultural imagination.

This observation resonates with Carr's philosophical analysis of narrative and experience. Carr argues that narrative is not simply imposed retrospectively upon events but is already embedded in the way individuals

experience their lives (Carr, 1986). In other words, people naturally interpret their experiences through narrative forms that connect past, present, and future.

Within the Altervia Multivox project, personal stories shared by residents reveal this narrative structure of lived experience. Memories of work, youth, or family relationships are told not merely as isolated events but as meaningful episodes within broader life stories.

The project also illustrates how narrative interpretation evolves through encounters between different participants. For local residents, the process of sharing memories often produces a sense of recognition and validation. Many interviewees express joy when recounting anecdotes from their youth, particularly when speaking with younger listeners who demonstrate curiosity and respect.

For the young participants conducting the interviews, the process often triggers reflections about their own identities and cultural backgrounds. Some participants report experiencing a sense of dissonance when interpreting testimonies rooted in cultural contexts different from their own.
However, this dissonance frequently becomes a source of deeper reflection. One participant described how listening to stories about attachment to land reminded her of the way her own parents spoke about their homeland. In this way, narrative encounters can reveal unexpected connections between different cultural experiences and universal concepts.

The performative phase of the project further intensifies these narrative dynamics. As participants rehearse the route of the performance walk, they repeatedly move through the landscape whilst speaking the words of local residents. Through this process, the stories gradually become embodied experiences. Performance theory provides useful insights into this process. Pearson and Shanks (2001) argue that performance in landscapes can function as a form of embodied interpretation, allowing participants to engage with historical narratives through movement and sensory perception. Similarly, Taylor (2003) emphasises that cultural memory can be transmitted not only through written archives but also through embodied practices such as storytelling, performance, and ritual.

The Altervia Multivox performance walks exemplify this embodied dimension of heritage interpretation. Participants do not simply recite narratives; they physically inhabit the landscapes described in the stories.

Environmental conditions often play a significant role in shaping the performance. For example, when participants read testimonies about strong winds such as the bura or jugo, the wind itself may affect their voices, forcing them to project their speech more strongly. In such moments, the environment becomes an active participant in the narrative (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Illustration of 'Bura' from the story of Captain Mile (inhabitant), created for a lantern included in the performance (Image: Gentiane Désveaux)**

Landscape scholars have emphasised that landscapes contain traces of past human activity and social relationships (Ingold, 2000). By performing narratives within these landscapes, the project creates a dialogue between memory and place.

Another striking example concerns testimonies related to the war of the 1990s in the Vrana region. When participants realised that they were standing on a former frontline whilst reading war testimonies, the emotional impact of the landscape led them to modify the structure of the performance. Instead of a planned musical transition, the group introduced a silent departure that allowed the audience to reflect on the stories in relation to the surrounding environment.

## Conclusion

The Altervia Multivox project illustrates how heritage interpretation can function as a transformative process that connects narrative memory, artistic practice, and environmental experience (Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Drawings of local stories on lanterns, moving in the landscape during the performance (Image: Gentiane Désveaux)**

By combining ethnographic research with performance and slow mobility through cycling, the project creates opportunities for meaningful encounters between participants and local communities. These encounters allow stories of everyday life, cultural practices, and historical change to be shared across generations and cultural backgrounds.

The project also demonstrates how narrative can serve as a bridge between personal memory and collective heritage. Through storytelling and performance, individual experiences become part of a broader narrative landscape that connects people with places.

Moreover, the embodied nature of the performance walks encourages participants and audiences to engage with heritage through physical and emotional experience. Landscape becomes more than a setting for interpretation; it becomes an active participant in the narrative process.

Ultimately, the Altervia Multivox project suggests that heritage interpretation can move beyond the transmission of information to become a space of dialogue, reflection, and transformation. By bringing together oral history, artistic practice, and participatory exploration of landscapes, the project offers a model for innovative approaches to heritage interpretation in rural and cultural landscapes.

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# Broadening the history at Athelhampton House


## Giles Keating (UK)

**Giles Keating** is the custodian of Athelhampton House in Dorset, UK. It is one of England's finest Tudor manor houses and receives some 30,000 visitors annually.

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**Abstract**

This paper is a record of the presentation, which gave an insight into our work. Our work at Athelhampton House encompasses five strands:

1. Review of existing research. For example, the founding family's ownership didn't end in 1596; it continued another 250 years via female descent after the male line ended.
2. Widening the scope of new research, including the fact that Lady Frances Hyde came to the house to escape an abusive husband.
3. Look at opening once-closed spaces to contrast with grander rooms, including the Tudor Kitchen, a servant's room, a chapel for expectant mothers.
4. Write novels that add fictional colour to historical fact. For example, the Anne of Athelhampton trilogy.
5. Provide re-enactments and recreations with accurate detail, including Damask fabrics woven by traditional methods and costumed historical re-enactors in clothing with no zips and using no artificial dyes.



**Keywords**

Athelhampton House, Tudor manor house, heritage conservation, historical research, women in history


Athelhampton House is a 15th-century manor in the heart of Dorset in England and its history is extensively documented. However, much of that history tends to focus on the male owners, who were generally wealthy. This paper aims to delve a bit deeper and also, where necessary, to look for new interpretations, to help understand the role of some of the other people involved with Athelhampton, including the women and the broader community.

The house was built in 1485 by Sir William Martyn. Older guidebooks, and even some current internet sources, say that his descendant, Sir Nicholas Martyn, who died in 1595, was the last of the line. But he wasn't actually the last of the bloodline at all. He had four surviving children, all daughters, and they inherited the house in equal shares.

I was so inspired by the youngest of these four sisters, Anne, that I've written several novels about her – the Anne of Athelhampton trilogy. She and her descendants retained their quarter-share of the house and its estate right up until the mid-1800s, continuing the link with the Martyn bloodline for another quarter of a millennium after Sir Nicholas died.

This provides a clear example of how historians tend to choose or emphasise certain facts to fit a particular social narrative, and how a different narrative can emerge from a deeper analysis of the facts.

This general principle is illustrated by another part of Athelhampton's history, this time referring to the 1680s when Mary Keightley was living in the house. With her was her sister-in-law, Frances Keightley, who had been born Frances Hyde (and two of whose nieces became Queens of England: Queen Mary II and Queen Anne). Frances Keightley is relevant to the theme of historical interpretation because of her relationship with her husband. She lived with

him in Ireland and they had eight children, but he then deserted her for several years before returning to stay with her for just a few days. During his brief sojourn she became pregnant for the last time with what would be her ninth child, but her husband did not return and she did not see him again for several decades. Sadly, all of her children save one died very young, one after the other. Eventually, she left Ireland with her remaining child and came to live with her sister-in-law at Athelhampton as a form of sanctuary.

A major history of the extended family, published just a few decades ago, explicitly concludes that the husband did nothing wrong, citing rumours that Frances Keightley was an alcoholic. This seems a one-sided narrative that ignores the clear evidence of abandonment, and the hints of possibly abusive circumstances surrounding the conception of the final child. Modern interpretations of these events would see at minimum issues on both sides of this relationship, and would likely lean towards viewing Frances Keightley as a victim of a harsh spouse.

Moving forward another 100 years or so to the early 1800s. The then Prince of Wales is a leader of the wealthy social scene and builds the Brighton Pavilion.

This third example also concerns an unhappy marriage. Catherine Tylney-Long owned most of Athelhampton at this time, along with many other properties – indeed, she was the richest woman in Britain and wealthier than most men. The Prince of Wales (who would later become King George IV) courted her, probably in part to gain control over her wealth. However, she rejected his proposal of marriage, and instead she married for love, taking as her husband a man named William Pole.

Sadly, the relationship did not prosper. He was often absent, and there is evidence that she may have caught a sexually transmitted disease from him. She died young, having tried to write her will so that William would not get control of the property that she had brought to the marriage and also not get control of their children. He did not want either of these outcomes and the law of the time was very much on his side. After she died, he was able to get hold of much of the property through extraordinary means, notably selling off the physical structure of one house and, in the case of Athelhampton, taking out substantial mortgages on it. He also attempted to take control of the children, whom she had wished to stay in the custody of her two sisters, and he was prevented from this only after a major legal struggle.

At the time, many people across society were very critical of William's financial profligacy and also supportive of Catherine Tylney-Long's posthumous wishes for her children, but some historical accounts gave little or no recognition of this, and chose very selective facts to support a particular narrative. Only more recently has a new study appeared, which clearly sets out all the facts and allows a more accurate narrative to be revealed.

A fourth example of selective narratives relates to the late 1860s and to the famous English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy. He was in his twenties and fell in love with his sixteen-year old cousin, Tryphena Sparks. She was working as an assistant teacher at a Church of England school in Puddletown, having recently moved from the non-conformist school on the nearby Athelhampton estate that had been established by the house's then owners, George and Mary Wood. Hardy wrote a series of poems about a very passionate relationship that occurred at this stage of his life, one even suggesting that it led to an unwanted pregnancy. But with one partial exception, none of them refer to

Tryphena explicitly – though scholars have subsequently been able to make that link.

Some months after the relationship began, Tryphena was thrown out of the Church of England school because of her association with Hardy. Nine months later, Mary Wood found her a new post at another non-conformist school a few miles away, allowing her to continue her career and studies. As a result, Tryphena had a brilliant career, becoming one of the youngest head teachers of the era, aged just 20.

Despite what Hardy had hinted at in the ambiguous medium of poetry, in his prose autobiography he made almost no mention of either Tryphena or the relationship, simply making one brief reference to a poem he was writing at the time she died. Nor did any of the letters that they likely exchanged survive in the extensive collections of his missives. Given this, for half a century after his death, scholars ignored what appears to have been a deep relationship for both parties – once again, the facts being chosen to fit a narrative, in this case rejecting the idea that such a famous man had a passionate pre-marital affair. However, from the 1970s onwards, this topic became widely researched, with more facts being uncovered, and it is now widely accepted that the relationship did occur.

The next example concerns Amelia Arnold, who was the housekeeper at Athelhampton from 1890 until 1904. As a servant, she would have lived in a small attic room at the top of the house. Amelia was born in the 1830s and had had a very long association with the man who owned the house, Alfred Cart de Lafontaine, and was entering her 60s when she came to Athelhampton. But as a young woman, she had been nanny to both Alfred and his brother, and then eventually she became his housekeeper. Very sadly, in her final years she was placed into a home for the mentally ill, but Alfred clearly liked her and felt responsible since he made sure that she was buried in the churchyard at Athelhampton, where he himself was buried some decades later.

Again, past histories did not see Amelia Arnold as relevant to their narrative, despite the importance of her role in running the household and the emotional importance she clearly held for the owner. She was completely omitted, and researchers may not even have been aware that she existed. Finally, after detailed research to find out about her life, she can now be included in the history of the house.

Two 20th-century female occupants of the house show a marked contrast with those discussed above, in that they have not been erased from the histories. Mrs Peggy Harmsworth came here in 1930 and lived here for about a decade. She was married to the man who was to become the second Viscount Rothermere and whose family owned newspapers, including the Times of London and the Daily Mail.

When the couple separated in 1930, Athelhampton was bought for her personal use and she had some wonderful parties with famous guests, including Noel Coward and Douglas Fairbanks Junior. Then, in the late 1940s, the house was sold to the family of Marevna, an artist of Russian and French heritage, and her daughter, Marika Rivera, who was a classical professional dancer. Not only are these women clearly referenced in the histories, but their work is visible in the house in the form of paintings by Marevna and photographs of Marika dancing.

It is interesting to consider why the earlier generations of women were excluded from the histories while the 20th-century ones were not. Possible explanations include the tendency of earlier historians to ignore or minimise the role

of women, which has now given way to a willingness to search out the role played by all; also, the high social or professional visibility of Mrs Harmsworth, Marevna and Marika Rivera. Research to understand more about the roles at Athelhampton of women and the broader community, and their lives, is ongoing, to make the history richer and more complete.

# In This Place: A soundwalk at the former KL Plaszow site

## Aleksandra Kumala (Poland)

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**Abstract**

'In This Place' is a location-based sound walk on the former KL Plaszow site in Kraków, developed by FestivALT with artists Marcin Dymiter and Ludomir Franczak. Drawing on interviews with diverse stakeholders—residents, researchers, descendants, decision-makers—and incorporating nature's perspective, it captures multiple, sometimes conflicting, narratives in a place marked by trauma, memory, and everyday life.

**Keywords**

KL Plazsow, soundwalk, 'In this Place', multiple narratives, conflicting narratives, trauma, difficult history

### In This Place – The history

The Plaszow German Nazi concentration camp (KL Plaszow) was established in two districts of Kraków – Podgórze and Wola Duchacka – on the grounds of two pre-war Jewish cemeteries.
The camp operated between 1942 and 1945 on an area of approximately 0.8 sqkm (today, only half of that terrain is officially recognised as a memorial site). Depending on the period, it functioned as a forced labour camp, a concentration camp, and a transit camp.

Imprisoned there were Polish Jews (including those deported from the liquidated Kraków Ghetto), Poles, Hungarian and Slovak Jews, Romani families, and Germans. The total number of prisoners is estimated at over 35,000 people, with approximately 6,000–10,000 victims.

### Commemoration and controversies

Commemoration efforts date back to the communist era. Between 1947 and 2002, seven monuments and plaques were erected, the most recognisable being the Monument of the Victims of Fascism (1964). The site gained broader public visibility in the 1990s, particularly after the premiere of the Oscar-winning Schindler's List, directed by Steven Spielberg.

In 2002, the site was entered into the official heritage register as a war cemetery. In 2006, a competition for a memorial was announced; although a winning design was selected the following year, it was significantly modified in 2013 after a series of controversies. One major concern was its incompatibility with Halacha (Jewish religious law), which prohibits the disturbance of human remains.

In 2016, the Kraków Museum initiated activities to raise public awareness of the site, including a conference, guided walks, and the beginning of conceptual work on a new commemoration scenario. Archaeological research was

conducted on-site between 2016 and 2019. In 2017, an outdoor exhibition was installed.

Between 2016 and 2020, extensive public consultations took place. The proposed commemoration plan sparked further controversy, as it included fencing the area and the large-scale removal of trees to construct a museum building (ongoing). In 2020, the KL Plaszow Museum was officially established.

By that time, due to urban development and changes in the surrounding landscape, the former camp site had become a vast green area near the city centre, approximately 20 minutes from the Main Square. Residents used it for a range of everyday activities that were not always aligned with the site's traumatic history: walking with children and dogs, picnicking, sunbathing, jogging, and social gatherings.

In 2017, shortly after its founding, FestivALT began working with and on the site. It aimed to mediate tensions surrounding the commemorative process and to propose participatory projects that would engage the local community, deepen knowledge of the area's Jewish history, and acknowledge the site's palimpsestic character.

Among these initiatives was a series of walks titled The Jew, the Dog, and the Neighbour, designed to familiarise participants with the locations of mass graves and to indicate which areas (then still unmarked) should not be disturbed. The walks were led by a Halacha expert, accompanied by his dog, creating a symbolic and practical gesture of coexistence and care. Other projects included Medicinal Plants of Płaszów and a participatory marking of mass graves with Berlin-based artist Anna Schapiro. Using ecological, earth-based pigments safe for the environment, animals, and people, participants created temporary visual markers, gradually fading with rain and snow – both a practical intervention and a metaphor for the fragility and disappearance of memory. Simultaneously, the Still Standing – Monument in Motion project introduced a performative monument presented on the site yearly.

**Figure 1. Someone listening to the soundwalk during one of its public presentations (Image: Vira Kosina-Polańska)**

### Soundwalk 'In This Place'

In 2024, FestivALT received funding from the Jewish Historical Institute Association and the National Recovery Plan (KPO), enabling collaboration with Polish artists Marcin Dymiter and Ludomir Franczak, who had previously worked with the audiosphere of the former KL Stutthof site (now Stutthof Museum) in northern Poland.

The project draws on nearly 100 interviews conducted by the FestivALT team throughout the years with diverse stakeholders, as well as excerpts from essays and books, and ambient compositions created by Dymiter specifically for the soundwalk.

It integrated multiple perspectives: human (residents, researchers, guides, descendants, decision-makers) and non-human (elements of the soundscape reflecting the agency of nature and other-than-human actors).

The freely accessible mobile application Echoes.xyz (also available via desktop) was used to implement the project. The platform operates through geolocation: each sound piece is assigned to a specific location and appears on the map as a geometric shape, accompanied by a title and short description. Sounds are activated by the listener's movement, creating an embodied, multisensory, site-specific experience. The soundwalk can be explored individually or in groups, and allows the site to be encountered within the rhythms of everyday life.

### Narrating difficult heritage

The KL Plaszow site embodies both difficult history (the stories and traumas of victims and survivors) and difficult heritage (the physical remnants of camp infrastructure embedded in the contemporary landscape). The Echoes app serves here as an accessible technological tool for mediating such difficult heritage and supporting the broader process of heritagisation that, for FestivALT, began in 2017.

Memory activism in this context seeks to foster accessibility, civic dialogue, and ethical engagement with the site. It emphasises community-led, bottom-up practices as a potential counterbalance to institutionalised, top-down narratives.

The KL Plaszow Museum is currently developing its own 'Sound Monument', scheduled to premiere later this year. This project will be accessible exclusively through the museum's infrastructure, via dedicated headphones available on-site.

Aware of this initiative, FestivALT deliberately structured its soundwalk around two opposite ends of the former camp area – larger than the officially designated memorial zone and encompassing spaces now occupied by, for instance, a gas station, supermarket, and branch of McDonald's – while leaving the central part untouched. The intention was not to overlap with the Museum's forthcoming project, but also to preserve the 'heart' of the former camp – where the appellplatz once stood, where the mass graves and monuments are located – as an undisturbed space. Visitors can thus experience its present-day audiosphere directly: birdsong interwoven with the distant echoes of urban traffic.

Ultimately, the project seeks to "reveal unheard or silenced stories, challenge perception, encourage emotional and empathetic response, and create a sense of presence." (Stylianou-Lambert et al, 2022).

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# Narrating the Writer's House: Literary mediation as a strategy for linguistic identity and critical literacy

## Javier Roig-López (Spain)

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**Abstract**

In line with the 21st-century shift in literary heritage interpretation, which moves away from static displays towards participatory and dialogic models, this paper examines how writer's house-museums function as dynamic spaces for cultural and civic narratives. Focusing on the Joan Fuster House-Museum (Sueca, Spain), the study explores how literary mediation acts as a bridge between the author's intellectual and political legacy and the students' own life stories. Given Fuster's role as a key figure in Valencian contemporary thought—and as a target of political violence due to his ideas—the museum's 'didactic classroom' is analysed as a site for critical literacy. Here, heritage is not just observed but actively reconstructed, which participants perceive as a way to explore territorial belonging and democratic commitment.

Adopting an interpretive qualitative case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers and museum mediators. The findings highlight how these agents co-construct interpretive narratives that address the author's civic courage and the challenges of linguistic identity in a bilingual society. The study concludes that by embracing this interpretive shift, literary heritage sites can transform the 'author's house' into a living laboratory for identity construction and social awareness.

**Keywords**

literary mediation, narratives, writer's house, identity, critical literacy, heritage interpretation

## Introduction

The ways in which communities understand and value their heritage are fundamentally shaped by the narratives constructed around them. In recent decades, literary literacy has undergone a profound transformation; it is no longer viewed as a mechanical decoding of signs, but as a complex cultural and emotional process (Colomer, 2004; Yasukawa et al., 2013). This shift, rooted in the need for a more socially embedded practice (Hein, 2004), redefines reading as a dialogic interaction that occurs not just in books, but within specific cultural landscapes and symbolic spaces.

Consequently, heritage centres and museums have become vital settings for informal and critical literacy (Munita, 2024; Falk & Dierking, 2012). Writers' house-museums, in particular, serve as unique environments where the 'literary event' is experienced through the lens of memory, territory, and the author's life (Bataller, 2017; Uccella, 2013). There is an increasing academic interest in how these informal learning spaces complement formal education by offering students a more visceral connection to cultural legacy (Munita, 2024; Hein, 2004).

This research focuses on the Joan Fuster House-Museum (Sueca, Spain), the residence of the essayist and intellectual Joan Fuster (1922–1992). Fuster was not only a pioneer of critical humanism but a cornerstone in the construction of modern Valencian and Catalan identity. His staunch defense of democratic values and the recovery of a minoritised language made him a controversial figure; indeed, his house and his person were targets of far-right extremist violence and bombings during Spain's transition to democracy. Today, this site of memory operates as a museum and a didactic classroom, where students engage with his work through active heritage strategies (Ortells & Pérez-Moragon, 2022; Pérez-Moragon, 2016).

The central inquiry of this paper is how a writer's house can manage such contested narratives to foster critical literacy. Fuster's legacy provides a lens to explore how collective memory and linguistic identity are negotiated in a globalised world. Despite the importance of these spaces, there is a lack of research in Spain regarding how the actual agents of mediation—teachers and museum staff—perceive these interactions (Portillo, 2023; Pérez-Mateo, 2015). Their educational beliefs, understood as the affective and cultural representations that guide their professional practice (Munita, 2024; Borg, 2017), are key to understanding how heritage is translated for younger generations.

Aligning with the Interpret Europe framework, which advocates for narratives as spaces for shared meaning-making, this study aims to analyse the beliefs of Valencian language and literature teachers and museum mediators. By focusing on the mediation practices within Fuster's classroom, we seek to understand how these experiences contribute to the development of students' cultural and civic competencies.

To this end, the study proposes the following specific objectives:

1. Describe the pedagogical and narrative offerings of the museum's didactic classroom.
2. Identify the mediation strategies used by mediators to handle the complex and contested aspects of Fuster's political and literary legacy.
3. Explore the beliefs of both mediators and visiting teachers regarding the role of heritage in linguistic education.
4. Contrast the perceptions of both groups to identify how meaningful, dialogic narratives can strengthen the link between literature, territory, and social commitment.

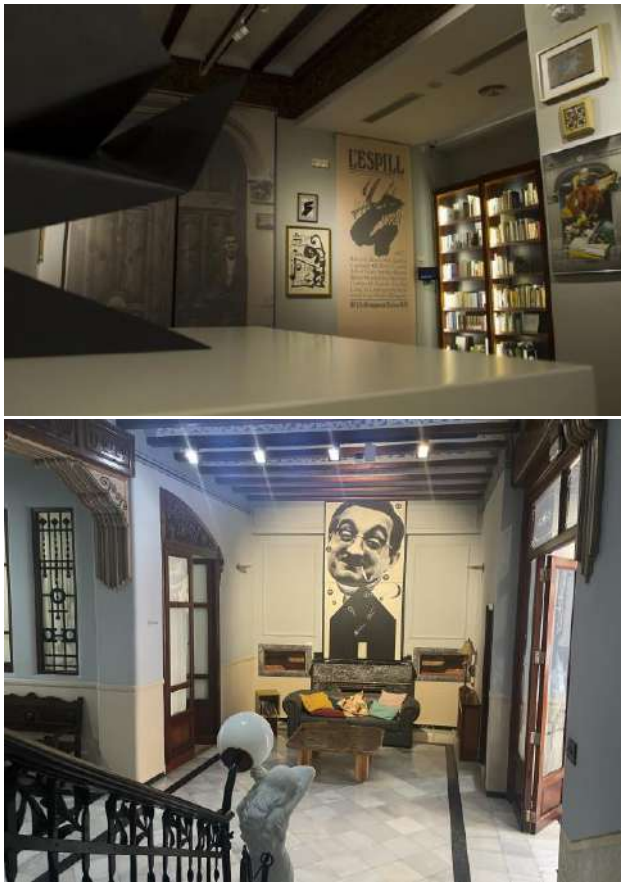
## Theoretical Framework

### Joan Fuster and his writer's house

Joan Fuster (1922–1992) was not merely a writer, he was a central figure in Valencian modernity (Ortells & Pérez-Moragon, 2022). As a preeminent essayist, his life spanned a turbulent period—the Second Republic, the Francoist dictatorship, and the transition to democracy—marked by systemic censorship and persecution (Archilés, 2012). Fuster constructed a powerful narrative of identity characterised by irony and a 'skeptical humanism' that sought to dismantle the 'satellite culture' and provincialism imposed by centuries of linguistic minoritisation (Iborra, 2012; Archilés, 2012; Ballart et al. 2017).

In the current climate of historical revisionism, Fuster's figure represents a 'singular and bitter' biographical adventure (Archilés, 2012; Ortells & Pérez-Moragon, 2021). As a target of far-right political violence—surviving two bomb attacks at his home in 1981—the very walls of his residence bear witness to a 'narrative of conflict' (Ortells & Pérez-Moragón, 2022). Consequently, Fuster is the ideal foundation for interpretive practices that move beyond fixed, 'single stories' towards an open, democratic dialogue (Nora, 2008).

The Joan Fuster House-Museum, located in two connected Modernist buildings in Sueca (the Casa Pasqual Fos and the Casa Joan Fuster), officially opened in 2017 (Figures 1 & 2). While Fuster once described the original house as the most 'pompous' in town—filled with noble woods and marble staircases (Pérez-Moragón, 2016)—it has been transformed into a permanent institution at the service of society, following ICOM standards (Allard & Boucher, 1998).




**Figures 1 & 2. Interior view of the Espai Joan Fuster in Sueca (Valencia), a 'material-discursive assemblage' where the author's legacy meets the visitor's identity (Images: Espai Joan Fuster & Javier Roig)**

The house acts as a 'lieu de mémoire' (Nora, 2008), housing a colossal legacy that includes:

- 21,000 books and 21,757 letters.
- 251 artworks by figures such as Joan Miró and Antoni Tàpies.
- 12,000 articles in newspapers and magazines.

This space is structured into four functional areas: the museum space, the documentation centre, the cultural programme, and crucially, the Didactic Classroom (Ortells & Pérez-Moragón, 2021). The museum's mediation strategy is a conscious exercise in deciding what is shown to foster 'narrative tension'. For instance, the original fireplace and the filing cabinets that survived the bombings are preserved as 'material witnesses' (Figure 3). They are not mere relics; they are educational tools that confront the visitor with the price of intellectual freedom (Miller, 2005; Snaza, 2019).

**Figure 3. Material evidence of resistance: the filing cabinet that survived the bomb attack at Fuster's home in 1981, currently used as a pedagogical tool. (Image: Espai Joan Fuster)**

From the perspective of heritage studies, the museum has evolved from a descriptive repository into a dialogic space for shared meaning-making (Falk & Dierking, 2012). The

Joan Fuster House-Museum is conceived as a dynamic laboratory of narratives where the interaction between the visitor's personal history and the collective memory embedded in the site creates a situated literacy (Yasukawa et al., 2013; Pérez-Moragon, 2016).

The educational strategy of the museum is crystallised in its Didactic Classroom (Figure 4), an institutional collaboration between the museum and the regional educational authorities. This space acts as the primary engine for 'narrative co-creation', where the theoretical 'message' of the museum is transformed into a lived experience for preschool, primary, secondary and high school students. Among its eight specific programmes, this research focuses on the workshop 'Images and Thoughts by Joan Fuster'.

This workshop is strategically designed to activate Fuster's legacy through two main pillars:

- Visual literacy: Students analyse and create caricatures and artistic products (by Andreu Alfaro) to understand the author's public image and international connections.
- Critical literacy through aphorisms: By engaging with Fuster's 'Thoughts' (short, ironic aphorisms), students are encouraged to deconstruct established dogmas and reflect on contemporary social issues.

Crucially, the mediation in this workshop acknowledges that Fuster's narrative is inextricably linked to the sociolinguistic reality of the Valencian territory, marked by a long-standing process of linguistic substitution (Tasa & Bodoque, 2016). The workshop is designed to move beyond a neutral archive, functioning as a site where mediators can address what they describe as 'symbolic resistance' through the activation of 'narrative tension'. By using Fuster's sharp intellectual discourse, mediators force students—often coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds—to confront the gap between the historical prestige of the language and its current social vulnerability.

An essential characteristic of this educational project is its linguistic immersion approach. Although the Joan Fuster House-Museum is fully adapted to the needs of a diverse public with materials translated into Spanish and English, among other languages, the educational experience for schools is conducted exclusively in Catalan. This aligns with the fact that the visiting students study in Catalan and follow the language and literature curriculum in this language, making the museum a natural extension of their formal academic environment

In this sense, the 'Images and Thoughts' workshop (Figure 4) becomes a site for critical literacy, where the narrative of a persecuted intellectual is used to foster a sense of shared responsibility for the democratic and cultural future of the community. This specific educational setting is where the 'material-discursive assemblage' (the author's legacy, the mediator's guidance, and the student's identity) is physically and symbolically enacted. The offering is complemented by a literary route (Roig-López & Bataller-Català, 2026; Ortells & Pérez-Moragon, 2021).

**Figure 4. The Didactic Classroom at Espai Joan Fuster, a key space for narrative co-creation and literary mediation with students. (Image: Espai Joan Fuster)**

## The museum as a dynamic space for memory and social cohesion

In the context of the 21st-century interpretive shift, museums have evolved from static repositories of objects into 'instituciones dinámicas, vivas y de encuentro intercultural, como lugares que trabajan con el poder de la memoria (dynamic, living institutions and sites for intercultural encounter, acting as places that work with the power of memory)' (Gutiérrez, 2012: 17). This transformation, rooted in the Declaration of Salvador de Bahía (2007), redefines the museum as a space that works with the 'power of memory' to foster educational development and social cohesion. Under this paradigm, the Joan Fuster House-Museum is not merely a memorial to a writer but a 'instancia relevante para el desarrollo de las funciones educativa y formative (relevant body for the development of educational and training functions)' (2012: 17).

Furthermore, following the vision of Allard and Boucher (1998), the contemporary museum is defined as an institution at the service of society and its development. This civic commitment implies that the museum must transcend the mere preservation of artifacts to generate a tangible social impact, transforming the house-museum into a tool for stimulating respect for cultural diversity, elevating self-esteem, and strengthening the community to which it belongs (Gutiérrez, 2012; Falk & Dierking, 2012).

To understand how this mission is fulfilled, we must consider the Interactive Experience Model (Falk & Dierking, 2012). According to this framework, the museum visit is a constructive process shaped by the intersection of three contexts: the personal, the social, and the physical. In a writer's house, the physical context (the domestic space and Fuster's belongings (Figure 5)) and the personal context (the visitor's prior knowledge and identity) must be mediated to generate a meaningful experience. Learning is not a destination but a continuous process of meaning-making that happens when these contexts overlap, shifting the focus from a purely descriptive approach to a more dialogic and interpretive one (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Arriaga, 2019).

Following the principles of Interpret Europe, heritage interpretation is no longer seen as a collection of static facts, but as a space for shared meaning-making. From this perspective, the 'message' of a museum is a dynamic process that depends on the interaction between the visitor's personal history and the collective memory embedded in the site (Falk & Dierking, 2012; Hein, 2003; Uccella, 2013). In this context, the interpretation of literary heritage is intrinsically linked to Critical Literacy. As Freire and Macedo (1987) argue, reading is an act of reading the word and the world. Heritage spaces are not neutral; they are environments where power, identity, and memory are negotiated (Uccella, 2013; Munita, 2024).

Consequently, the Joan Fuster House-Museum is conceived as a dynamic laboratory of narratives. The author's legacy—his library, manuscripts, and the physical space of his home—functions as a catalyst for narrative engagement that connects Fuster's intellectual commitment with the students' own reality (Ortells & Pérez Moragón, 2021). The house operates as an environment of situated literacy (Yasukawa et al., 2013; Uccella, 2013; Hein, 2004), where the mediator facilitates a 'provocation' (Tilden, 2006) that links Fuster's humanist struggle with contemporary challenges of social and linguistic commitment. In this sense, the museum manages contested histories to foster a sense of belonging and critical citizenship (Figure 6).

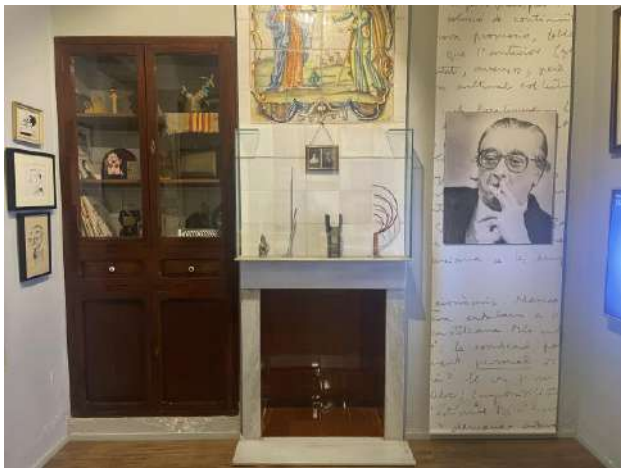


**Figure 5. The writer's fireplace: a 'lieu de mémoire' that functions as a catalyst for narrative engagement and situated literacy (Image: Javier Roig)**

**Figure 6. A guided visit at the Espai Joan Fuster: an example of social and personal context interaction within the Interactive Experience Model. (Image: Javier Roig)**

## The role of mediation: From passive observation to civic engagement

The transition from a contemplative museum to a communicative and didactic one (Allard & Boucher, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 2012) fundamentally relies on the figure of the mediator. Within the writer's house-museum, mediation is not merely a technical transmission of biographical data, but a meaning-making process where the mediator acts as a bridge between the author's legacy and the visitor's contemporary reality (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). According to Gutiérrez (2012), one of the keys to a successful exhibition is 'transformation': the ability to provoke an affective and cognitive experience in the visitor.

In this context, mediation of a 'human character'—guides and animators—is prioritised over mechanical or electronic interactivity, as it allows for interactive sessions to understand complex contexts (2012: 129). This is supported by the findings of Massarani et al. (2022), whose research demonstrates that mediated visits significantly increase the depth of conversations and the level of engagement. Their study highlights that the mediator's role is not just to provide information but to orchestrate a conversational and interactive encounter where language and social interaction converge to create meaning. In Fuster's house, the mediator's ability to spark these dialogues is essential to co-construct a narrative that resonates with the students' identities.

Furthermore, following Cândido-Vendrasco et al. (2020), this mediation is a situated practice that responds to the specificities of the site. In a space as politically and symbolically charged as the Joan Fuster House-Museum, the mediator assumes a civic responsibility: they must manage 'the power of memory' (Bataller, 2017; Uccella, 2013) to ensure that the heritage on display is not perceived as a fossilised past, but as a testimony of thought that challenges the student's critical thinking. As Munita (2024) points out, the mediator's role is to facilitate a dialogue that encourages the reader's/ visitor's personal response.

Consequently, the mediator does not just show the house; they 'activate' it as a site of reflection (Bataller, 2017). This human intervention, which connects the material traces with the visitors' own lived experiences, is what prevents the minoritised language and culture from becoming a 'folkloric object' (Simbor, 2022; Tasa & Bodoque, 2016), which participants interpret

as fostering forms of civic reflection and engagement (Nora, 2008).

### Materiality and contentious narratives: The house as a 'material assemblage'

From the perspective of heritage interpretation, the writer's house is not a neutral container of relics, but a materialisation of memory that is inherently subjective and selective (Gutiérrez, 2012; Figure 7). In the case of the Joan Fuster House-Museum, the physical space functions as a 'Material Assemblage'. Following Snaza (2019) and Miller (2005), this approach allows us to understand the museum as an environment where learning is not exclusively a human-to-human interaction, but an encounter between 'human and non-human agents'. In this network, the building's architecture, the author's personal library, and the traces of political violence—such as the archives of the 1981 bombings—interact to produce meaning.

This materiality is crucial to understanding Fuster's role in the construction of a 'literary nation'. According to Simbor (2022), Fuster acted as a demiurge who sought to dignify Valencian culture, moving it away from what T.S. Eliot termed a 'satellite culture': one that possesses its own language but borrowed spirit and a system of references anchored in a foreign culture. The house-museum, as a physical site, embodies the resistance against this provincialism and cultural autocracy. The very walls of the house, which survived far-right attacks, serve as a physical reminder that 'La literatura catalana avui, és una forma de resistència' (Catalan literature today is a form of resistance) (Simbor, 2022: 167)

The 'narrative richness' of this assemblage lies in its ability to challenge the 'single story' of regionalisation and castilianisation (Tasa & Bodoque, 2016; Archilés, 2012). Fuster argued that a language reduced to 'Spanish with Catalan endings' leads to cultural mistreatment (Simbor, 2022; Iborra, 2012). By presenting the house as an environment of situated literacy, the museum allows visitors to engage with a 'system of references' that is authentically Catalan/ Valencian. In this sense, the materiality of the museum does not just document a life; it functions as an 'affirmation and reminder' in an international context, preventing the 'indigenous language' from becoming a mere 'folkloric object' (Simbor, 2022; Snaza 2019; Snaza et al. 2016; Meskell, 2005; Figure 8).

**Figure 7. Allegory of the Spanish Republic in Fuster's study: A visual testimony of the author's political roots and his commitment to democratic and leftist ideals during a period of fascist dictatorship (Image: Javier Roig)**

**Figure 8. Interior view of the museum showing the exhibition of the 1981 bomb attack: Transforming a site of political violence into a pedagogical space for historical memory. (Image: Javier Roig)**

## The power of beliefs: 'mental scripts', irony and critical literacy

Research in museum pedagogy has long warned that teachers often use museum visits merely as a 'cultural outing' or an 'end-of-year reward' without direct links to the curriculum. This creates a gap between the site's potential and the actual learning outcome. As our study shows, the Joan Fuster House-Museum attempts to bridge this by offering structured workshops that provide the 'rigorous pedagogical framework' that scholars like Lacey and Agar suggested was missing in traditional museum-school collaborations (Falk & Dierking, 2012; Allard & Boucher, 1998).

Narratives in a museum are not only found on the information panels or within the author's books; they are also profoundly shaped by the 'mental scripts' and beliefs of those who tell the stories. In the field of education and heritage, these beliefs act as an invisible filter, determining how information is presented to and filtered for the visitor (Woods, 1996).

At the Joan Fuster House-Museum, these internal architectures are decisive. If a teacher perceives Fuster primarily as a political ideologue, the museum visit will inevitably lean towards civic debate. If, instead, they view him as a master of prose, the narrative focus will shift towards aesthetics and philology. Understanding these 'mental scripts' is vital, as they determine which stories are told with passion and which are silenced.

To explore this phenomenon, our research adopts the CRS model (Creences, Representacions, i Sabers) developed by the PLURAL research group (Cambra & Palou, 2007) and derived from the Wood's model, BAK (Beliefs, Assumptions, Knowledge) (1996). This model allows us to understand that the mediator is not a neutral agent; they are a bridge carrying their own personal history, worldview, and unique relationship with reading (Neira & Martín-Macho, 2020; Colomer & Munita, 2013).

The way each professional perceives their role—whether as a guide transmitting facts or as a facilitator triggering emotions—directly influences the depth of the visitor's experience. Although these beliefs are often resistant to change, research shows they can be transformed through collaborative reflection and the introduction of new mediation methodologies (Munita, 2024).

Ultimately, analysing beliefs is more than a theoretical exercise; it is a tool for professional transparency. It reminds us that a museum's narrative is a living co-construction between the site, the objects, the mediator, and the visitors themselves (Jorrín et al., 2021). Recognising our own position as researchers and educators is the first step towards ensuring a heritage

interpretation that is truly open, critical, and honest.

In the context of the Joan Fuster House-Museum, Critical Literacy is not merely a goal but a process facilitated by the unique intellectual style of the author: irony (Ballart et al., 2017). Following Freire and Macedo's (1987) principle of 'reading the word and the world', the museum visit aims to provoke a critical awakening in students.

While the teachers act as mediators who already validate Fuster's intellectual legacy, the real challenge for critical literacy emerges with the students. Unlike their instructors, the student body reflects a broader and more fragmented ideological spectrum. Their 'mental scripts' are frequently shaped by family environments that may be reticent or even hostile to Fuster's figure. Therefore, the mediation process does not just reinforce existing beliefs held by the teachers, but actively works to dismantle the prejudices and resistances brought by the students, using the house's materiality to bridge these ideological gaps.

As Bataller (2017) and Uccella (2013) suggest, this 'mediation' is what enables situated literacy. By using Fuster's aphorisms as interpretive triggers, students engage in a linguistic and social critique that is deeply rooted in their reality. The 'narrative tension' generated by irony allows for a negotiation of identity and power, transforming the house-museum into a space where democracy is practiced through critical reflection and the defense of cultural diversity. Thus, irony becomes the bridge between the 'material assemblage' of the house and the 'civic engagement' of the visitor.

## Methodology

To explore how narratives are managed and lived at the Joan Fuster House-Museum, this research adopted a qualitative approach based on an interpretive case study design (Stake, 2007). This method is particularly suited for heritage research as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the 'why' and 'how' behind the interactions between people, objects, and places.

The study is situated within the Didactic Classroom of the Joan Fuster House, a specialised educational unit. Our primary object of analysis was the workshop 'Images and Thoughts of Joan Fuster', where we observed how Fuster's intellectual legacy is translated for younger generations through a combination of audiovisual resources, material objects, and dialogic activities.

Recognising that heritage narratives are always best co-constructed (Figure 9), we sought the perspectives of the two main groups who act as 'bridge-builders' during a school visit:

- Museum mediators: The professional staff responsible for designing and delivering the workshops. They are the primary facilitators between the author's house and the public.
- Secondary school teachers: Language and Literature specialists from various regional schools. We view them as 'gatekeepers' whose prior beliefs and 'mental scripts' act as a filter for how students receive the museum's narrative.

All participants provided informed consent and were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

The ten participants (4 museum mediators and 6 teachers) were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure a diversity of professional profiles and school contexts. It is important to note that the teaching staff participating in this study generally shares a specific ideological consensus regarding the validity and literary quality of Fuster's work.

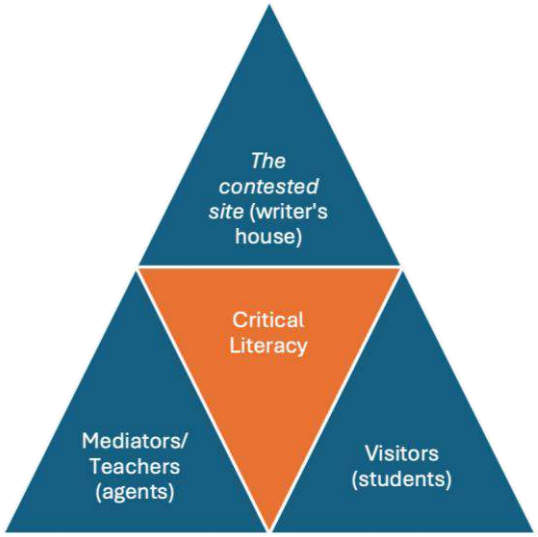



**Figure 9. Narrative mediation model: Data triangulation of agents and site**

Given the highly specific symbolic meaning of the Joan Fuster House-Museum, while the participating teachers shared broadly positive views regarding Fuster's legacy, the study remained open to ideological diversity. However, the research remained open to all ideologies. The primary source of ideological diversity and resistance was found among the students, whose perspectives are often influenced by family backgrounds and external social discourses

To achieve a 'thick description' of the experience, we used several tools to triangulate our findings:

1. Semi-structured interviews: Conducted in 2025, these were the heart of our data collection. We used an adapted version of the Jefferson system (1985) for transcriptions to capture not just words, but pauses and intonations that reveal emotional engagement. Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached, as no substantially new categories emerged in the final phase of analysis.
2. Participant observation: The researcher acted as a 'moderate observer' during the workshops and the museum's literary routes, taking detailed field notes on the dynamics, attitudes, and the 'material intra-actions' between students and Fuster's belongings.
3. Identification forms: To understand the personal and professional background of each participant.

The data were subjected to Thematic Content Analysis. Using an inductive approach, we grouped the transcriptions into three main dimensions that help us understand how the story of Fuster is being told (Figure 10):

- Educational beliefs: How do they conceive literature and literature mediation through the heritage?
- The mediated experience: How do the physical space and material objects (the fireplace, the library…) shape the learning?
- Narrative and identity: How is the writer's house used to discuss contemporary identity, the Valencian language, and democratic values?

| OPEN CODING-STRUCTURE-CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dimension 1: Educational Beliefs | Dimension 2: The Mediated Experience | Dimension 3: Narrative and Identity |
| • Value of the Author<br>• The role of agents<br>• Mediation philosophy | • Interpretative tools<br>• Material resources<br>• Barriers and strengths | • Linguistic resilience<br>• Sociopolitical context<br>• Civic evaluation |

**Figure 10. Thematic mapping of the nine analytical categories**

## Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed that the Joan Fuster House-Museum functions not merely as a repository of books, but as a dynamic ecosystem where diverse narratives coexist and are negotiated (Roig-López & Bataller-Català, 2026). The findings are structured into four key interpretative axes.

### 1. The author's narrative: Between intellectual rigour and accessibility

Participants consistently highlighted Fuster's status as 'one of the most important Valencian writers of the 20th century' (Mediator 2).

However, a central narrative tension emerged: while his intellectual relevance is undisputed, 'reading Joan Fuster is not easy' (Mediator 2).

To bridge this gap, mediators (Mediator 4) emphasise a narrative strategy that is 'disseminating but not vulgarising'. The goal is to move the author from the formal school curriculum—where he is often perceived as a 'required subject' (Mediator 4)—into a personal, meaningful experience. As one teacher (Teacher 1) noted, the narrative becomes authentic 'when students enter into the spaces the author actually travelled through'.

### 2. Students and teachers: The co-creators of meaning

The museum visit is often a journey of shifting narratives. Teachers observed an initial resistance—'This is so boring'—which, through the workshop's mediation, transforms into engagement: 'they ended up having a great time' (Teacher 2).

A crucial finding is the role of the teacher as a 'narrative gatekeeper'. Mediators (Mediator 1) noted a marked contrast between teachers who are 'very involved' and those who 'just come for a walk' or use the outing to 'disconnect'. This confirms that the success of the heritage narrative depends on a collaborative triangle between the site, the mediator, and the educator.

### 3. Materiality as a 'stronghold' of truth

In a digital age, the material objects of the house act as anchors for 'factual accuracy'. Teachers noted that the workshop Images and Thoughts helps students realise that 'we didn't invent the characters' (Teacher 2), grounding the literary narrative in physical reality. The 'Didactic Classroom' was described by staff as a 'stronghold' (Mediator 4) where creative and cooperative workshops (Teacher 4) allow students to interact directly with Fuster's legacy.

### 4. Narratives of resistance in a changing landscape

The research captured a profound narrative of linguistic identity. In a context of 'linguistic substitution' (Teacher 2), the museum is perceived by participants as a space that promotes cultural and linguistic affirmation. One mediator (Mediator 2) shared a striking impact: 'I've seen students leave here convinced that the most important thing is to speak Valencian'.

The effectiveness of this 'symbolic resistance' is rooted in the shared linguistic code between the institution and the school. Given that the students are already part of a Catalan-language educational system and study the language as a core subject in their curriculum, the museum's decision to maintain the educational experience solely in Catalan reinforces the status of the language. This pedagogical choice prevents the language from being perceived as a mere academic requirement and transforms it into a functional tool for high-level intellectual and civic discourse.

However, these narratives are vulnerable to external pressures. Participants expressed concerns regarding institutional support following recent 'regional political changes' (Mediator 3), noting that 'more resources always yield better results'. Despite these logistical barriers, the overall evaluation is 'eminently positive' (Mediator 4), with teachers considering the experience a 'must-see' (Teacher 6) that should be repeated annually.

## Discussion

The findings from the Joan Fuster House-Museum provide a compelling case for the evolution of heritage interpretation in the 21st century. While the study does not directly measure changes in students' critical literacy, participants' testimonies suggest that the mediation strategies are oriented towards

fostering reflective engagement. By analysing the interaction between mediators, teachers, and the physical space, we can address the core questions regarding the role of narratives in contested environments.

The research demonstrates that the Joan Fuster House-Museum functions not just as a memorial, but as a space for fostering civic dialogue. Teachers and mediators, explain that by dealing with an author whose narrative was historically contested and silenced by political violence, the museum acts as a site of reconciliation.

The consensus among participants on Fuster's cultural significance confirms that he is a 'key figure for understanding contemporary Valencian culture' (Mediator 2). However, the use of irony and 'narrative tension' in the workshops prevents the creation of a closed institutional message. Instead, it allows students to develop their own critical 'mental scripts', transforming a difficult curriculum subject into an experiential and emotional literacy event (Snaza, 2019; Uccella, 2013). The relative ideological alignment between the institution and most participating teachers may have limited the emergence of overt narrative conflict, shifting the site of tension primarily to student responses.

Since the 1970s, international bodies, including ICOM and UNESCO, have recognised that 'l'éducation constitue l'une des fonctions les plus importantes du musée et qu'elle doit être renforcée dans le futur (education is one of the museum's most important functions and must be reinforced in the future)' (Allard & Boucher, 1998:27). At the Joan Fuster House-Museum, this is achieved by ensuring that visitors do not just see collections, but are helped to understand and feel what they see. This emotional and cognitive engagement is exactly what transforms a simple visit into a meaningful literacy event.

As shown in the interviews, the mediator's success lies in their ability to manage ambiguity with a blend of 'rigour, humour, and participatory dynamics' (Munita, 2024). They act as a bridge, ensuring that the mediation is 'disseminating but not vulgarising' (Mediator 4). This role requires more than factual knowledge; it demands empathy and sociolinguistic awareness to manage the 'multiple narratives' of a 'diverse student body'.

The Joan Fuster case proves that factual accuracy and narrative richness are not mutually exclusive. The 'material assemblage' of the house—the art collection, the damaged filing cabinets, the library—provides the factual grounding that prevents the narrative from becoming purely subjective.

This 'material memory' acts as a stronghold (Mediator 4) where even ethically questionable or contested narratives from the past—such as the attacks on Fuster—can be discussed openly. This aligns with critical museology (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), where the museum functions as a pedagogical space that challenges cultural hegemonies and incorporates marginalised voices.

The sociolinguistic context emerged as a persistent, cross-cutting dimension. Despite students often coming from Valencian-speaking towns, a prevailing tendency to switch to Spanish was observed (Tasa & Bodoque, 2016). In this framework, the visit becomes a symbolic space of resistance that reinforces the visibility of a minoritised language. The narrative of the house encourages students to leave 'convinced that the most important thing is to speak Valencian' (Mediator 2), positioning the museum as a space perceived by participants as contributing to processes of linguistic

legitimisation. The museum operates as a high-prestige cultural institution where a minoritised language is not merely preserved but functionally enacted within intellectual discourse. This situates the visit within broader debates on language policy and linguistic legitimacy, extending the relevance of the case beyond the specific figure of Fuster.

Furthermore, the mediation strategies must manage the paradox of a student body that, despite studying in Valencian and following a Valencian-language curriculum, often defaults to Spanish in informal interactions. While the museum provides multilingual access for general visitors, the strictly Valencian-language educational experience serves as a strategic intervention. It provides students with a prestigious, authentic, and immersive environment where their formal language studies are applied to the critical analysis of one of their culture's most significant thinkers.

The study also highlights a significant challenge: the 'counter-planning' and reduction of institutional support following recent regional right political changes. Mediators describe the workshop as a 'star' that persists despite financial limitations. This highlights a key responsibility for 21st-century heritage interpreters: narrative resilience. The ability to maintain professional rigour and critical reflection in the face of shifting political priorities is essential for the conscious and responsible shaping of our common future.

## Conclusions

The research at the Joan Fuster House-Museum demonstrates that this space does more than preserve a legacy; it opens 'gateways' into the author's texts, activating them for contemporary audiences. The museum and the resources of the Didactic Classroom transform the house into a literary interpretation device. Objects, domestic spaces, and urban routes function as 'material paratexts' that lead visitors toward Fuster's writing—aphorisms, essays, and poems—facilitating a situated and meaningful interpretation.

From the perspective of teachers and mediators, the house-museum enables a crucial shift: from memory to reading, and from biographical data to the interpretation of work. The activities (guided tours and workshops) provide tangible scaffolds for engaging with the text. The house acts as a literary mediator in the strongest sense: it does not replace the act of reading but provokes it, making it plausible and relevant for new generations.

The study identifies three primary impacts on the visitor's narrative journey.

1. Narrative activation: Students approach the texts with more favourable expectations and tools to understand Fuster's unique voice and style.
2. Contextualisation: The territory and the house illuminate Fuster's rhetoric—his civic stance, his dialogue with art, and his aphoristic playfulness.
3. Transference: Teachers identify continuity sequences (before–during–after the visit) that integrate the museum experience back into the classroom, prolonging the narrative engagement.

While Fuster's conceptual density and the challenging sociolinguistic context remain barriers, the mediation at the Joan Fuster House-Museum provides insights to build 'interpretive bridges'. It legitimises the author's work not just as a curricular requirement, but as a practice of cultural and democratic citizenship.

To further enhance these narratives, we propose:

- Strengthening the library of text-oriented didactic materials (reading dossiers and commented anthologies).

- Developing and expanding progressive narrative sequences by educational levels to ensure deeper entry into complex genres like the essay or the opinion article.
- Expanding collaborative projects between the museum and schools to foster pre-visit reading.

Although limited by its specific sample, this study confirms that writers' house-museums like the Joan Fuster's house do not merely 'patrimonialise' an author. They make the author readable. By embracing the 'sociomaterial' and affective dimensions of the house, the institution consolidates Fuster's work as a living narrative for critical thinking and contemporary cultural debate. In doing so, the Joan Fuster House-Museum may offer a transferable case for reflection within literary and heritage mediation contexts, proving that the past can, indeed, be a powerful tool for interpreting our common future.

This study suggests that literary heritage may function as a 'living laboratory' for identity construction. A key learning point is that mediation is not about factual transmission, but about building bridges that transform initial student resistance into civic and critical engagement through irony and emotion.

This study is limited by its small and context-specific sample, focusing on a single writer's house-museum and a relatively homogeneous group of teachers and mediators. While this allowed for an in-depth, situated analysis, the findings cannot be generalised to other heritage contexts without caution. Moreover, the research centres on adult participants' perspectives; students' voices were not systematically collected, which may limit the extent to which conclusions can be drawn about the direct impact of mediation on learners' critical literacy development. Future research could expand the scope to include comparative cases and longitudinal approaches that explore how such mediation practices influence students' linguistic and civic engagement over time.

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# Weaponising the past: Mnemonic populism and the erasure of multiple voices in Belarusian history education

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates how the Belarusian regime employs mnemonic populism to monopolise historical memory and ensure political survival. By conducting a longitudinal discourse analysis of state-mandated history textbooks (2006–2019), the study deconstructs the mechanisms used to erase dissonant pasts. The findings reveal a rigid mnemonic hierarchy where the State is elevated as the supreme core value. Consequently, the educational curriculum strategically sanitises the Stalinist era, completely omits the democratic transition of the early 1990s, and weaponises the legacy of World War II to criminalise modern opposition symbols. Ultimately, the paper argues that this aggressive replacement of historical complexity with artificial moral dichotomies creates a fundamentally brittle narrative, one that fractured visibly during the 2020 civil protests.

**Keywords**

mnemonic populism, memory politics, history education, authoritarianism, Belarus

## Introduction

Contemporary heritage interpretation advocates for multiperspectivity, encouraging inclusive and dialogic approaches to navigate the complex narratives that surround the past. However, this democratic approach faces a fundamental challenge in authoritarian states, where engagement with history is not treated as a space for reflection, but rather as a highly controlled political resource.

This research examines the mechanisms of historical memory in Belarus, a country where history education and heritage spaces are systematically weaponised by an authoritarian regime to secure its political present.

Following the collapse of the USSR, newly independent republics faced the monumental task of forming new national historiographies to legitimise their independence. In Belarus, however, this process was fundamentally redirected by the rise of Alexander Lukashenko in 1994. Over the past three decades, the State has constructed a hybridised historical narrative that selectively merges Soviet legacies with specific state-centric national myths.

To understand this mechanism, this paper employs the concept of mnemonic populism. Populism fundamentally divides society through a moral antagonism between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). Mnemonic populism applies this dichotomy directly to historical narratives and interpretations (Kończal 2021). Within the Belarusian context, the history curriculum does not aim for genuine historical education; rather, its ultimate goal is the institutionalisation of symbolic control. It serves as a tool to legitimise

authoritarian stability, enforce political loyalty, and vilify dissent.

This mnemonic governance extends beyond the pages of textbooks and into the physical interpretation of heritage. In Belarus, museum visits are integrated directly into the school curriculum as mandatory lessons in a museum. The spatial organisation of these state exhibits physically constructs what can be termed a 'route of loyalty' for students, creating an immersive ideological environment that dictates the boundaries of acceptable historical memory. Consequently, classrooms and museums are transformed from spaces of critical inquiry into sites of loyalty enforcement.

Drawing on a longitudinal analysis of Belarusian school history textbooks published between 2006 and 2019, this paper explores the strategic gaps and the deliberate erasure of multiple voices in state-sanctioned history. It investigates how a rigid hierarchy of memory dictates the narrative, prioritising the State above all else. By replacing historical complexity with moral dichotomies, the regime attempts to suppress the pluralism advocated by modern heritage interpretation. However, as the unprecedented civil protests of 2020 vividly demonstrated, this aggressive memory politics comes at a significant cost: it produces a fundamentally narrow narrative that ultimately fails to capture the minds of a new generation.

## Methodology and theoretical framework

The empirical foundation of this study relies on a comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of four Belarusian school history textbooks covering the period from 1917 to the early 21st century. Published between 2006 and 2019, these editions were selected intentionally: by this time, the concept of national history transmitted in schools had undergone its latest significant transformation, shedding certain nostalgic elements while incorporating and modifying ideological constructs to serve the State. These textbooks reflect the mature, established educational and memory politics of Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, formulated after the State officially mandated ideological support for educational work.

The specific textbooks analysed include:

1. History of Belarus, 1945–2005 (10th grade) by Ganushchenko et al. (2006).
2. History of Belarus, XIX – beginning of XXI century (11th grade) edited by Novik (2009).
3. History of Belarus, 1917–1945 (10th grade) by Novik (2012).
4. History of Belarus, 1917 – beginning of XXI century (9th grade) by Panov et al. (2019).

The theoretical framework of the research is grounded in the concepts of mnemonic governance (Horonziak & Kaim 2023) and authoritarian populism. Methodologically, the research aligns with memory politics studies, utilising historian Georgiy Kasyanov's (2018) interpretation of memory politics as the purposeful construction and utilitarian use of collective representations of the past for political objectives. Within this context, educational materials are not viewed just as pedagogical tools, but as the core infrastructure for implementing the State's broader strategy of memory governance.

To deconstruct the official narrative, the study employs the original concept of core values, identifying four main groups of ideas that construct national history:

1. **The Soviet**: Characterised by institutional inertia, nostalgia, and the preservation of Soviet attributes in public life.
2. **The National**: Focused on Belarusian ethnicity and the concept of a political nation.
3. **The State**: Centred on the presence of statehood and centralised power.

4. **Political conjuncture**: Driven by the immediate internal and external political needs of the regime and the personal views of state actors.

The research utilises elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover narrative structures, mechanisms of moral coding, and strategies regarding the deliberate omission of historical events. This approach allows for the tracing of moral dichotomies which are used to marginalise alternative voices.

### The mechanics of erasure: Silencing the complex past

To maintain its hybridised narrative, the Belarusian regime relies heavily on deliberate omissions (strategic lacunae, or 'gaps') to construct a sanitised version of history. By marginalising or entirely removing painful and contradictory voices, the educational system actively prevents inclusive, multi-vocal engagement. This erasure is a foundational tactic of mnemonic populism, ensuring that the State remains the supreme and unquestionable benefactor.

### The valuation of statehood: From the 1917 revolutions to Western Belarus

The curriculum's treatment of the early 20th century explicitly prioritises Soviet-aligned statehood over grassroots national movements. Textbooks approach the 1917 revolutions conservatively, following Soviet inertia: the February Revolution is dismissed as having failed to solve the country's problems, while the October Revolution is presented as an "inevitable" phenomenon supported by the majority of the peasantry (Novik 2012:9).

When addressing early attempts at Belarusian independence, the narrative deliberately marginalises alternative voices. The proclamation of the independent Belarusian People's Republic (BNR) in 1918 is diminished as an unsuccessful attempt to create national statehood under German occupation. The leaders of the BNR are heavily criticised for collaborating with the enemy, with textbooks asserting that they lost the support of "the people, who considered the German occupation regime hostile" (Panov et al. 2019:17). The role of the BNR is described as symbolic. In stark contrast, the textbooks link real and effective national-state building exclusively to the creation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).

This state-centric, Soviet-aligned valuation is further reinforced in the depiction of a divided Belarus. Western Belarus, under Polish rule following the 1921 Treaty of Riga, is described from a standpoint of national oppression and even national tragedy. Textbooks describe it as an "agrarian appendage" (Novik et al. 2009:134) suffering from police terror and the oppression of Belarusian culture. Consequently, the 1939 Soviet annexation of Western Belarus is framed as a profound blessing, with one textbook even entitling the section about it, "The Liberation Campaign of the Red Army in Western Belarus". The difficulties of the population's adaptation to Soviet rule are virtually ignored.

### Industrialisation, collectivisation, and the erasure of tragedy

The narrative of the 1920s and 1930s continues to champion state endeavours while silencing the immense human cost. Massive economic policies such as industrialisation and collectivisation are portrayed as exceptionally successful. While some hardships are briefly acknowledged, such as money being actively withdrawn from the population, they are immediately overshadowed by declarations of economic triumph. Textbooks assert that the USSR covered a developmental path in years that took Western countries centuries.

Regarding collectivisation, the narrative goes as far as to justify the policy as necessary to raise the level of farming and provide food products, bizarrely claiming that it took into account the "communal traditions of peasant collectivism" (Novik 2012:76). Panov briefly notes that the fates of many thousands of people were crippled, yet immediately mitigates this by adding that "people did not lose faith in a better future" (Panov et al. 2019:38). What is deliberately and entirely erased from these pages is the concept of a national tragedy. Belarusian students will not find any mention of the catastrophic famine or the severe decline in agricultural production efficiency. By overshadowing negative facts with abstract, positive state achievements, the curriculum structurally silences the victims of these policies.

### The Stalinist regime: De-politicising repression

The topic of mass political repressions is the most confusingly described block of themes, suffering from massive omissions. Repressions are presented dryly, heavily de-politicised, and often justified as "deformations" dictated by the objective necessity to solve complex tasks within a hostile capitalist environment (Novik 2012:48).

Textbooks evade attempts to build cause-and-effect relationships or discuss the role of the Soviet leadership's guilt for what occurred. Even when a textbook provides statistics, the question of the causes of the repressive policy is completely avoided; the reader is presented with the fact of the repressions without contextual commentary (Panov et al. 2019:44). Strikingly, one high school textbook explicitly states that the "tens of millions of victims of political repressions in the USSR... are nothing more than a myth launched into public consciousness to discredit the socialist system" (Novik 2012:85). By deliberately criticising not figures confirmed by historians, but some abstract "tens of millions" of victims from an unauthorised quote, the textbook turns the topic of repression into a farce. Protecting the State, even in its totalitarian form, from profound critique, the narrative implies that criticising power is inherently dangerous.

### The historical 'Black Hole': Perestroika and the Post-Soviet transition

Moving into the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras, the state narrative encounters a massive historical vacuum. The events of Perestroika and the collapse of the USSR are handled with either surprising neutrality or open hostility towards democratic reforms. For instance, Novik (Novik 2009:192, 195) openly criticises Soviet leadership for allowing "unfounded criticism of the Soviet state" and laments that democratic reformers "destroyed a large and powerful state", arguing that the Belarusian economy lost more than it gained. Even the Chernobyl disaster is framed primarily as an economic catastrophe, omitting profound political critiques of the Soviet system that concealed the disaster's true consequences.

This anti-reform sentiment culminates in complete silence regarding the political history of Belarus from 1991 to 1994. Students receive absolutely no information about the intense democratic debates of the early 1990s, the struggle over the economic system, or how Alexander Lukashenko actually rose to power. His political struggles against rivals from both the national-liberal opposition and the Soviet nomenklatura are entirely omitted.

Instead of a factual account of this transitional period, the 1994 Constitution appears seemingly out of nowhere, introducing the new powerful post of the president, and Lukashenko's rule simply begins. It is framed as a natural, uncontested historical destiny. To mask these factual gaps, the curriculum replaces factual history with abstract ideological clichés. The regime's socio-economic path is proudly

labelled as "socially oriented", directly opposing the collapsing-destructive (Novik 2012:196) market reforms associated with the political opposition. Textbooks deploy vague ideologemes such as, "stability", and "multi-vectorness" (Ganushchenko et al. 2006:143, 117,131), to retouch complex societal problems and create an artificial construct that demands symbolic loyalty over authentic historical understanding.

### Weaponising heritage: World War II and the clash of symbols

While certain historical periods are subjected to strategic erasure, the legacy of World War II (referred to exclusively as the Great Patriotic War within the curriculum) is heavily emphasised. As noted many times by scholars (Rudling 2017; Marples 2014), the memory of this war serves as the "natural centre of identity building" in contemporary Belarus. However, the State's approach to this heritage is not one of multidimensional remembrance; rather, the history of the war is highly instrumentalised to solve contemporary political tasks, ranging from legitimising the roots of the current regime to antagonising foreign neighbours.

### The 'Partisan Republic' and selective remembrance

In the textbooks, the broader Soviet context of the war is largely displaced by a strictly national one. Often, major Soviet military events are subordinated to Belarusian history; for example, the Mogilev operation is exalted as the "father of Stalingrad" (Panov et al. 2019:69). The narrative focuses overwhelmingly on the heroism of Belarusian partisans, cementing the enduring myth of the "Partisan Republic" (Goujon 2010). Educational materials dedicate extensive chapters to detailing the organisational features and specific stories of heroic resistance by Belarusians against the occupiers. The heroism of the defence of the Brest Fortress is meticulously detailed, purposefully overshadowing the massive and catastrophic retreat of the Red Army at the beginning of the war.

This selective remembrance also serves to justify controversial geopolitical manoeuvres. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is portrayed not as an act of imperial division, but as a necessary and justified step that ensured the reunification of the Belarusian people. The curriculum goes as far as to blame Western powers, claiming that "England and France consciously pushed the fascists to the East" and "left the Soviet Union no alternative" (Novik 2012:111). Furthermore, the partisan narrative is actively used to antagonise modern Poland, with textbooks specifically highlighting the partisans' struggles against the Polish Armia Krajowa.

Conversely, this hyper-focus on heroic state-aligned resistance leaves little room for the multifaceted tragedy of the conflict, particularly regarding the Holocaust. Earlier textbooks authored by Novik barely touch upon the systemic extermination of the Jewish population. It is only the most recent editions (likely reacting to contemporary European cultures of memory) that provide a specific narrative explaining the term Holocaust and describing Jewish ghettos (Panov et al. 2019). By selectively curating which traumas are remembered and which are marginalised, the State utilises the war as a valuable political resource rather than a site for inclusive heritage interpretation.

### Criminalising multiperspectivity: The battle over symbols

Perhaps the most striking application of mnemonic populism is the weaponisation of the WWII narrative against modern political opposition. The white-red-white flag and the 'Pahonia' coat of arms served as the official state symbols of independent Belarus in the late 1910s and again in the early 1990s. During the

unprecedented civil protests of 2020, they emerged once more as the ultimate symbols of civil resistance against the authoritarian regime.

How does the state educational apparatus handle these heritage symbols? Textbooks systematically link them to Nazi collaborationism. The curriculum instructs students that collaborators used these specific symbols, greeting each other with the patriotic cry, "Zhyve Belarus!" (Long Live Belarus!) accompanied by a "fascist-style forward arm salute" (Novik et al. 2009:159).

Furthermore, textbook authors actively construct a narrative that demonises the historical origins of the symbols themselves. One textbook explicitly asserts that the "Pahonia" represents "hoary feudal antiquity", signifying "aggressiveness, belligerence, theocracy of the state", which "does not correspond to the mentality of the Belarusian people" (Novik et al. 2009:198). The author even dismisses the white-red-white flag as a mere 1917 invention associated with collaboration, ultimately passing final judgement by declaring them "symbols of the struggle for power by certain political forces, not supported by the majority of the Belarusian people" (Novik et al. 2009:199). In later editions, the issue is subject to complete omission; the Panov (Panov et al. 2019) textbook simply does not mention which national symbols preceded the current Soviet-style ones.

### The institutional erasure of alternative heritage

The State's effort to erase alternative national narratives extends to the calendar of national holidays. Independence Day, which used to mark the anniversary of the Declaration of State Sovereignty, was moved by the regime to celebrate the Day of Liberation from Nazi invaders. To reinforce this conceptually, textbook authors actively link the previous Independence Day date with the Nazi occupation, claiming it was the day when gauleiter Kube "supported the Belarusian traitors" and allowed them to display the white-red-white flag and the "Pahonia" coat of arms (Novik et al. 2009:199). The author suggestively questions whether the coincidence of these dates by the democratic opposition was "accidental or intentional".

This is a prime example of heritage interpretation being actively deployed to forestall dialogue. By embedding these associations into the minds of schoolchildren, the educational narrative laid the precise legal and moral groundwork for the regime's subsequent efforts to officially ban these historic national symbols as something extremist. In this way, the State transforms a complex, multi-layered historical heritage into a binary, moralised weapon, effectively criminalising alternative voices and perspectives.

### The language of interpretation and the 'Route of loyalty'

The implementation of mnemonic populism in Belarus is not limited to the selection or omission of historical facts; it is profoundly embedded in the very language of heritage interpretation and the physical spaces where this interpretation occurs. The regime employs a carefully curated pedagogical and spatial infrastructure to ensure that its historical narrative remains unquestioned and that the multiple voices of the past are structurally silenced.

### The linguistic spaces of memory

An analysis of the textbooks reveals distinct linguistic spaces that serve to normalise authoritarian constructs. Earlier textbooks, such as those authored by Novik, heavily inherit Soviet, Marxist-Leninist terminology from the early 1980s, abounding in sharp emotional characteristics and condemning terms like

'bourgeois'. More recent editions adopt a seemingly more restrained, professional tone, yet this modernisation masks a deliberate de-conceptualisation of the past. For instance, across all studied textbooks, the term 'totalitarian' is completely absent. The Stalinist era is described neutrally as a "Soviet socio-political system", distancing the reader from any undesirable critical assessment. Similarly, the Brezhnev era is never labelled with the critical Perestroika-era term 'zastoy' (stagnation), but rather softened to admitting some "stagnant phenomena".

In the chapters concerning recent history, the textbooks largely abandon factual discourse, replacing it with a heavily ideologised lexicon. Complex societal problems and historical realities are obscured behind vague ideologemes and abstract formulations, rendering the narrative profoundly lacunar, or full of holes. The narrative frequently utilises accumulations of terms such as 'sovereignty', 'stability', and 'multi-vectorness' to create an artificial construct of a flawless, state-centric reality. This language does not facilitate a full-fledged discussion about the recent past; instead, it replaces it with artificial constructs designed to retouch complex problems and create the appearance of a singular, correct interpretation of reality.

### Methodological apparatus as ideological control

Furthermore, the methodological apparatus of these textbooks (such as chapter summaries, review questions, and supplementary materials) serves to strictly guide the students' interpretation (Ostrovskaya 2010; Zadora 2017). In Novik's editions, extensive quotes from Soviet documents from the 1950s are presented as factual, whilst any contradictory perspectives are dismissed without reference as the opinion of "some historians".

Later textbooks incorporate more sophisticated engagement tools, including interactive tasks and QR codes, alongside narratives designed to evoke a strong emotional response. These include humanising stories of state officials, such as a Soviet official sacrificing his career to build a clinic (Panov et al. 2019:107), or First Secretary Pyotr Masherov personally ensuring electricity was brought to the street of a sick collective farmer (Panov et al. 2019:108).

However, this pedagogical sophistication abruptly disappears when the narrative shifts to the period of post-Soviet independence. At this point, the supplementary materials completely cease to encourage critical thinking; instead, they serve solely to confirm the preceding text, setting the expectation that the reader will uncritically repeat the ideological formulations and state slogans provided.

### Museum spaces

The mnemonic governance extends far beyond the printed pages of textbooks into the physical realm of heritage interpretation. In Belarus, the state's monopoly on memory is reinforced through the integration of museum visits directly into the mandatory school curriculum, designated as lessons in a museum.

By bringing students into these state-curated heritage spaces, the regime creates a controlled environment. The spatial organisation of these exhibitions is not neutral; it is designed to physically construct what can be termed a route of loyalty for the students. This spatial curation dictates the strict boundaries of acceptable historical memory. By substituting historical nuance with strict moral dichotomies (e.g. 'patriots' versus 'traitors'), the State transforms both the classroom and the museum from spaces of critical inquiry into sites of loyalty enforcement.

## Conclusion

Discourse analysis demonstrates that the highest value in the core values hierarchy is invariably the State. The State is consistently presented as the primary source of good for the people. In any historical narrative where national identity conflicts with state power, the interpretation always favours the State, making the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) inherently more symbolically valuable to the narrative than the earlier, non-Soviet national project.

Mnemonic populism within Belarusian history education functions as a structural imperative for authoritarian survival. The longitudinal analysis of the educational infrastructure reveals a deliberate, systematic project: the absolute subordination of historical complexity to the supreme value of the State. By continuously enforcing an ideologically rigid timeline completely devoid of national traumas, democratic struggles, and alternative perspectives, the regime sought to manufacture perpetual civic obedience.

However, this monopolisation of memory ultimately generated its own profound vulnerability. When a State relies on massive factual lacunae and coercive symbolic demands rather than authentic historical engagement, the resulting official narrative loses its interpretive power. The unprecedented civic awakening in 2020 exposed this exact fracture. It demonstrated that a curated past, stripped of the population's genuine agency and historical trauma, cannot sustain political legitimacy when faced with contemporary crises; it simply ceases to resonate with the lived reality of its citizens.

For the broader field of heritage interpretation, the Belarusian case study offers a critical and urgent lesson. It illustrates the acute dangers of allowing political forces to suppress multiperspectivity. Defending the plurality of memory and championing dialogic approaches are not only theoretical ideals for museum curators and educators; they are essential practices for safeguarding societal resilience. Actively navigating and protecting the multiple voices of the past remains the strongest bulwark against the authoritarian usage of heritage.

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# Asking what makes a 'good' idea: prompting conversations with colleagues and museum visitors


## Steve Slack (UK)

**Steve Slack** is a heritage interpretation consultant. His current work focusses on including audiences in participative exhibition making processes and in engaging visitors through interpretive experiences that provoke dialogue and active meaning-making. In 2025, Steve was project curator of the 'Lightbulb moments' exhibition at the Victoria Gallery & Museum at the University of Liverpool, UK, which is the subject of this presentation.

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### Abstract

When curating an exhibit about innovation and invention that contains a range of complex potential narratives relating to Liverpool, we decided to present visitors with information and gentle, careful provocation. The exhibit moves beyond the didactic and seeks to engage people in dialogue around nuclear weapons, human/animal medical experimentation and exploitation, tobacco product promotion and legacies of Britain's empire. Without space to carefully unpack these topics, we introduced each (we hope without judgement) and then handed interpretive agency to visitors. We asked them what makes the difference between a 'great' idea and a 'good' idea; what future generations will make of our current advancements, and what positive change can look like. We hope this creates space for visitor-led conversations and that it does more than simply invite people to reflect on the past.



### Keywords

conversation, narrative, interpretation, questions, open-ended questions, provocation, neutrality, lightbulb moments, university, museum


### Introduction

In response to the symposium theme of the role of narratives in modern interpretation, this paper highlights an interpretive initiative which made use of active conversation in its planning and which, inspired by this, purposefully leaves some open-ended narrative-making to the visitor. This example demonstrates how, through considered interpretive practice, the exhibit was able to make some statements about heritage assets (museum collection items and archive items), yet also provide space for academics' and visitors' individual interpretations of those assets. By offering visitors a series of broad questions, the museum handed agency from the institution to the viewer, inviting them to be a part of the process of constructing individual narratives. There is nothing new to asking visitors what they are thinking in an exhibition or heritage visitor experience – it is an age-old interpretive tactic to engage audiences. Instead, here we are actively attempting to carefully provoke visitors into conversations and for open-ended meaning-making to take place.

### Exhibition background

Lightbulb moments opened to the public in September 2025 at the Victoria Gallery and Museum, one of the cultural venues operated by the University of Liverpool, UK. It makes use of the collections of the museum and gallery along with those of the University's library and archive holdings, the collections of the Garstang Museum of Archaeology items provided by project partners at The National Archives, London.

**Figure 1. Lightbulb moments exhibition at Victoria Gallery and Museum, University of Liverpool (Image: Steve Slack)**

The exhibition is an exploration of 'great ideas' from the University and from the Liverpool City Region. It is an intentional curatorial collage, featuring a range of material – museum objects; 2D and 3D artworks; archive items; objects lent by academics and alumni; reproductions of 19th-century inventions and modern co-created elements. These items were placed into display settings alongside one another in four sections, each of which offers the visitor a potential route to having a so-called 'lightbulb moment', suggesting they: Identify a problem; Be curious about the world; Stand on the shoulders of giants; and Listen to what comes from within. By showing around 150 objects to visitors, each with an apparently great idea behind it, we suggest that visitors might be similarly inspired to have great ideas of their own. We also intended for local visitors, university staff and students to feel a sense of connection to their city/city region, by creating links back to Liverpool in each instance, however tangential.

### Lightbulb moments concept

Our working internal strapline for the exhibition was: 'Liverpool is a great place for having great ideas'. Our proposition to the visitor was that they, too, could be inspired to have a great idea. We figured there are worse places to experience a lightbulb moment than in a museum.

The rationale for being included in the exhibition was that a novel idea, an original thought, a spark of inspiration or moment of realisation – all concepts associated with the so-called 'lightbulb moment' we sometimes feel we've experienced – must be able to be related to the visitor. As curator, I was faced with a wide range of objects, each of which had many potential stories behind them, and only a small amount of space in which to relate the story to the visitor (80-100 words on a museum object label).

### Are all great ideas 'good' ideas?

Having undertaken front-end audience research with visitors during the research stage, collaborating with colleagues in the University and following a questions-based interpretation planning model, I arrived at a curatorial concept that fused the wide-ranging collections together with the various strategic briefs the exhibition needed to achieve. During that process, it became clear to all on the project that not all great ideas that we were in the process of researching were, in fact, ideas that could be presented as having solely contributed positively to the advancement of human society. This echoed earlier audience research findings, where people suggested that they wanted to hear about lightbulb moments that might have felt like positive ideas at the time, but which turned out not to be so great.

The story of the human species is not one of uncompromised success. Our history is not a succession of lightbulb moments and great ideas that changed the world forever in positive

ways. As well as making positive advancements, which the exhibition sought to celebrate, humans are also capable of arriving at ideas that embody our propensity for greed and envy, that lead to tragedy and conflict and which can end up exploiting both other people and our planet, some of which we found evident in the collection items that we selected for inclusion. As curator, I wanted to acknowledge the role that these ideas played – locally in Liverpool, nationally and internationally – within the context of an exhibition that is generally positive. Importantly, I was keen to embrace the possibility of multiple narratives existing alongside these objects and didn't want to simply present these as a series of alternative perspectives. The intention in the interpretation plan for the exhibition was that these objects and stories would be catalysts for conversations of all kinds.

**Exploring and displaying multiple narratives**

An early exploration of this focused on the display of two globes – one celestial (made in 1799) and one terrestrial (made in 1816 and updated in 1833). As part of our research, I invited four academics from across the university to view the object in the museum store and to share with the group how they responded to it. The open-ended conversation between a world historian, two geographers, a historian of the mathematics of cartography, and a curator covered a great deal of ground in one hour – so much so that one simply couldn't fit a summary of the wide-ranging subjects we covered onto one label. The four academics all said how much they enjoyed the meeting and also how much they each took away from the session – hearing how different disciplines approach and analyse what they see and how this might apply to their own research or thinking.

This conversation was an important part of the curatorial journey for me. It reminded me that when exploring multiple narratives that could potentially sit behind an object, something as simple as a group conversation is a useful way of hearing those perspectives – for all our desk research and background reading, sometimes simply placing five people in a room can unlock many more potential avenues of enquiry. It also demonstrated to me just how many potential stories might be associated with this object and presented me with the challenge of how to frame a narrative around this object for the visitor – a narrative of multiple perspectives and a narrative of changing ideas about history.

In the end, the gallery label for this object reads:

> **Cary's new terrestrial globe**
> **made by C and J Cary, London 1833**
> Made in 1816, and updated some years later, this object reflects the most up-to-date geographical knowledge of the world at the time. The routes of recent global explorers are marked, although people struggle to see much of these in the southern hemisphere, given the wooden frame which blocks off areas that were perhaps of less interest to the globe's makers and the customers.
> This globe, and the celestial globe displayed nearby, were donated to the University by the locally well-known Rathbone family who, despite being vocal opponents of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, had business interests in Liverpool and around the globe linked to the trade of enslaved people. Looking at this globe today, it's only partially useful for finding where places are. Perhaps it's more useful as a way of starting conversations about Britain's role in global history.
> We invited four University of Liverpool researchers to offer their perspectives on this globe.

As the label indicates, the case also featured four quotations, one from each of our academic volunteers, inspired by our conversation (which we had thankfully recorded) and which they

were each free to edit before display. These variously explored the process of globe creation; historical understanding of data and time; the concept of 'global mastery'; the opportunities of colonial expansion; connections between Liverpool and European empires around the world; the use of language; the relationship between science and colonialism and the fact that the mathematical, scientific and technological knowledge involved in creating these globes was itself taken from the wider world the European nations would go on to claim colonial dominion and scientific superiority over. Each academic quotation, in some cases slightly edited into visitor-friendly language, was around 100 words long (Figure 2). While this created a lot of text for visitors to read, it offered them a glimpse into that conversation in the museum store, bringing a range of potential stories about this object to the fore and demonstrating that multiple narratives around one object can exist. But this was merely an insight into a conversation, rather than an invitation into one. We wanted to go further.

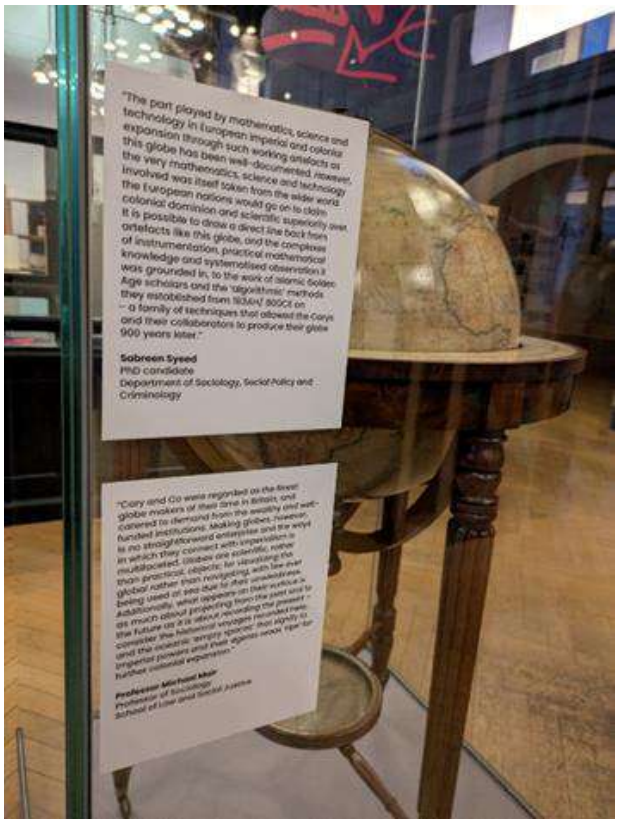


**Figure 2. Two labels showing quotations arising from our conversation, displayed alongside Cary's terrestrial globe (Image: Steve Slack)**

## Suggesting open-ended, visitor-led narratives

Considering the number of objects on display, it wouldn't have been feasible to present five labels alongside every object in the exhibition. Inspired by the conversation we'd had in the museum store, which had gone in a delightfully surprising range of directions, we supposed that the power of this collection of objects potentially lies not in what the museum communicates about them to the visitor, but in the ways in which visitors respond to them. Instead of 'telling' visitors about these potentially 'difficult' objects, could we instead pose them a question?

The interpretive solution we arrived at was to create a display in one alcove of the museum space that we hoped could become a focus for conversation around these objects. We provided visitors with some information about the items and, at the same time, some gentle provocation

around them. We decided not to shy away from any of the potential topics that arise from these objects and were clear with visitors about the role of one alcove in the exhibition – that we were bringing a group of objects relating to injustices of the past together for the purpose of comparison and reflection.

The opening panel for this alcove reads:

> **Liverpool is a great place for having great ideas.**
>
> **But are all great ideas 'good' ideas?**
>
> Despite the best intentions, sometimes our ideas don't work out quite as we planned. Failures, mistakes and unforeseen consequences can lead us to regret what we once thought were breakthroughs in a brilliant lightbulb moment.
>
> As a port city, Liverpool played an important part in the story of the British Empire and the trade of enslaved people around the world. Our industrial history is part of the story of manmade climate change, and there are injustices and divisions that remain challenges for the city today in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and more.
>
> With the privilege of hindsight, it would be over simplistic to dismiss some of the ideas the people of Liverpool had in the past as 'bad'. But, surely, we must acknowledge these if we're to learn from the past and build positive futures for ourselves? None of this means we ought to stop asking questions, being curious, identifying problems or building on the work of others. Instead, we need to keep having lightbulb moments to make the world a better place.

Inside the alcove, visitors find a range of objects that may, at first, seem rather unconnected. Two reproductions of inventions made in Liverpool in the 1850s (held by The National Archives) are featured – an accessory designed for keeping cigars safe inside the wearer's top hat and an 'air-conductor' hat for keeping the head cool in tropical climates. At first glance, these can be seen as light-hearted, even whimsical, 'great ideas' from the Victorian era and a glimpse into the sartorial inventions of the day. But look a little more closely and these two items point directly to the injustices of the mid-nineteenth century; they serve as evidence of Britain's imperial past and of Liverpool's place in it – a city where journeys to far-off places so often began. They also talk to the industry and commercial opportunities that supported the travel, emigration and colonial endeavours of Britain at the time. The commercialisation of Empire, in the UK and beyond, is a shame that stays with us in cities like Liverpool. To some, these objects represent charming inventions that speak to the Victorian spirit of innovation and discovery, to others they are symbols of oppression and injustice.

Other items in this display include a painting of four alpacas, which was used by Liverpool businessman William Danson to build support for his innovative alpaca wool business. Danson displayed the painting at the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1840 and he also took four live alpacas with him on his travels around the country, showing off how superior their wool was to that of local sheep. His 'great idea' to import alpacas to Britain, from Peru, ultimately failed – many died on the voyage and those that survived the journey were not suited to the climate here. At first sight, the painting may seem like the depiction of a group of adorable animals, but on closer inspection of the reality behind Danson's idea, it is a reminder of the greed that humans have exerted over nature for centuries.

Other objects in the display relate to 'advancements' in medical science surrounding the passing of electrical currents through the body; to the teaching of physics in a university setting that was involved with the development of nuclear weapons in the 1940s, and to the

development of dental products that turned out to have been made from materials that were dangerous to human health. Shown alongside these collection items is a T-shirt (Figure 3) – a product of the 'Museums are not neutral' campaign. The label alongside this object sets out some of the curatorial thinking for this exhibition and this alcove. It reads:

**Who makes museum exhibitions?**
**Can they ever be objective?**

Museum exhibitions are made by people, not by robots. The choices we make about which objects to put on display, and how to interpret them, are informed by our lives and experiences and the world around us. This exhibition has been shaped by the biases and values of the people who created it and also by the unique historical context of the University and its collections.

'Museums are not neutral' is a campaign that reminds staff, and visitors, that museums are never 'above' the political and social issues present in modern life. We are not apolitical or neutral. We aim to be respectful in our work, but what museums put on display will always be subjective. Museums reflect the power structures and ideologies of their time and they have a role to play in fostering a world based on equity and respect for all.

**Figure 3. Objects and interpretive questions on the gallery wall, intended to prompt further conversation (Image: Steve Slack)**

Also visible in Figure 3 are some questions, reproduced on the wall and designed to be read from across the space, which we hope will catch visitors' attention and maybe provoke a thought or a conversation. We asked them:

- Will people in the future think differently about the so-called 'great ideas' of our age?
- When we have a lightbulb moment, how can we make sure it's not a terrible idea?
- What makes the difference between a great idea and a genuinely 'good' idea?
- What does positive change look like for our city and our planet in the future?

## Setting up conversations with care

Some might argue that by asking visitors what they think and by inviting them to construct their own narratives (even though visitors in the moment might not call them 'narratives'), that we are absolving or devolving ourselves of the responsibility of telling these complex stories – that to offer a question is to side-step the issues that these items bring to the fore. We couldn't disagree more. By carefully and intentionally creating a space like this, the museum is actively demonstrating to the wider world that they are ready to have conversations about history, empire, agency, experimentation and control. We seek to be a place where conversations, and narratives, around these topics can be held and where multiple perspectives can exist in an environment of care and respect. We also seek to hold space for visitors to have conversations in a place that feels safe to them – in an alcove, off the side of a busy exhibition gallery.

The intention has been to purposefully keep these questions open-ended and for visitors to be clear that there are no expectations of how they might react to them. We have acknowledged the issues at play here, we introduced the objects and the topics and we set them in a little context – as much as one can in a short museum label. We also introduced the idea of multiple narratives in the opening panel.

We had the opportunity not to include these objects or to ask these questions. Instead, with this simple interpretive gesture, we are saying to the visitor that we would like to share the agency for making narratives around these objects in the exhibition space, making it clear that the museum is not the one to tell people how to think about them. We say to visitors that it's okay to be conflicted about these topics and we invite them to construct narratives of their own.

The museum does, of course, retain some interpretive agency in this display. We are, after all, the ones asking the questions here – but we ultimately want to empower visitors to interpret these objects, and other so-called 'great' ideas that they see in the world around them, creating their own narratives as they go. Indeed, as a curator, I am passionate about the role that heritage, in particular museum collections, can have in building a society that respects open dialogue and constructive exchange.

Any conversation is a two-way interaction. While we hope that these objects and the questions on the wall encourage visitors to have conversations between themselves in the space, the museum is also in listening mode, eager to find out what they think of this style of interpretation. An audience-focussed evaluation is ongoing and visitors are feeding back on what they see there. They are also invited to write their thoughts on a nearby blackboard, which is regularly monitored for trends in visitor activity.

This ongoing conversation between the visitor and the museum continues well after exhibition opening day and we are hopeful that this simple interpretive technique does more than invite visitors to reflect on the past. Instead of communicating narratives to visitors, the museum now actively seeks to have conversations with them – intentionally, in a considered fashion and within a framework of care.

# Heritage interpretation as mental modelling: A connective concept for an expanding vocabulary

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**Abstract**

As the professional conversation about heritage interpretation develops, it embraces concerns, concepts, and terms from various sources. For example, the announcement for the Interpret Europe symposium, The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation (2026), refers variously to 'frames', 'narratives', 'stories', 'themes', and 'brain scripts'. Individual definitions notwithstanding, it remains largely unclear how these terms relate to each other and why we should use this vocabulary and not a different one. To help assemble a coherent and user-friendly professional language, and to address the lack of a working theory that reflects current challenges, I propose that we describe heritage interpretation as an intersubjective practice of mental modelling. To speak of interpretation, then, is to talk about mental models, their relationships and characteristics, and how we shape them. The concept of mental models is a plausible connective concept for heritage interpretation.

**Keywords**

mental models, connective concept, working theory, philosophy of heritage interpretation, current challenges

### Introduction

The upshot of this paper is a simple suggestion to the reader: Try to think of heritage interpretation as a practice of mental modelling, one that involves several people. And consider: Does the idea make sense? If you imagine some typical interpretive situations, such as a guided walk or a museum visit, can you detect any mental modelling happening there? (At this stage, you may find that you need to understand more clearly what mental modelling means. This will be discussed shortly.)

Consider further that the growing scope of what good heritage interpretation can mean and what methods and processes it may involve – from community participation and collaborative meaning-making to the inclusion of multiple narratives. Under these circumstances, would it help you to think and speak about heritage interpretation more coherently if you could map its diversifying practices and objectives to a common conceptual framework? For it is against this background that I propose mental modelling as a connective concept for heritage interpretation.

A connective concept, as I understand the term, is a concept that connects an initially disparate set of concepts, theories, or conversations. Some connective concepts create links between entire branches of knowledge. For example, the "shifting baseline syndrome" has recently been proposed as a connective concept for environmental research across the sciences and humanities (Alleway et al. 2023). It refers to the tendency of humans to ignore environmental change that occurred before their personal experience, and addressing it, therefore,

requires an understanding of both human and natural systems. (For a similar example, see Simon 2020 on the beginning of the supposed Anthropocene as an "epochal event".) On a smaller scale – say, in an evolving, interdisciplinary field of practice such as heritage interpretation – a connective concept can be an anchor, or a point of translation, for the diversifying, multi-source professional vocabulary, while there is no generally accepted theory to do this job.

That said, I suspect that a good connective concept can easily evolve into the kernel of a working theory. In the following sections, I make a gesture in this direction.

## Mental models

The symposium invitation that prompted this paper suggested that prospective contributors "reflect on the role of narratives in contemporary interpretation". "Why narratives? Why now?", the organisers asked (Interpret Europe 2026a). In a dedicated document (Interpret Europe 2026b), dozens more elaborate questions were offered as food for thought. Among a few that caught my eye at the time, the question, "How can narratives contribute to a conscious and responsible shaping of our common future?" seemed like an interesting chance to connect heritage interpretation with my interest in utopianism. Similarly, the question, "Can heritage interpretation itself be understood as a meta-narrative practice – one that both creates and critiques narratives and stories?" tempted me to expound my idea of heritage interpretation as a philosophical practice.

However, the more I considered the symposium call, the more I found myself thinking about its underlying uncertainties. For example, a glossary provided by the organisers included the following entries (excerpted and composed from Interpret Europe 2026b):

Narrative. Broad interpretive frame that is shared by many, puts things or events into a meaningful context and influences as a proposed truth what people believe and how they interact with their surroundings.
Frame. Set of (un)conscious associations evoked by something. While surface frames tend to provide examples or explanations, deep frames provide deeper meaning. Different people may frame the same facts and concepts in different ways.
Brain script. Set of stored behavioural patterns that suggests to the individual how to behave in a particular situation.
Story. Illustrative description or depiction that may itself consist of storylines (plotlines) as a connected and coherent series of events.

While I welcomed the glossary as a gesture to bring contributors into the same frame of reference from the very start, including an entry on the symposium's central term, 'narrative', the latter definition (see above) felt a bit weak. It made sense to me to describe narratives as a kind of 'interpretive frame'. But should a glossary entry not also acknowledge the quite obvious storytelling aspect of the term (from the Latin verb, narrare)? It also seemed curious that the very same document that, in one section, offered definitions of the terms "narrative", "brain script", and "story", in another section included the questions, "How are narratives defined?" and "What is the relation between narratives, brain scripts and stories?". Indeed, what was the relation? How could I make sense of all of this?

The connective concept that came to mind was mental modelling. I could see how many of the terms and concepts in question could be constituted as kinds of mental models or ways of mental modelling. Why did I think of mental

modelling? To this, I have no clear answer. As far as I recall, I had never dealt with the term and concept of mental models before in any specific way. This probably means that I plucked it from colloquial language and general culture. Should it turn out to be as easily accessible to many other people, this would be an added argument in favour of using mental models as a connective concept for heritage interpretation.

It speaks to the popularity of the concept of mental models that there is a substantial number of books in the English language alone that promise to teach general readers helpful mental models for various purposes – if not to make them outright successful like "great thinkers such as Charlie Munger and Warren Buffett" (Penguin Random House 2026). The quote comes from the blurb of The Great Mental Models series by Shane Parrish and Rhiannon Beaubien, which includes a New York Times bestseller. This should lend further support to the assumption that mental models are part of popular culture, a concept already available to many of us.

In an academic context, British psychologist and philosopher Kenneth Craik is generally credited with introducing the term 'mental models' and his particular version of the concept into modern psychology. In his book, The Nature of Explanation (1943), Craik defends the hypothesis "that thought models, or parallels, reality – that its essential feature is not 'the mind', 'the self', 'sense-data', nor propositions but symbolism, and that this symbolism is largely of the same kind as that which is familiar to us in mechanical devices which aid thought and calculation" (Craik 1943:57).

I suspect that Craik was only one of many people through the centuries who, observing their own mind at work, made similar conjectures. For example, among Craik's contemporaries, Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in section 2.1 of his Tractatus logico-philosophicus (1922/n.d., originally published in German in 1918), notes that "[w]e make to ourselves pictures of facts" and each such "picture is a model of reality". While Wittgenstein did not use the term 'mental models', the notion of mental modelling was clearly part of his thought.

Similarly, American philosopher, psychologist, and educator John Dewey shows a keen awareness of the imaginative aspects of thought throughout his work. For instance, he describes ethical deliberation as "an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct" (Dewey & Tufts 1909:323). In other words, we mentally model how we might act in a given morally problematic situation and how this might play out, and we make decisions based on what we learn from these model runs. It may also be interesting to mention in the context of heritage interpretation that Dewey describes the "interpretation of facts" as a mental process that turns meanings and images into ideas through "reflective examination" (Dewey 1910:107–109). Again, the process of reflectively examining such an "image" of a fact (or "picture" in the sense of Wittgenstein, whose original German term 'Bild' translates equally as 'image') could be identified as mental modelling.

And, of course, early in the history of Western thought, Plato famously claims a kind of model–reality relationship between the ever-changing physical world and eternal "ideas" or "forms". In Plato's view, though, it is the forms which are real and the physical world which models them (imperfectly).

All of which is to emphasise again that, when it comes to considering the notion of mental models as a potential connective concept for heritage interpretation, what matters is not any specific intellectual pedigree, but its broad and proven intuitive appeal.

Accordingly, the notion of mental models is widely used across disciplines. Drawing on a checkered literature that ranges from cultural anthropology to computer science, Jones et al. (2011) offer the following synthesis of the concept:

> "[1] Mental models are personal, internal representations of external reality that people use to interact with the world around them.
> [2] They are constructed by individuals based on their unique life experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the world.
> [3] Mental models are used to reason and make decisions, and can be the basis of individual behaviors (sic).
> [4] They provide the mechanism through which new information is filtered and stored."

To my mind, these four aspects of mental models already strongly suggest an application to heritage interpretation.

### Interpretation as mental modelling

Can we intelligibly talk about heritage interpretation in terms of 'mental models' or 'modelling'? If so, this would lend further support to the claim that we should consider the concept of mental models as a connective concept for heritage interpretation. As a first brief test, I take the four aspects of the synthetic definition by Jones et al. (2011) (quoted above) and offer an example of their application to heritage interpretation.

(1) "Mental models are personal, internal representations of external reality that people use to interact with the world around them." – Any kind of interpretation is a process that shapes our 'personal, internal representations', or mental models. Heritage interpretation specifically works on the mental models of the phenomena that constitute natural or cultural heritage, and on the mental models of heritage in a more general sense.

(2) "[Mental models] are constructed by individuals based on their unique life experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the world." – Interpretation is possible because our mental models are not hard-wired, as it were, but 'constructed' throughout the course of our lives. This implies that they can typically be reconstructed through new experiences and knowledge. In a typical interpretive situation, the audience brings their pre-existing mental models and is introduced to other mental models that complement or challenge theirs. An interpretive conversation can be described as an exchange, negotiation, and potentially a mutual reshaping of the participants' mental models.

(3) "Mental models are used to reason and make decisions and can be the basis of individual behaviours." – Because we know that our 'mental models are used to reason and make decisions', i.e. that they can influence our actions, heritage interpreters have to deal with the expectation (theirs or other people's) that their work should change people's behaviour.

(4) "[Mental models] provide the mechanism through which new information is filtered and stored." – Our mental models act as information filters because they represent what, to us, is familiar and meaningful, accommodate new information that relates to it, and often reject information that does not. Hence, while the job of interpreters is conventionally understood as helping people find meaning in heritage (Tilden 1957/2007; Ham 2013; Ludwig 2015), we might also describe it as the tweaking of mental models to help people accept new relationships (both cognitive and emotional).

I assume that the examples have established the plausibility of using the concept of mental models as a connective concept for heritage interpretation. This means that all of heritage interpretation may be understood as working

with and on mental models. These models may have various sizes and other properties, but all of them are mental models. Similarly, while there are various ways of working with mental models, all of them are kinds of mental modelling. In this way, the concept of mental models connects the various concepts and terms of heritage interpretation internally. It also connects heritage interpretation externally to other fields of practice that can be described in terms of mental models.

The notion of mental models and modelling (whether expressed in these terms or others) originated as a description of processes in the individual mind. Heritage interpretation is usually understood to involve several minds, or subjects. In this sense, heritage interpretation is intersubjective mental modelling.

## Defining terms with a connective concept

This contribution was sparked by a list of definitions that did not seem to connect well with each other. As another test of our proposed connective concept for heritage interpretation, consider this sample list of definitions expressed in terms of mental models:

Frame. Mental model that acts as a mould for other mental models.

Interpretive theme. Mental model that an interpreter uses as a mould to shape the mental model of a given phenomenon; in other words, a kind of frame [mental model that acts as a mould for other mental models].

Story. Mental model that describes a process.

Narrative. A large frame [mental model that acts as a mould for other mental models]; also, specifically, a large-scale story [mental model that describes a process] that acts as a frame.

Brain script. Mental model of how to act in a given situation; in other words, a template story [mental model that describes a process].

As far as we may judge from this small sample, not only does it seem manageable to define each individual term with reference to the concept of mental models. As one does so, this approach also suggests a rapidly growing web of logical connections between various concepts. Once individual terms are translated into the same conceptual language, i.e. once they are commensurable, they begin to fit together intuitively like pieces of a puzzle, as when one useful definition of 'narrative' turns out to be a combination of 'frame' and 'story' (see above). Instead of a group of terms that sit next to each other awkwardly like strangers, we get a lively party of close connections.

## Conclusion

The concept of mental models is a plausible candidate for a connective concept of heritage interpretation. As such, it can be immediately useful in making sense of and integrating a diversifying vocabulary in this evolving field of practice. In addition, any good connective concept holds some potential to become the seed of a working theory and, more generally, contribute to the philosophy of a given field of practice.

If we follow one of the most recent offerings towards a theory of heritage interpretation, the practice has been influenced mainly by two theoretical approaches: "the educational model, rooted in Freeman Tilden's principles and cognitive psychology; and the hermeneutic model, which emphasises subjective meaning-making and cultural memory" (Kim & Kim 2025:2). Against this backdrop, Kim & Kim (2025) develop their own "integrated" model of heritage interpretation, which emphasises the participation of heritage stakeholders and the wider public, as well as the dynamic, political nature of the interpretation process. As they transparently note, their approach "extends the normative intent of Paragraph 108 of the 2024 Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (WHC)" (Kim & Kim 2025:1).

It is my impression that, like Kim & Kim's "integrated" approach, the "educational" school of thought on heritage interpretation (e.g. Ham 2013) is inherently normative. It, too, teaches a specific way to practise heritage interpretation. In contrast, the "hermeneutic" school (e.g. Lehnes & Carter 2016) seems to focus on describing and understanding what may occur in any process of heritage interpretation, whether individual, collective, professionally designed and guided or not. However, its inclination towards academic philosophy can render the hermeneutic approach somewhat opaque and less user-friendly for practising professionals.

If nothing else, developing a working theory of heritage interpretation from the concept of mental models (or from a similarly simple, descriptive, and functional connective concept) could avoid both the normative prejudice and the conceptual baggage of various existing approaches.

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# Reading the invisible: The Bora as a narrative framework in urban heritage interpretation

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### Abstract

This paper explores the Bora wind as a narrative framework for interpreting the city of Trieste through an urban walking experience. Rather than treating the Bora only as a meteorological phenomenon, the interpretive approach reads it as a cultural narrative that shapes local identity, everyday practices and ways of relating to place. The city is approached as an open-air museum and archive where the presence of wind can be traced through architectural details, urban forms, objects, habits and collective memory.

A distinctive feature of the experience is that the Bora is usually absent during the walk. This absence becomes interpretively productive, allowing participants to reflect on how narratives persist independently from direct experience and how expectations and cultural frames shape perception. The paper discusses how heritage interpretation can balance scientific accuracy with narrative richness and argues that interpretation can function as a mediating practice that makes invisible narratives visible while supporting critical awareness without reducing emotional engagement.

### Keywords

heritage interpretation, narratives, urban walking, place identity, invisible heritage, Trieste, Bora wind

### Introduction

Narratives play a fundamental role in the way people relate to heritage and place. They provide interpretive frames that influence how environments are perceived, remembered and experienced. Heritage interpretation has increasingly recognised the importance of working with multiple narratives, not only as storytelling devices, but as cultural structures that shape meaning and identity.

This paper presents a case study based on a guided urban walk in the city of Trieste, in north-eastern Italy. The experience focuses on the Bora, a strong and often violent downslope wind that has become one of the most recognisable symbols of the city. While the Bora is a meteorological phenomenon, it also functions as a powerful narrative framework that structures how Trieste is imagined by residents and visitors alike.

The interpretive experience explores how a natural phenomenon becomes embedded in collective memory and local identity and examines how interpretation can reveal narrative structures that normally remain implicit. Rather than presenting a single authoritative account, the walk works with multiple narratives and encourages participants to reflect on how they interpret the place.

### The Bora as cultural narrative

The Bora is a cold and gusty wind that descends from the Karst plateau towards the Gulf of Trieste. Strong episodes can exceed 150 km/h and have historically affected transport, urban life and building practices. Scientific explanations describe it as a katabatic wind driven by pressure differences between the continental interior and the Adriatic coast.

However, the Bora is far more than a physical phenomenon. In Trieste, it has become a defining narrative element. The city is widely known as 'The city of the Bora', and references to the wind appear frequently in local storytelling, tourism promotion, and everyday conversation, as well as in art and literature.

The Bora narrative contributes to a sense of local distinctiveness. It is often associated with ideas of resilience, strength and adaptation. Residents share stories of exceptional gusts and memorable storms, while visitors frequently arrive expecting dramatic weather conditions. In this way, the wind operates not only as a natural force but also as a cultural frame that shapes expectations and perceptions before any direct encounter with the phenomenon.

Narratives of this kind provide coherence and meaning. They help people interpret their surroundings and situate themselves within a shared cultural context. At the same time, they simplify complex realities and can produce stereotypical representations of place that deserve closer examination.

### The city as an open-air archive and museum

The interpretive walk approaches Trieste as both an open-air archive and an open-air museum: a space where the Bora can be read through material traces and artefacts embedded in the urban fabric, and through immaterial ones such as habits, collective memory and local stories. Rather than focusing on monuments or major historical events, participants learn to recognise small and often overlooked details that testify to the long-term presence of wind.

These include architectural adaptations, such as windows with two panes of glass, ropes and handrails installed along exposed streets, fountains with a metal wind barrier, and urban forms shaped by generations of adaptation to strong gusts. Everyday practices also provide evidence: house entrances designed to reduce draughts, habits related to weather conditions, and local expressions referring to the wind.

Participants are encouraged to observe these elements as interpretive clues. The aim is not only to transmit information but to develop a different way of reading the city. Ordinary details become meaningful signs that reveal hidden relationships between natural forces and cultural adaptation.

In this sense, the city functions as a layered text. The Bora is not directly visible during most visits, but its presence becomes perceptible through its effects. Interpretation makes those effects legible.

### Multiple narratives

The interpretive experience intentionally works with several coexisting narratives, none of which is presented as definitive.

One layer is based on scientific knowledge. Participants learn about the meteorological mechanisms that generate the Bora and about the geographical conditions that make Trieste particularly exposed to it.

A second layer consists of local stories and sayings. These include memories of extreme weather events, humorous exaggerations and widely shared anecdotes. Such accounts are not always factually precise, but they play an

important role in shaping collective perception and local attachment.

A third layer is formed by visible and invisible traces in the urban landscape: material signs that connect natural processes with everyday life and long-term adaptation.

Finally, participants bring their own expectations and preconceptions. Many arrive with the idea that the Bora is a constant presence, even though strong wind events occur only intermittently. These expectations are themselves part of the narrative, shaped by reputation, media representation and cultural stereotype.

Interpretation does not attempt to merge these layers into a single coherent story. Instead, it makes their coexistence visible and invites reflection on the different functions each narrative serves.

### The productive absence of the wind

One of the most distinctive features of the experience is that the Bora is usually not blowing during the walk. At first sight, this might appear to be a limitation, since participants cannot directly experience the phenomenon.

In practice, this absence becomes interpretively productive. The lack of wind highlights the gap between physical experience and cultural narrative. Participants discover that the Bora can be recognised even when it is not present: through traces, flag trees, adaptations and memories that remain visible in the urban landscape.

Absence also creates space for reflection. Participants are invited to consider how their expectations influence perception and how narratives persist independently from direct experience. The walk reveals how cultural frames shape the way environments are encountered and interpreted.

In this sense, the absence of the Bora helps to make the narrative itself visible. Rather than a deficit, it becomes a condition for interpretation.

### Balancing facts and narratives

Working with the Bora requires balancing factual accuracy with narrative richness.

Scientific explanations provide an essential foundation. They help participants understand the physical processes involved and prevent the phenomenon from being reduced entirely to myth or stereotype.

At the same time, local stories and symbolic meanings cannot be set aside as irrelevant. Even when they include exaggerations or locally embellished versions of events, they reflect lived experience and emotional attachment to place, and they function as cultural documents.

Interpretation, therefore, aims to contextualise rather than correct non-factual narratives. Participants are encouraged to recognise differences between measurement and perception without invalidating personal or collective memory. Local exaggerations are not presented as errors to be dismissed but as expressions of how the Bora has been absorbed into everyday life and identity. Comparing how the Bora was experienced in the past — its frequency, intensity and role in daily life — with present-day conditions naturally opens a conversation about climate change and the ways in which familiar natural phenomena are themselves shifting.

This approach allows emotional engagement to coexist with critical thinking. Participants can appreciate the cultural significance of the Bora while also developing a more nuanced understanding of its physical reality.

The wearable infographic: Making data tangible
A wearable infographic, the Bora necklace, is occasionally used as an additional interpretive tool during the walk. It is a 'paper jewel' displaying key numerical data about the wind through different colours: speeds and frequency of the wind in a year, presented in a compact visual form. Worn by the interpreter during the walk, it makes otherwise abstract meteorological information immediately visible and easy to consult.

Because it can be handled and examined close up, the object supports a direct and informal exchange with participants. Numerical values that might otherwise remain abstract become anchored in a tangible reference, allowing participants to compare their own expectations about the Bora with measured data. The contrast between the numbers shown by the necklace and the calm conditions experienced during the walk often prompts spontaneous reflection on the distance between narrative and reality.

The wearable format reinforces the idea that interpretation is not limited to verbal communication but can be supported by material devices that connect scientific information with everyday perception. It also introduces a playful dimension that helps maintain engagement and curiosity throughout the walk.

## Interpretation as mediation

The role of the interpreter in this experience is not limited to providing information. Interpretation functions as a mediating practice that reveals relationships between narratives, knowledge and perception.

Rather than presenting a definitive account of the Bora, the interpreter helps participants recognise interpretive frames and become aware of their own assumptions. Questions and observations encourage dialogue and reflection throughout the walk.

This positions interpretation as a process of meaning-making rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge. Participants actively construct understanding by connecting scientific information, urban observation and personal experience.

The interpreter's role here sits closer to that of a facilitator or curator of meaning than a traditional guide. The walk does not end with answers. It ends with participants who have been invited to notice how they read a city, and what stories they brought with them before they arrived.

## Making the invisible visible

The Bora walk demonstrates how heritage interpretation can engage with forms of heritage that are not immediately visible. The wind itself cannot be exhibited in the way objects or buildings can. Yet its presence is deeply embedded in the urban environment and in collective memory.

Interpretation makes these relationships perceptible by guiding attention towards subtle signs and overlooked connections. Participants learn to recognise how environmental forces shape cultural landscapes and local identities over time.

The case also suggests something broader: interpretation can uncover narrative structures that normally remain implicit. By making these structures visible, it helps people understand how places are constructed through stories as much as through physical processes — and how those stories continue to influence the way a city is perceived, remembered and narrated.

## Practical considerations for urban walking interpretation

Urban walking interpretation presents specific design challenges that differ from those of trail-based or countryside experiences. The following considerations are offered for colleagues working with or considering this format, particularly in dense historic city centres.

### Group size and urban dynamics

Small groups of between eight and ten participants work best. In an urban environment, larger groups become difficult to manage at intersections, in narrow streets or in spaces shared with other pedestrians and traffic. A smaller group also allows for the kind of close observation and spontaneous conversation that urban interpretation depends on. The city is not a controlled environment, and the experience gains rather than loses from that fact.

### Route design as interpretive argument

In urban walking interpretation, the route is not simply a path between points of interest: it is itself an interpretive choice. The sequence of spaces, transitions and arrival points should be designed to support the narrative arc. In this experience, moving between open waterfront areas, exposed streets and sheltered alleys creates a direct physical experience of the Bora's uneven geography. The route makes the wind's spatial logic legible without needing to explain it verbally.

### Reading the city rather than describing it

One of the distinctive possibilities of urban interpretation is training participants to observe rather than simply to receive information. Rather than explaining what they are looking at, the interpreter can invite participants to notice something: a detail, a texture, an anomaly, and ask what it might mean. This shift from description to observation changes the quality of engagement considerably.

### Working with what is not there

Urban environments accumulate traces of past uses, adaptations and conditions that are no longer visible or active. In the case of the Bora, the wind is usually absent. But so are many of the practices and social situations it once produced. Interpretation can work productively with these absences by helping participants develop the habit of asking: What was here before? and What does this detail tell us about conditions we can no longer directly experience? Absence, handled well, sharpens attention rather than frustrating it.

### Managing expectations

Visitors often arrive with strong preconceptions about a place; in the case of Trieste, the expectation of dramatic wind is almost universal. Rather than trying to correct these expectations immediately, it is often more productive to acknowledge them openly at the start of the experience and use them as interpretive material. What does it mean that the Bora's reputation is so powerful even when the wind is not blowing? That question, asked early, often generates more genuine reflection than a factual correction would.

### Using objects and portable interpretive tools

In an urban context, where participants are standing in public space rather than around an exhibit, small portable objects can play an important role in focusing attention and anchoring abstract information. The wearable infographic described in this paper is one example. Objects can be passed around, examined at close range and referred to at different points in the walk. They create a physical anchor for information that might otherwise remain intangible.

### Placing interpretive moments

Not every interesting detail along the route needs to become a formal stop. Selecting a small number of key moments, where the urban

environment, the narrative content and the sensory experience converge most powerfully, is more effective than attempting comprehensive coverage. The rest can happen in movement, in conversation, in the act of walking through rather than stopping at, listening to needs and interests from the participants and selecting what to tell or not.

### Silence and pace

Urban environments are noisy and visually demanding. Moments of deliberate slowing down, such as pausing in a sheltered courtyard, standing still to observe a detail, looking without speaking for a moment, can be among the most productive in an urban walking experience. They create a temporary counterpoint to the pace of the city and open space for reflection that the city's ordinary rhythm tends to close.

### Weather as an interpretive resource

In experiences centred on a meteorological phenomenon, actual weather conditions become part of the interpretive material rather than a logistical variable to manage. A cold day, a sudden gust, an unexpectedly still afternoon… each creates a different relationship between participants and the narrative. Rather than treating weather as background, the interpreter can bring it explicitly into the experience: naming it, connecting it to the content, using it as a prompt for reflection. Even a perfectly calm day is interpretively useful, as discussed in this paper.

## Conclusion

The Bora provides a striking example of how narratives shape the relationship between people and place. In Trieste, a meteorological phenomenon has become a central element of local identity, collective memory and cultural expectation.

The urban walking experience described in this paper demonstrates how heritage interpretation can reveal the processes through which natural phenomena become cultural narratives. By working with multiple narrative layers and by treating absence as an interpretive resource, the experience encourages participants to reflect on how they interpret place, and on the frames they carry with them before interpretation even begins.

The case shows how interpretation can hold factual accuracy and narrative richness together without sacrificing either, while maintaining both emotional engagement and critical awareness. It illustrates how interpretation can function as a mediating practice: one that makes invisible narratives visible, and that invites participants to examine their own assumptions about the places they visit.

Working with narratives in this way allows heritage interpretation to move beyond storytelling towards something more open: an exploration of how meaning is created, sustained and sometimes quietly revised.

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# Embodied narratives in heritage interpretation: Walking the stories of the mlekarice

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an interpretive walking experience focused on the mlekarice, the milkmaid women who walked daily from the Karst plateau to the city of Trieste to sell milk until the mid-20th century. The route retraces historical paths between rural villages and the urban market, using walking as both method and interpretive framework. Participants are invited to imagine a milkmaid walking alongside them, reflecting on her work, physical effort, daily rhythms and social position. The experience combines documented historical information with embodied perception and personal reflection. Walking becomes a narrative device that surfaces tensions between invisibility and economic centrality, rural margins and urban identity, collective memory and fragmentary documentation. The paper argues that embodied interpretation can make marginalised histories visible and support critical engagement without romanticising the past; and it offers practical considerations for colleagues designing walking interpretive experiences.

**Keywords**

embodied interpretation, walking interpretation, women's heritage, marginalised narratives, Karst, Trieste, mlekarice

## Introduction

Heritage interpretation often gravitates towards dominant narratives: monuments, major historical events, prominent individuals. Everyday lives and marginalised social groups frequently remain underrepresented, even when they played a significant and structuring role in shaping local economies and identities.

This paper presents an interpretive walking experience centred on the mlekarice, milkmaid women who for generations walked from villages on the Karst plateau to Trieste to sell milk and a few other products like wild herbs. Their activity connected rural production with urban consumption and represented an essential part of the city's food supply. Despite their economic importance, their stories are largely absent from official heritage narratives.

The experience explores how walking can function not only as a means of visiting heritage sites but as a narrative and interpretive framework in its own right. Through bodily engagement, participants are invited to encounter historical experience in a situated and reflective way, not by reconstructing the past theatrically, but by using their own physical presence in the landscape as a starting point for interpretation.

The case addresses the symposium theme of narrative plurality by examining how physical movement through landscape can support the interpretation of marginalised histories and

stimulate reflection on the relationship between heritage, identity and place.

### Historical background: the mlekarice

For generations, women from villages on the Karst plateau walked regularly to Trieste carrying milk. These women, known locally as mlekarice (the Slovenian term for milkmaids), followed paths that connected rural settlements with the urban markets of a city that was, for much of this period, one of the most important ports in central Europe.

The journeys required considerable physical endurance. Milk containers were carried by hand or balanced on the head. The work demanded not only strength but organisational skill: milk had to be delivered fresh, reliably and at the right time, in all seasons and weather conditions.

The mlekarice occupied a complex and often contradictory social position. Economically, they played an essential role in supplying a growing city. Socially, they remained on the margins: associated with rural poverty and manual labour and often separated from their urban customers by language. Many came from Slovenian-speaking rural communities on the Karst and did not speak the language of the city fluently. They sold milk mainly to urban middle-class households, in exchanges marked by clear social and cultural distance. Their presence in the city was highly visible in practical terms, yet their individual stories were rarely documented, and their contribution rarely acknowledged.

Most historical references to the mlekarice come from photographs, local accounts and economic records. Personal testimonies are scarce, which means interpretation must work with fragmentary sources and careful contextual reconstruction: a condition that becomes, as discussed below, part of the interpretive experience itself.

### Walking as an interpretive method

The interpretive experience retraces part of the historical routes between Karst villages and Trieste, descending from the plateau through the landscape and entering the city on foot. Walking is used not simply as a mode of transportation or as a way of covering ground between points of interest. It functions as a narrative structure that shapes the interpretive process from beginning to end.

Distance and physical effort play an important interpretive role. Participants experience the gradual transition from the rural plateau to the urban environment, observing changes in landscape, vegetation, built structures, wood trails and urban streets. The physical experience of movement provides a temporal and sensory dimension that static exhibitions cannot reproduce. Time passes in a way that is felt in the body.

Rather than reconstructing the past in a literal or theatrical way, the experience invites participants to imagine a milkmaid walking alongside them, a specific woman going about her ordinary working day. This imagined presence provides a narrative focus while leaving space for personal interpretation. It is not role play. It is a reflective exercise grounded in physical experience.

Participants are encouraged to reflect on practical aspects of everyday life that become concrete through the act of walking:

- How long would such a journey take, at the pace required to arrive in time for market?
- What would it mean to walk this distance regularly, in all seasons?
- How would summer heat or winter cold and mud change the experience?
- What would it feel like to carry heavy containers by hand or on the head for many kilometres?

- How did they support one another? What kinds of relationships existed among the milkmaids?
- What expectations, hopes or anxieties might accompany entering the city each time?

These questions do not have definitive answers. They function as openings, connecting bodily perception with historical reflection and inviting participants to construct their own understanding rather than receive a fixed interpretation.

Walking, therefore, becomes both a method and a subject of interpretation: the act of moving through space reveals the significance of mobility in the lives of the mlekarice and makes that significance liveable rather than merely legible.

### Marginalised narratives and the limits of documentation

The mlekarice represent what might be called marginalised narratives within the heritage of Trieste. They were neither political leaders nor cultural figures, and they left limited written records. Their historical presence survives mainly through indirect evidence, visual documentation and collective memory, and even that memory is partial, filtered through the perspectives of those who observed them rather than those who lived their experience.

Interpreting such stories requires particular care. The absence of detailed documentation creates a genuine risk of romanticising or sentimentalising the past, projecting contemporary values onto lives that were shaped by very different conditions. At the same time, avoiding interpretation altogether would perpetuate invisibility. The decision not to interpret is also a choice, one that tends to favour already-documented, already-celebrated narratives.

The interpretive approach adopted here addresses this tension directly. Historical facts are clearly distinguished from interpretive reconstruction. Participants understand not only what is known but what remains uncertain, contested or simply absent from the record. Working with gaps honestly becomes part of the experience.

The experience highlights several narrative tensions that are presented as productive rather than resolved:

- Visibility versus invisibility: the mlekarice were a constant presence in the city, yet they left almost no trace in its official memory
- Economic centrality versus social marginality: essential to the urban food supply, yet situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy
- Rural margin versus urban identity: their daily journeys connected two worlds that rarely acknowledged their mutual dependence
- Collective memory versus historical documentation: are what people remember and what the archive records the same thing?
- Cultural and linguistic distance: their encounters with urban customers involved not only an exchange of goods but a negotiation across social and linguistic boundaries

These tensions are not resolved into a single narrative. They remain open, as interpretive questions rather than as conclusions.

### Embodied imagination

A central element of the experience is the invitation to walk in the footsteps of the milkmaid women. This imaginative exercise is grounded in real physical experience.

Participants are not asked to role-play or simulate historical characters. Instead, they are

encouraged to use their own bodily sensations – the rhythm of movement, the effort of a slope, the weight of a bag, the change in temperature as the landscape opens – as a starting point for reflection. The body becomes an interpretive instrument.

This works through small, concrete interpretive prompts rather than big narrative gestures:

- noticing the physical effort of a descent or a climb
- observing a resting place and considering why it was placed there
- feeling the transition between open plateau and enclosed urban streets
- paying attention to the moment when the city and the sea first become visible

These elements help participants connect historical information with personal, present-tense experience. The milkmaid walking alongside them is not a ghost or a theatrical figure. She is a thinking device, a way of keeping a real human life in mind while moving through a landscape that was once part of her daily routine.

Embodied imagination of this kind supports a form of interpretation that is experiential without being immersive in the theatrical sense. The aim is not to recreate the past but to create conditions for reflection on historical experience, conditions in which emotional engagement and critical thinking can coexist rather than compete.

### Interpretation as dialogue

The interpretive experience is structured as a dialogic process rather than a linear narrative. Participants' reflections and questions are not interruptions to interpretation; they are part of it.

Discussion often emerges spontaneously around themes that the historical material opens but does not contain:

- gender and the organisation of work
- invisible labour and its relationship to visible wealth
- rural-urban relationships and economic dependency, foodscapes
- migration, mobility and belonging
- everyday resilience under difficult conditions

Participants frequently draw parallels between the historical experiences of the mlekarice and patterns recognisable in contemporary life. These connections are not imposed by the interpreter but arise from the interpretive setting, from the combination of physical movement, historical material and open questions.

Interpretation functions here as a mediation between historical knowledge and present-day experience. The guide's role is not to deliver a fixed narrative but to support reflection while maintaining historical grounding: to be, in the language of the call, less an interpreter in the traditional sense and more a facilitator of meaning.

### Whose stories shape a city?

The experience raises a central interpretive question, introduced early in the walk: Whose stories shape a city?

Urban identity is typically constructed through prominent buildings, famous individuals and major historical events. The mlekarice offer a different perspective: the city as a place sustained by everyday labour, invisible networks and repeated movements between centre and periphery.

Retracing the historical routes makes these connections physically present. The city appears

not as an isolated entity but as part of a wider landscape shaped by movement, exchange and dependency. The market square where the walk ends, once a site of daily commerce and social negotiation, becomes readable as a place formed by many kinds of work, most of them unrecorded.

Participants are invited to reflect on how heritage narratives influence the perception of place, and on which stories are systematically absent. Walking reveals that urban identity is not only built through monumental history but also through repeated everyday practices, practices that connected people and places in ways that rarely found their way into the archive.

## Practical considerations for walking interpretive experiences

Walking interpretation is a distinctive practice that requires specific design choices. The following considerations are offered for colleagues working with or considering this format.

### Group size and pace

Small groups of between eight and ten participants work best for this kind of experience. Larger groups make dialogue difficult and disrupt the rhythm of movement. Pace should allow for conversation without becoming a formal stop-and-start lecture. Some of the most valuable interpretive moments happen while walking, not at designated stopping points.

### Route design and interpretive structure

The route itself is an interpretive argument. The sequence of landscapes, transitions and arrival points should be chosen to support the narrative arc rather than simply to cover distance efficiently. In this experience, the gradual descent from the open plateau to the enclosed city streets mirrors and reinforces the narrative of transition: from rural to urban, from periphery to centre.

### Placing interpretive moments

Not every interesting point along the route needs to become a formal stop. Overloading the walk with information undermines both the physical experience and the interpretive engagement. Select a small number of key moments where the landscape, the historical content and the embodied experience converge most powerfully. Let the rest happen in movement. Be open to acknowledging participants' insights and needs and adapt the content accordingly.

### Silence and pause as interpretive tools

Moments of deliberate silence, for example, looking at a view, observing a detail, or pausing at a threshold, can be among the most productive in a walking experience. They create space for personal reflection that verbal interpretation alone cannot provide.

### Managing variable conditions

Weather, seasonal changes and unexpected circumstances are not problems to be avoided but interpretive resources to be used. A cold or wet day becomes an opportunity to reflect on working conditions. Mud on the path, heat in summer, the first autumn chill… all of these connect participants more directly to the material reality of the lives being interpreted.

### Introducing embodied imagination without forcing it

The invitation to imagine the milkmaid walking alongside the group works best when it is introduced quietly, as a suggestion rather than an exercise. Not all participants will engage with it in the same way, and that is entirely appropriate. The aim is to open a possibility for engagement, not to produce a uniform emotional response.

### Managing emotional engagement

Stories of hardship and marginalisation can produce strong emotional responses. The interpreter's role is not to manage or contain those responses but to ensure that emotional engagement remains connected to reflection rather than replacing it. Acknowledging difficulty honestly, without dramatising it, tends to produce more sustained engagement than either sentimentalism or detachment.

### Ending the experience

Where a walking experience ends matters as much as where it begins. In this case, arriving in the city market square provides a natural conclusion that connects the physical journey with the historical narrative. A few minutes of open conversation at the end, rather than a formal summary, tends to be more productive, allowing participants to articulate what has stayed with them and feel invited to share their thoughts.

## Discussion

This case suggests several implications for heritage interpretation more broadly.

Walking can function as a narrative framework rather than simply as a method of covering ground. Movement through space structures the interpretive experience and gives abstract historical content a physical dimension that supports understanding and memory.

Embodied interpretation can make marginalised histories more accessible and more present without relying on theatrical reconstruction or sentimentalisation. The body of the participant, in the present, in the landscape, becomes the interpretive instrument.

Interpretation can hold multiple, and sometimes contradictory, narratives without forcing a resolution. The tensions in the story of the mlekarice are not problems to be solved. They are the substance of interpretation.

Working honestly with the limits of documentation, acknowledging what is unknown or unrecorded, is not a weakness but an interpretive resource. It places participants in a more active and more honest relationship with the past.

These elements align with current interpretive approaches that emphasise participation, dialogue and personal meaning-making, and they suggest that walking interpretation is particularly well suited to histories that are embodied, marginal and spatially situated.

## Conclusion

The interpretive walking experience centred on the mlekarice demonstrates how embodied narratives can make marginalised histories visible, present and meaningful.

Walking provides a structure that connects landscape, historical knowledge and personal perception. The experience reveals how everyday labour shaped the relationship between the Karst plateau and the city of Trieste, a relationship that official heritage narratives have largely left unexamined.

Rather than reconstructing the past, the interpretive walking approach creates conditions for reflection on historical experience and contemporary identity. Participants leave not with a single story but with a set of open questions that the landscape, the physical effort and the imagined presence of the mlekarice have helped to make real.

If walking changes the story, it also changes the way participants relate to heritage, and perhaps to the invisible labour that continues to shape the cities and landscapes they inhabit.

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# Narratives in place: From telling stories to inviting relationship


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**Erica Wheeler** is the founder of Sense of Place Consulting and an interpretive specialist, trainer, and keynote speaker whose work focuses on sense of place, storytelling, and meaning-making. For more than two decades, she has worked with sites across the United States, including training for dozens of National Park Service sites, as well as with a wide range of natural, cultural, and heritage organisations.

Her approach supports interpreters in designing experiences that invite visitors to arrive fully, notice where they are, ask questions, and form deeper relationships with the places they encounter. Through her training, Sense of Place and the Art of Interpretation, she works with interpreters, planners, and managers to design interpretation that supports reflection, integration, and meaningful connection with place.

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### Abstract

This paper explores a sense-of-place approach to heritage interpretation that begins not only with the stories a site holds, but with the relationships people may form with a place and the experiences that can help those connections begin.

Drawing on Erica Wheeler's Sense of Place and Story Method, this paper considers how interpretive design can invite visitors to arrive, notice their surroundings, ask questions, and begin forming meaning in relationship with place.

In this view, sense of place forms through the interaction of experience and knowledge, supported by opportunities for reflection and integration. Interpretation helps create the conditions in which meaning can emerge, rather than presenting meaning as something fully formed.

A case study from Fort Stanwix National Monument in Rome, New York, USA, illustrates how this perspective can inform interpretive design in practice, including how it can open space for multiple narratives to be encountered without requiring immediate resolution.

The method is offered as both a practical framework and a shift in orientation, asking not only what should be said in interpretation, but what kind of encounter is needed in a particular place, event, or story.



### Keywords

sense of place, heritage interpretation, meaning-making, relationship to place, interpretive design, multiple narratives


### Introduction

Across the symposium, I heard people in the field of heritage interpretation asking thoughtful and timely questions. How do we work more openly with layered histories, multiple perspectives, and stories that do not sit neatly together? How do we move beyond single narratives and fixed messages without losing clarity, rigour, or purpose?

These are important questions for a field that continues to grow.

Listening to the presentations and conversations, I also heard a deeper question: In what ways can theme-driven interpretation expand to include additional ways of helping people engage with place?

This paper offers one response to that question.

The ideas shared here are not separate from the aims that interpretation has long held. Rather, they reflect one way of working intentionally with how people come to know and care about places.

What I describe here is my sense-of-place approach to interpretation, which focuses on how those connections are formed in practice, beginning not only with the stories a site holds and the knowledge people can gain, but with the experiences that help visitors enter a place and begin forming their own relationship with it.

### What I mean by sense of place

I define sense of place as a meaning-making process. It forms at the intersection of experience and knowledge—what a person already knows, carries, or notices, and what experiences and knowledge they gain while visiting.

I use the word place in an expanded sense to include not only landscapes, but also objects, events, and experiences understood in relation to time, setting, and context. An object, for example, can be part of a place story when it is shared in the context of who owned it, where it was made, how it travelled, and what lives and histories it touched.

In that way, anything set meaningfully within time and place can help people connect to where they are. In this frame, the resource being shared—a pocket watch, a watershed, an event, a story—can become a door into gaining a sense of place.

### Gaining a sense of place

In this framework, a sense of place forms when experience and knowledge intersect inside a person. It forms when visitors are not simply moving from one idea to the next, but when opportunities are offered for reflection and integration. That is when insights can emerge, connections are made, and meaning can form.

It is within that integration of knowledge and experience that an individual's sense of place takes shape.

So, a sense of place is not something we give someone; it is something that begins within the individual. We can only create the conditions in which those encounters may occur.

### Sensing, sleuthing, and story-making

In my training work and personal experience, I have noticed that people often deepen their relationship with a place through three interconnected movements: sensing, sleuthing, and story.

Sensing — Creating an invitation for a visitor to arrive and notice where they are: the lay of the land, the atmosphere, the colours, the textures, the feeling of being there.
Sleuthing/ Inquiry — Offering openings for visitors to become curious and investigate how a place came to be what it is, who has moved through it, and what layers of time and meaning it holds.
Story/ Meaning-making — Providing opportunities for reflection and integration so that sensing and knowing begin to intersect. This is where meaning is formed. From meaning, connection and caring can grow.

These are not steps to be followed in order. They are doors, and which one opens first depends on the place and the story. Like any craft, knowing the doors is only the beginning. Learning when to open them, and how, is where the real work lives.

### From place knowledge to place relationship

Interpretation often begins with a question about story: What should we tell here?

An alternative place to begin is with the place itself.

Before deciding what narrative to construct, we might spend time experiencing a place directly—sensing it, sitting with it, noticing what is immediately present and what is not yet understood. This kind of attention can shape how interpretation develops.

From that starting point, interpretive work becomes less about delivering a story and more about considering what kind of encounter might help people enter a place more fully. Through that encounter, visitors may begin to notice layers, ask questions, and gradually form their own relationship with the place.

This way of beginning can be particularly helpful in places where histories are layered, contested, or difficult to enter directly. Starting with an encounter does not soften those histories. Instead, it allows visitors to arrive fully and be more present before they are asked to hold complexity.

A sense-of-place approach offers a different starting place for programme design, one that begins with the layers of experiences and histories a place holds from past to present.

When the place itself becomes the container for complexity, interpreters do not have to rush to resolve that complexity into a single message. They can help visitors enter it, notice what the place holds, and begin forming their own relationship with it.

The Sense of Place and Story Method is not a formula to be overlaid on every place, but rather a set of tools and a structure through which a different kind of programme can emerge. It creates more room for layered histories, multiple perspectives, and emerging meanings to be encountered more openly.

When we ask not only, What stories should we tell? but also, What kinds of experiences might invite visitors into this place?, interpretation can support not only knowledge about place, but opportunities to build connection and, ultimately, relationship with that place.

### Finding a way in

Interpreters often struggle with how to make their topic relevant to visitors. Sometimes people arrive with previous knowledge or enthusiasm to learn more. Sometimes they come open to whatever you have to share.

But many people arrive unsure what a site may have to offer, and it is our role to help them discover what is there. Unless it is a visitor's topic of special interest, information about that topic may not be every visitor's first opening or way in.

If someone does not come as a specialist or enthusiast for the topic being interpreted, our role is to help open the place in another way and help them discover why it matters.

One way for this to happen is by beginning with connection to the place itself.

### Case study: Fort Stanwix

In my symposium talk, I shared brief insights from work with a site in central New York State. Fort Stanwix National Monument, located in Rome, New York, USA, provides one example of how this approach can take shape in practice.

The site stands near the historic Oneida Carry portage site, a land passage linking major waterways and providing access to the interior of the continent. The reconstructed fort that stands there today is only one layer of the stories that place holds.

It also holds the presence of Indigenous nations who lived there long before the fort existed and

who still live in the surrounding region. It holds stories of colonial diplomacy, military strategy, Revolutionary conflict, and contemporary community meaning.

It is a place shaped by the lie of the land itself, and by the layers of histories, changing allegiances, and contested ground it holds.

### Gaining a sense of place

I often begin finding my own sense of place by simply walking the grounds, or even looking at collections, without knowing anything about them—just experiencing them and getting my own sense of the place. My own first connection with the fort site began not with learning the history, but with connecting to the place itself.

At Fort Stanwix, I started by walking around the grounds. I headed out to the bastion and stood there in the summer wind under a heavy, about-to-rain sky. I paid attention to the feel of the air, the lie of the land, the shape of the fort, and the surrounding landscape. I thought about the place, the setting, and the people who had been there throughout time. After that, I felt grounded and ready for more, including learning about the history.

Later, during the training, I invited the staff to do the same—to move through the senses and share what they noticed. I had also asked a ranger to find and bring a written account from someone stationed there during the same time of year centuries earlier. After the sensory practice, the primary resource from the past was read aloud. In that moment, past and present met, and a sense of the place through time was gained.

What had begun as a simple sensory exercise shifted the atmosphere of the room. Staff were no longer speaking about the fort only through dates and events, but through what it felt like to stand there in summer weather, much like the person who had written the account centuries earlier. The place itself had entered the conversation.

The sensory practice above—slowing down, tapping into the senses, and feeling past and present meet—can open a door, in that it helps people simply arrive and be open to learning more.

Moments like this can shift how people begin to understand a site. When we take time to notice where we are, the place is no longer just the setting for the story. It becomes something to know more fully, connect with more deeply, and learn more about.

### The lie of the land

"If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are." — Wendell Berry

So often in our world today, we may not have access to knowing where we are simply by looking at what lies on the surface. At Fort Stanwix, what is not evident just from standing there and observing your surroundings is knowing where you actually are.

The reconstructed fort stands in the middle of the city, and although it is connected to the story of the Oneida Carry, there is no view of the river or the trees that make up that watershed. It is only through learning that you can come to understand what is not visible at first.

Interpretive programmes and media help reveal more about where people are, so that visitors can begin to see more fully the lie of the land and how it has been used and valued over time. From there, deeper connection and meaning can unfold.

Through the maps, timelines, artefacts, and stories that the site shares, pieces of the puzzle can start to come together, bringing insights

and connections to where you are. By following their curiosities and interests, visitors may also gain insight into who they are through the stories that draw their attention and the meanings that begin to emerge within them.

Interpretation is essential for helping people see more and consider what a place really is by inviting them to connect their own experience with stories that may have been erased, overlooked, or are not immediately visible.

### Site outcomes: Telling deeper and wider stories

One outcome from the training was the development of stories that had not yet been told in that way. One ranger developed a programme foregrounding women who had inhabited the fort. In doing so, she added a layer that had not previously been interpreted there in that form.

What emerged was not a replacement narrative, but a widening of the interpretive field. The fort still held its military and political history, but it also held the lived experiences of the many people who passed through it. The site did not become focused only on women at the fort. Rather, the inclusion of additional stories that the site already held allowed deeper connections and expanded opportunities for more people to find their own point of connection.

By allowing the place itself to hold these layers, interpreters could invite visitors to encounter a fuller picture of the past without forcing those stories into a single frame. Visitors could encounter multiple stories not as competing interpretations to be resolved, but as parts of a larger reality held by the same place.

### Conclusion: From telling stories to making invitations

A sense-of-place approach is not about replacing narrative work. It strengthens it. The rigour and research needed to share fuller stories as part of our interpretive responsibility remain essential.

What changes is how we help people develop connections with place. The attention shifts from what we want them to know toward understanding how people enter into connection with a place and begin forming meaning there.

In that way, interpretation is not only about what we say or how, but about the conditions we create for meaning to emerge.

I would like to leave readers with this inquiry: What has helped you connect with a place that matters to you? What was part of that process of connection? And how might that insight change the way you design interpretation for others?

When we recognise that interpretation is not just sharing stories or giving meaning, but the art of designing experiences that show people doors to their own connections, we help people not just know about a place, but form a relationship with a place that lasts and matters.

This paper is offered in the spirit of the conversations the symposium began. I would welcome continued exchange with colleagues across the field who are working toward helping people form deeper relationships with the places they interpret, steward, and share.

# A new narrative for the interpretation of archaeological heritage: Family histories through digital photo archives at Tell Tayinat in Antakya, Turkey


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### Abstract

Archaeological heritage is one of the hardest subjects to interpret. Their multi-layered context presents interwoven stories but the thousands of years of separation from today's societies challenges narrative interpretations, making their stewardship incomprehensible. This paper focuses on a socio-cultural association generated through the interaction of archaeological research. Early 20th-century photographs from archaeological sites provide a source documenting people as well as finds. This new narrative for co-creation and association through a social history of former and present workers at Tell Tayinat from the surrounding villages, utilises the University of Chicago ISAC digital archive of the 1930s expeditions. The individual and family (hi)stories produced could become a frame that provides the connection and stewardship of surrounding communities. The content of the archive photographs also opens other themes of research and narrative, focusing on different areas of archaeological research history and methodology as well as intangible heritage practices such as social order, festivities, building, dressing, health, cooking and farming.



### Keywords

Antakya, Tayinat, heritage, interpretation, narrative, archives


### 1. Introduction

Archaeological heritage is one of the hardest subjects to interpret. The multi-layered contexts of sites present interwoven stories but the thousands of years of separation from today's societies challenges narrative interpretations and often render their stewardship incomprehensible or obsolete:

> "But few, probably none of them, understand why these American Effendis come so far and enthusiastically engage in such apparently senseless activity. From the native point of view, it is patently absurd to be so interested in the fragments of a shattered pot, when one can buy nice new green-glazed jars in the local suk. Why should this Effendi photograph, and another one draw, the four walls of a mud brick house which collapsed only Allah knows how many years ago?" (Anon. 1937: 7)

The fascination of those living locally to this excavation site, as to why so much money and

time was spent on what they saw as such pointless activity in 1937, still exists unless materially valuable treasures are uncovered. It is also a marvel for the local communities because they almost never consider themselves related to the people, whose settlements are being excavated and investigated. Especially in Anatolia and the Middle East, where population movement and resettlement were constant through history; most communities consider themselves unrelated to earlier peoples. Identification with later monotheistic and organised religions make such relationships even more inconceivable.

One of the most important problems of every archaeological expedition is how to formulate a connection between the cultural heritage site and the local community who should be responsible for it, and how such communities could benefit from the cultural heritage. This may be achieved by establishing a connection between the tangible and intangible values obtained from the archaeological site and the communities involved and making this relationship visible both during and after the excavation processes. The team would like to address some of the questions provided for the Interpret Europe online symposium, The role of narratives in 21st century heritage interpretation:

- How can narratives shape collective memory, identity, and belonging?
- How can narratives contribute to a conscious and responsible shaping of our common future?
- How can people become aware of their own narratives?
- How do we manage power imbalances when co-creating interpretive strategies and plans (between institutions and communities, experts and locals, dominant and marginal voices, …)?
- How can we teach critical thinking within interpretive experiences without diminishing emotional engagement?
- How can we design interpretive experiences that reveal, rather than hide, the existence of multiple narratives?

This paper proposes a socio-cultural association generated through the interaction of past archaeological research as a stepping stone. 1930s photographs classified as the Tell Tayinat collection under the Syrian Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures West Asia and North Africa (ISAC) digital archive, provides a source documenting people as well as finds.

This new narrative for co-creation and association through a social history of former and present workers at Tayinat from the surrounding villages have the potential to produce individual and family (hi)stories, and thus, a frame that provides connection and stewardship of surrounding communities. The archive photographs also document intangible cultural heritage practices, which could be investigated to draw connections between the 1930s and the present as well as relating these values to the ancient people and practices.

This narrative also has the potential to contribute to the history of archaeological research in the Near East. The Syrian Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute, the work carried out on the mounds on the Amuq Plain, Tell al-Judeideh/ al-Judaidah, Chatalhüyük/ Çatalhöyük and Tell Tayinat, between 1931 and 1938 with the permission of the French Mandate in Syria, until Hatay Province was united with Türkiye in 1938-39, was never documented in detail. The period publications were summaries, and the more detailed publications were made years later through the 1950s to 1970s and subsequently in the 2010s. Although "the

processing of the materials for publication" began in Chicago, following the return of the team in 1938 according to Robert J. and Linda S. Braidwood (1960: vii), World War II and the early death of Calvin Wells McEwan, the director of the Syrian Hittite Expedition, on 12 January 1950 in Pittsburgh according to his obituary, delayed the work.

## 2. Tell Tayinat on the Amuq Plain

Tell Tayinat is a large mound located on the Plain of Antioch or Amuq, on the River Orontes in the province of Hatay in southern Turkey. It is on the crossroads between the Mediterranean and Cilicia to the west and north, Mesopotamia to the east, central Anatolia to the north and the Levantine shore to the south (Denel & Harrison 2018; Figures 1a and 1b). This fertile area has been home to various civilizations since the beginning of first human settlements. The Syrian Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute identified 178 mounds on the plain (Braidwood 1937) with a dating range between Tell Halaf (c. 6500 BCE) and Medieval Arab. Tayinat was one of the mounds studied and excavated over several seasons with Tell Judeideh and Chatalhöyük.

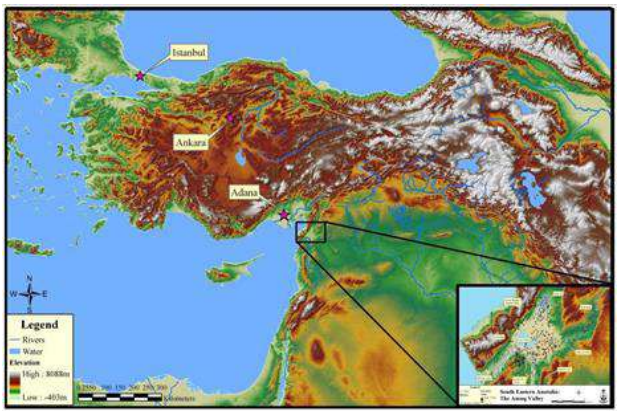


**Figure 1a. The location of the North Orontes Valley and Plain of Antioch/ Amuq**

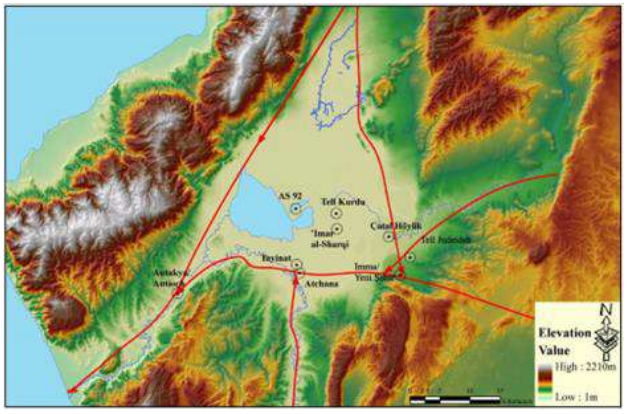


**Figure 1b. The principal transit routes through the Plain of Antioch/ Amuq with locations of identified archaeological sites including Tayinat (Images: Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP))**

Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP) continues research on Tell Tayinat since 2004, following a gap of 67 years. The upper mound, approx. 20 ha, contains the royal and public centre of the settlement in the Iron Age. The lower settlement, where the common people lived, comprises another 20 ha. Occupation levels extending back to the Early Bronze Age at least to the 3rd millennium BCE (Amuq Phases H, I, and J, according to Braidwood & Braidwood 1960: 13-14) also present substantial occupation from the Iron Age I-III periods or 12th to 6th centuries BCE (Amuq Phases N and O; Swift 1958: 58, Ünlü 2017: 602 n. 2, Haines 1971: 1-2; Figures 2a and 2b).

There is an occupational gap of c. 800 years in the 2nd millennium BCE corresponding to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. This period of abandonment has been shown to coincide with the emergence of Tell Atchana as ancient Alalakh, royal city of the Kingdom of Mukish, located 750 m to the southeast (Yener 2013: 11-24). These sister settlements maintained a strategic position at the intersection of interregional communication and transportation routes throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages (Denel & Harrison 2018).

In addition to the finds of the 1930s excavations, which included several post bases (McEwan

1937; Haines 1971), a double-lion base at Temple II (McEwan 1937) and fragments of the so-called colossus (Haines 1971: 60-61), TAP finds have redefined the architectural style and characteristics of Iron Age architecture in the region.

A 9th century BCE sitting lion, upper part of the statue of King Suppiluliuma and a purposefully destroyed statue of a woman, nicknamed the Lady of Tayinat, as well as several statue bases, most of which are basalt, and the Esarhaddon Tablet, a treaty or oath dated to 672 BCE, are among the important finds of the current expedition (Denel & Harrison 2018; Figures 3a and 3b). The site and its substantial architecture have been identified as Kunulua, the capital of the Pattina/ Unqi kingdom, dated to the mid-9th – late/ mid 8th centuries BCE, and following its subjugation in 738 BCE as the Neo-Assyrian centre of the province of Kinalia, dated to the mid/ late 8th – 7th centuries BCE (Denel & Harrison 2018).

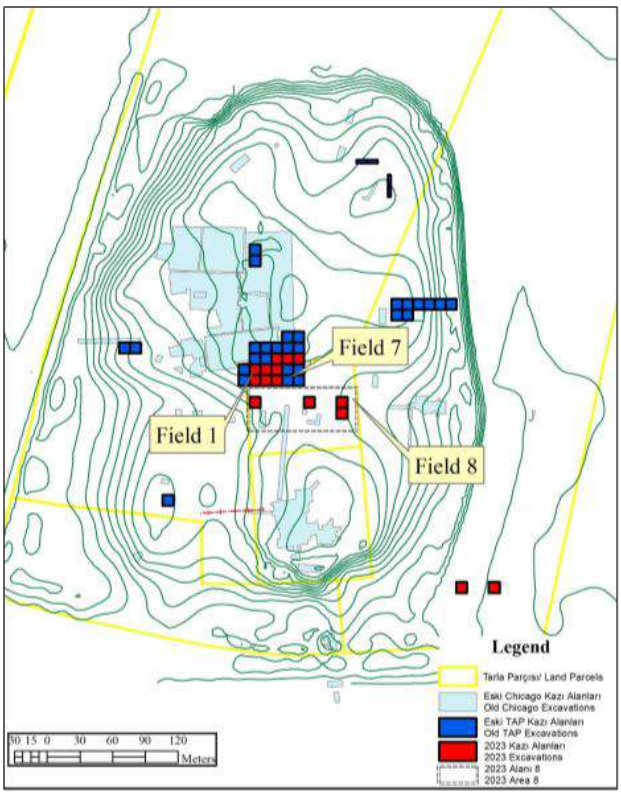


**Figure 2a. Plan of Tell Tayinat showing the Syrian-Hittite Expedition and TAP excavation areas**

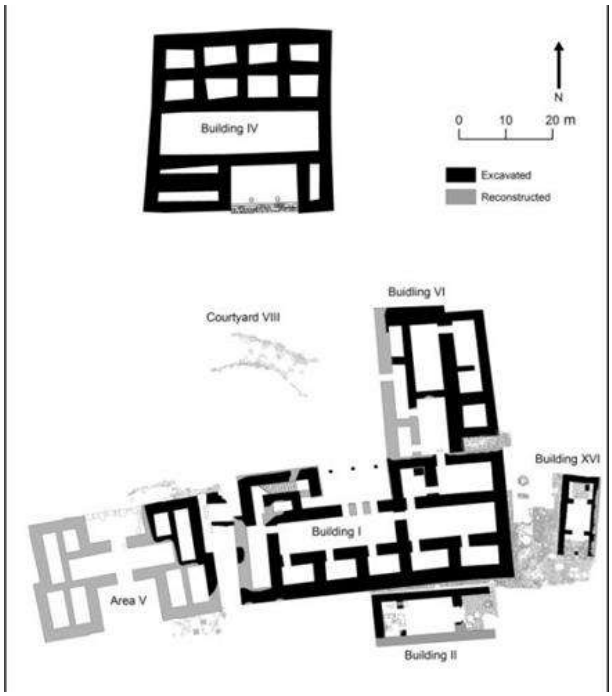


**Figure 2b. Iron Age (1st millennium BCE) buildings on the central part of Tayinat, Building XVI has been uncovered by the current expedition**
**(Images: Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP))**

**Figure 3a. TAP expedition, uncovering the statute of King Suppiluliuma in 2012**
**(Image: Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP))**

Figure 3b. Various finds: A 9th century BCE sitting lion (top left), the statue of King Suppiluliuma (bottom left), a purposefully destroyed statue of a woman, the Lady of Tayinat (bottom right) and the Esarhaddon Tablet, a treaty or oath dated to 672 BCE (top right). (Images: Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP))

### 3. The Syrian-Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1931-38

Following a letter by Emil Forrer to James Breasted, the director of the Oriental Institute, concerning the possible importance of Chatalhüyük, the Syrian Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute began under director Richard Martin in November 1931. However, Breasted was not satisfied with the results and appointed a new director, Claude Prost, the inspector of antiquities of the Sandjak of Alexandretta. The work at Chatalhüyük resumed operations on 12 January 1933. Then, beginning from 31 August 1933, Calvin Wells McEwan became the director (Pucci 2019: 1-2). However, Braidwood (1937: 1, 4, 33) stated that the Syrian Expedition of the Oriental Institute in the Plain of Antioch in North Syria began in summer 1933 under the direction of Calvin Wells McEwan as an archaeological survey. By the time Braidwood's book was published in 1937, three mounds on the plain had been excavated: Work at Chatalhüyük and Tell al-Judeideh were completed while the excavations on Tell Tayinat were continuing.

In their later publication R. J. and L. S. Braidwood (1960: vii) mentioned that according to James Henry Breasted's account in his The Oriental Institute (1933), the Syrian-Hittite Expedition of the Oriental Institute was directed by Richard A. Martin (1931-32) and Claude Prost (1932-33) before the arrival of its "first full director" C. W. McEwan in September 1933. This account indicates that the Robert J. Braidwood joined the expedition with McEwan and was not fully aware of its past. The team members were Richard C. Haines (1932-36; architect), M. and Mme. A. Walter (1932-34), Robert J. Braidwood (1933-38; archaeologist), Arthur E. Pierson (1933-36; photographer), William Henry Noble (1933-35), Elizabeth McEwan (1934-38), John Dennison (1935-36), Linda S. Braidwood (1937-38) and Abdulla Said Osman al Sudani (1932-38; foreman). The professional roles in parentheses were defined in an article by C. W. McEwan (1937).

The team was enlarged in the spring months of 1934, 1935 and 1936 by members of the Iraq Expedition of the Oriental Institute: Hamilton D. Darby, Harold D. Hill, Thorkild and Rigmor Jacobsen and Seton Lloyd. Harold D. Hill was also an architect as his "preliminary work" and "many excellent finished drawings … of the excavations at Tell Tayinat" were mentioned by Richard C. Haines (1971: v). The unpublished material in the Oriental Institute Museum Archives, classified and listed by Pucci (2019: Appendix 4, 319-327) will provide more detailed information on the Tayinat team and expedition.

McEwan reported having identified several basalt stones at Tell Tayinat in 1935 (letter dated

2 January 1935 at Oriental Institute Museum Archives, box F, file 1-58). Upon investigation they also discovered "a lintel of a double doorway, in place" and "on top of the mound turned up by clandestine digging … a huge column base" (Figure 4a). They also learned that a sculpture was sold by one of the villagers "to the Marcopoli family in Aleppo" and of "another sculpture, a bas-relief that Prost described to [McEwan] as a char de combat magnifique" (Pucci 2019: 2-3). Haines (1971: 37) reported that in addition to "one large base … found by local men digging in the highest part of the mound" (ISAC DPA 6-T and Figure 4a), there were two more bases "flanking the doorway of a village house" (ISAC DPA 9-T).

**Figure 4a and 4b. The large base "found by local men digging in the highest part of the mound" (Haines 1971: 37; ISAC DPA Tayinat 5-T; top) and the view of the site, Tell Tayinat, from the west-southwest with Tayinat village (ISAC DPA Tayinat 3-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

McEwan requested an excavation permit for Tayinat to find "the Syro-Hittite palace" (Pucci 2019: 3). The field work at Tayinat comprised of "a fifteen-day test dig" in spring 1935 and ten weeks in 1936 (McEwan 1937). The work continued in the 1937-1938 season as illustrated by the photo archive and explained by Haines (1971: 37), also extending to Tayinat al-Saghir, a small mound on the south side of the main road (Figures 5a and 5b).

Meanwhile, excavations were continuing on Chatalhüyük from 1933 to 1936 (Haines 1971: 3) and at al-Judeideh following a topographical survey in 1931-32, from 1934 to 1935 (Haines 1971: 26), which were both located near Reyhanlı on the east of the Amuq Plain.

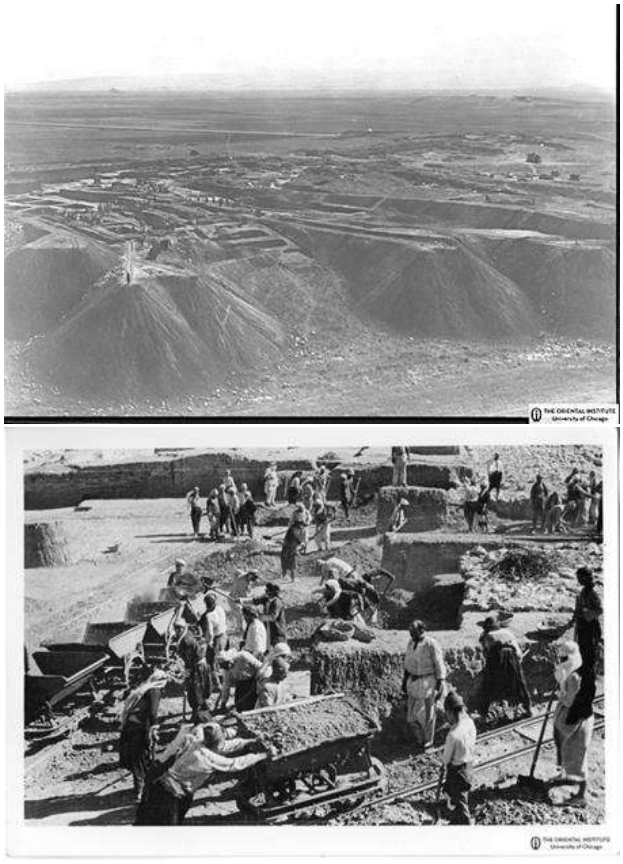

**Figure 5a and 5b. Aerial view of the excavations at the end of the 1937 season (ISAC DPA Tayinat 884-T; identified by Haines 1971: Plate 92; top) and view of the excavation work (ISAC DPA Tayinat 521-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

In 1935-36, the excavations uncovered the Iron Age structures, Building II, a megaron temple, and Building I, the Bit Hilani (McEwan 1937: 9, 11, 13). The double-lion base was in-situ in the front porch of the temple, and three decorated bases were in-situ at the entrance porch of the Hilani. The Hilani seemed to have no direct entrance at the ground floor level but a staircase leading to an upper level. Its construction was similar to the Lower Palace at Senjirli/ Zincirli with "wooden beams placed longitudinally along the porch face of the wall and bricks laid behind, then transverse beams set at regular intervals, usually penetrating the wall from 80 to 100 centimetres, [and] the spaces between filled with bricks, and another course of longitudinal beams placed on top".

The wall, thus, comprised of a timber structure infilled with mudbricks. The construction materials and technology of Building I is described in greater detail in Haines (1971: 44-53). The north side of the U-shaped complex and courtyard, Buildings IV and XIII, were excavated in 1937 (Haines 1971: 38) while the excavation of Building II was completed the same year (Haines 1971: 53). An experimental archaeology project was also carried out probably in the 1937-1938 season, following the completion of the excavation of Building II (Haines 1971: Footnote 15, 51-52 and Plate 91); this will be discussed in more detail below.

Men were employed in excavation and women were employed for lighter work like washing the sherds (Figures 5b and 6a). At other sites, for example in al-Judeideh, women did heavier work such as carrying earth to dump carts (Anon. 1937: 7). Women were paid themselves rather than their payments being made to the men in their family (Figure 6b). These images, thus, provide indirect information on social order and gender issues. Youngsters were also involved in the work, such as putting sherds together in the workshop (Figure 7a).

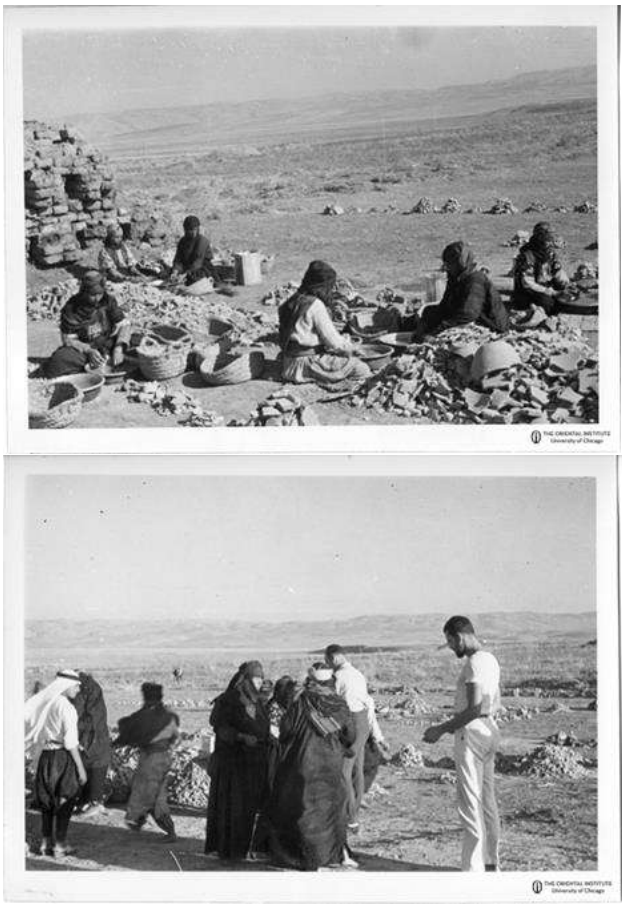

**Figure 6a and 6b. Women washing sherds at the site (ISAC DPA Tayinat 512-T; top) and women being paid their wages on pay-day (ISAC DPA Tayinat 505-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

The connection between the research team and the workers was not limited to the field. There are images of people with the uncovered ruins, including those who were not employed, like children who were curiously visiting where their parents worked (Figure 7b). Photography was not accessible for the local people at the time, and the team cordially, and perhaps for anthropological research, took pictures of families, babies, daily life, leisure time and community events, some of which are discussed below.

**Figure 7a and 7b. A youngster working on the sherds in the reed ceramics workshop (ISAC DPA Tayinat 978-T; top) and a child from the village visiting the site in one of the completed trenches (ISAC DPA Tayinat 907-T; bottom). (Images@ ISAC)**

## 4. Narratives for/ about the Tell Tayinat Expedition of the Oriental Institute, 1935-38

The 1964 International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, generally known as the Venice Charter, which was adopted by ICOMOS in 1965, already referred to "facilitating the understanding of the monument [cultural heritage] and revealing it without ever distorting its meaning" in Article 15 on Excavations. In its Introduction it referred to cultural heritage as being "imbued with a message from the past" and that they remained "to the present day as living witnesses of the age-old traditions of generations of people."

The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites, ratified in Quebec on 4 October 2008, is a useful tool providing guidelines. Accepted by the same assembly and on the same date with the Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place, these documents signify the integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and were followed by the ICOMOS-CIVVIH Valletta Principles in 2011. The 2008 ICOMOS Interpretation and Presentation Charter evaluates 'interpretation' as a tool to "heighten public awareness and enhance understanding" and 'presentation' as the "carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretive infrastructure". Thus, in terms of objectives, "(1) facilitating understanding and appreciation and (2) communicating the meaning" comes forward while "(3) safeguarding the tangible and intangible values, (4) respecting the authenticity, (5) contributing to the sustainable conservation, (6) encouraging inclusiveness, and (7) developing technical and professional guidelines" are complementary for the process.

Some of the principles of the 2008 ICOMOS Charter are especially relevant to the project, such as "1.1 … enhancing personal experience, increasing public respect and understanding, and communicating the importance of the conservation" and "1.2 … encouraging individuals and communities to reflect on their own perceptions … and assisting them in establishing a meaningful connection". Archaeological sites are not particularly related with "storytelling and memories" as information sources (Principle 2.3) but the narrative project, incorporates an early 20th century layer, which is more accessible from the present compared to 3,000 years ago as a stepping stone. "3.1… exploring the significance of a site in its multi-faceted historical, political, spiritual, and artistic contexts, and exploring all aspects of cultural, social, and environmental significance and values", "3.2 … respecting the contributions of all periods to the significance", "3.3 … taking into

account all groups that have contributed to the historical and cultural significance", "3.5 … intangible elements such as stories, customs and culinary heritage", and "3.6 … cross-cultural significance and the range of perspectives based on scholarly research, ancient records, and living traditions" are all principles incorporated into the project design.

More importantly, interpretation and presentation could become a tool "5.4 … enhancing the public awareness of specific conservation problems and explaining the effort being taken to protect the site's physical integrity and authenticity" while providing "5.6 … equitable and sustainable economic, social, and cultural benefits to all stakeholders through education, training and employment opportunities" for the future of the cultural heritage site.

ICOMOS Salalah Guidelines for the Management of Public Archaeological Sites adopted in New Delhi in 2017 also includes within its objectives "making use of archaeological sites open to the public to build public awareness of the value of cultural diversity and the strength of interconnections between cultures in ways that can benefit all". It refers to intangible cultural heritage by stating that "conscientiously presented heritage enriches our understanding of the ongoing relationship between humans and nature, as well as the common and various means by which humans organise themselves and interact with other groups". The guidelines include "the interpretive plan", "identifying the interpretive themes and sub-themes that best serve the didactic function of the site" and "the community engagement plan", "addressing how stakeholders should be identified, categorised, and engaged". However, the guidelines do not define methodology and scope of these plans.

The Tell Tayinat Expedition of the Oriental Institute in 1935-38 is illustrated by 920 images, mostly photographs, on the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, West Asia & North Africa Digital Archive, a selection open to public use. However, the images are not associated with additional data on dates, people and places. Some images are clearly from other sites, yet unidentified. One of the tasks of the project is to classify these in terms of date, people and location through research based on the later publications and the surviving documents listed by Pucci (2019: Appendix 4, 319-327). Other tasks related to various possible narratives are grouped under sub-headings below.

### 4.1. History of archaeological research

As with all fields of science, archaeology – in theory and practice – has changed throughout its history and continues to develop. Today, new technology, especially non-destructive methods of survey and analysis, helps archaeologists to study sites without damaging them, for archaeology is, in essence, a destructive process. Our understanding of cultural heritage and its preservation have also changed through the last centuries. A case study like the Tell Tayinat Expedition of the Oriental Institute is likely to illustrate and explain many points that are lost in generalisations of the period. Especially social histories of such work, expedition team dynamics and their relationship to local communities and places are rarely studied. Accounts like Agatha Christie Mallowan's Come Tell Me How You Live (1946), describing her husband's archaeological work in Syria and Iraq in the Near East in the 1930s, and her novel Murder in Mesopotamia (1936) are exceptions.

Some of the topics the project would like to investigate include the team members, some of whom became important scholars, and their professional lives (Figures 8a and 8b). Gender roles within the expedition teams, the role of the

women as family, housekeepers and, the last but not the least, as archaeologists and researchers is another track. Combined with life during the expedition is also the physical premises. Construction of new buildings as well as the use of existing ones at or near the sites forms an interesting subject. At Tayinat, the photo archive documents the construction of a new excavation house by local building masters with somewhat modernised local materials and technologies in addition to that of a reed hut used as a ceramics workshop (Figures 9a and 9b).

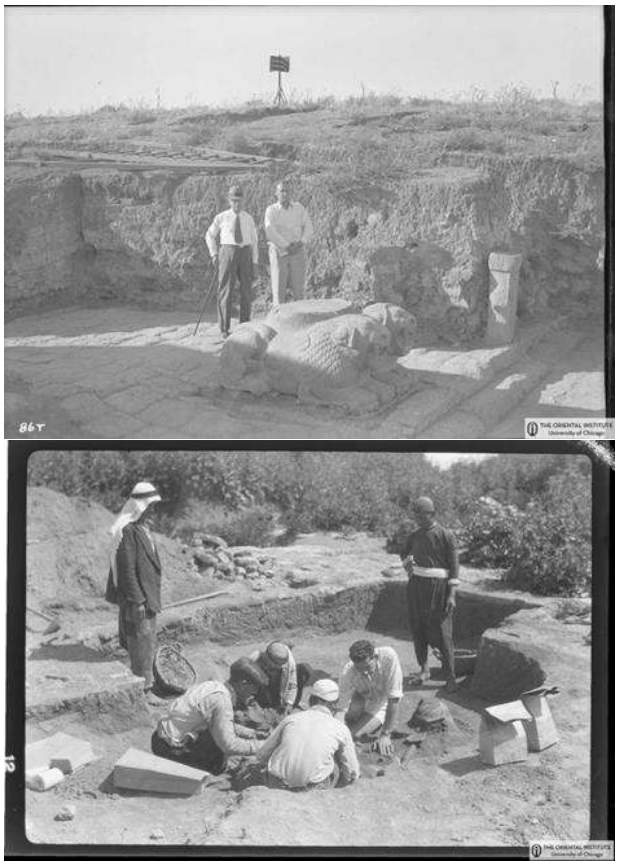

**Figure 8a and 8b. James Henry Breasted and Calvin Wells McEwan at the entrance of Building II, megaron temple, with the double-lion base (ISAC DPA Tayinat 86-T; top) and Robert J. Braidwood digging in a trench, sitting on the right (ISAC DPA Tayinat 900-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

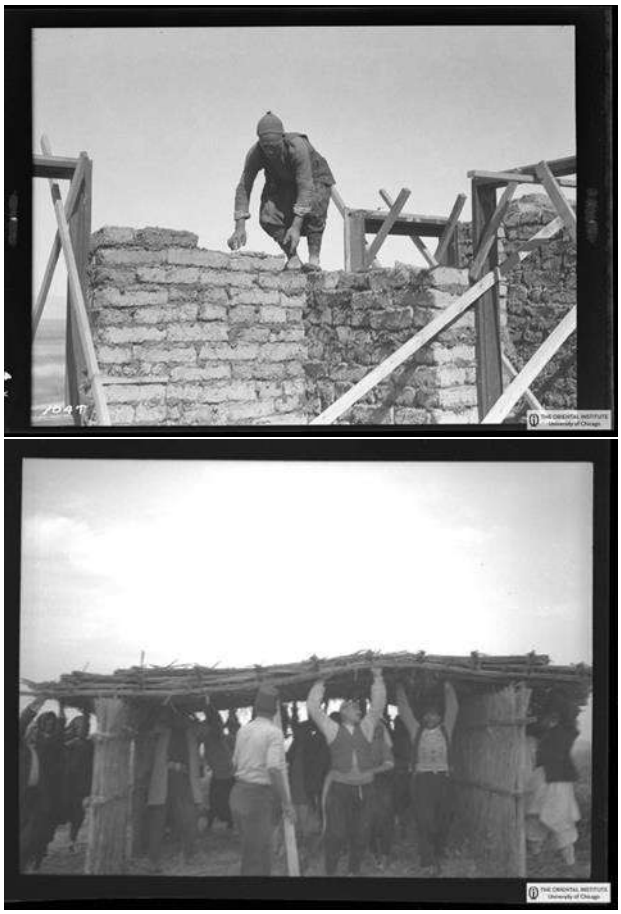

**Figure 9a and 9b. Construction of the excavation house with mudbrick using an adaptation of traditional technologies (ISAC DPA Tayinat 104-T; top) and construction of a reed hut, which was later used as the ceramics workshop (ISAC DPA Tayinat 989-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

Archaeological exploration, survey and excavation methods and operations specific to the Syrian-Hittite and Tell Tayinat expeditions, and their relationship to and comparison with present methodologies forms another track. Interdisciplinarity in teams and new methodologies developed through such collaboration in social sciences and arts and humanities constitutes a point of interest. Operations simultaneously carried out at different but related sites with limited teams and on limited time and budgets, as well as their dissemination through publications, including popular booklets and news, in order to raise additional funding from sponsors, constitute further tracks. These details may be compared with information from the other Oriental

Institute expeditions in Anatolia and the Middle East in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the expeditions of other institutions.

In terms of interdisciplinary work, an example illustrated by the digital photo archive and later publications is an experimental archaeology project (Haines 1971: Footnote 15, 51-52 and Plate 91). In addition to Harold D. Hill's contribution to preliminary work, Ann W. Epstein's work on "isometric views" and "detail drawings", probably for the final publication, are mentioned by Haines (1971: v). One result of the excavations was the discovery of an interesting structural system and building technology in Building I, the Bit Hilani, described above in section 3. The exposed walls were photographed and studied in detail and compared with building technologies known from other sites (Haines 1971: 45-46, Footnote 12; also see Baturayoğlu Yöney 2023). Richard C. Haines (1971: Footnote 15, 51-52 and Plate 91) described the experimental process, also illustrated by the photographs in the ISAC Archive (Figures 10a, 10b, 10c and 10d):

> "Although the fire was so hot that some of the bricks were partially vitrified, we wondered about the complete burning of the cross beams in their dead end pockets. So we used whatever wood was available and duplicated a section of the wall. After placing pieces of wood and other flammable material against it, we set the wall on fire. The dried mud plaster had shrunk away from the wood enough to provide sufficient draft to burn the wood completely. In fact the wood burned too quickly and a smothering effect of fallen roof plasterings might have baked the bricks more thoroughly."

Experimental archaeology became a methodology beginning from the 1960s, although more in relationship with smaller utilitarian objects, their production and use rather than architecture, building materials and technology (Ascher 1961). Such methods are derived from empirical approaches in sciences as a consequence of the development in the philosophy of science by scholars such as Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend (Outram 2008), one of the earliest being A. Cornelius Benjamin in 1936 (Ascher 1961). Heizer and Graham (1968: 141-147) have devoted a chapter to the subject "Replication and experiment in the service of archaeology" in their book on field methods in archaeology. The chapter includes a comprehensive list of 71 published experiments. Of these only nine could be associated with building materials and technology, and Tayinat experiment is not included probably because it was published by Haines later in 1971.

The cited examples are predominantly dated to the 1950s and 1960s, the exceptions being erecting monoliths in Stonehenge and Avebury in 1923 and 1924 and building an Egyptian pyramid by Flinders Petrie in 1930. Three of the cited cases from the 1950s and 1960s included experimentation on destruction sequences, including burning. Thus, it is safe to treat the Tayinat experiment as a very early example; it could very well be the earliest documented case in terms of timber and mudbrick construction and destruction through burning. This methodology must have been derived as a result of the more empirical thought and application processes of the architects at the intersection of interdisciplinarity with archaeological theory and practice. This certainly constitutes another track to be studied and addressed in a more comprehensive manner.

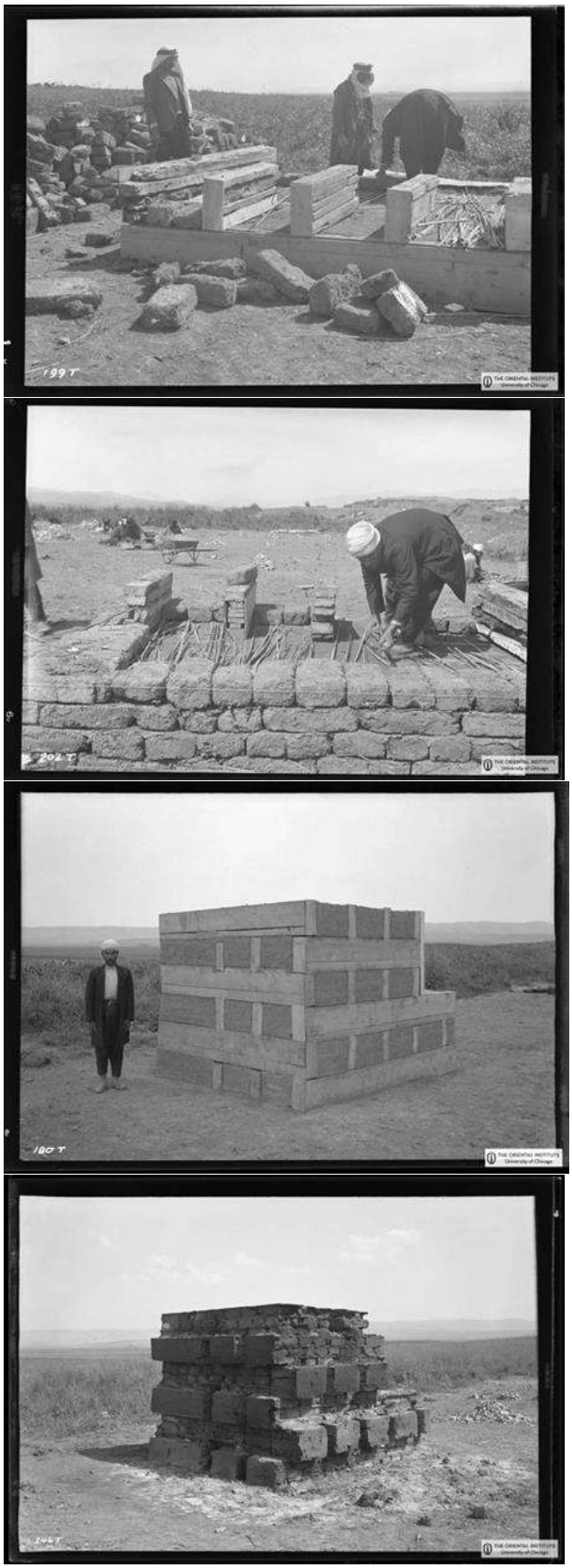

**Figure 10a-d (left). The experimental archaeology project: construction of the sample wall according to the data derived from original architecture (ISAC DPA Tayinat 199-T and 202-T; a & b), completed wall sample (ISAC DPA Tayinat 180-T; c) and the wall sample after burning (ISAC DPA Tayinat 246-T; d). (Images: ISAC)**

## 4.2. Expedition team and the local community

The project focuses on creating new narratives for the last century through family (hi)stories of the local community and about the team and the expedition. The photographs in the digital archive include many images in which the workers and associated people are recognisable, including women, youngsters and children. Considering the fact that these local communities are still more or less in the same place, the present villages around the site would be the starting point for interviews and discussions with larger groups. For this oral fieldwork, the project team is now preparing sets of photographs and related questions. The first trial is planned for the end of June 2026 and will be developed and continued in the following years with architectural design of interpretive structures.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, adopted in 2005 and generally known as the Faro Convention, recognises cultural heritage (a) as a Human Right and (b) an individual and collective responsibility, and emphasises that (c) its conservation and sustainable use must aim at human development and quality of life, and (d) the concerned parties must ensure its role in the construction of a peaceful and democratic society, in the processes of sustainable development and the promotion of cultural diversity as well as creating greater synergy of competencies among all the public, institutional and private actors concerned. Accordingly, the rights and responsibility of involved communities and creating a public awareness of their roles, are the central aims of the project.

### 4.3. Ancient life – Life in the 1930s – Present life

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in Paris in 2003, defines intangible cultural heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage … transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and providing them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity".

According to the Convention, these need to be "compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development".

Intangible heritage is manifested in the following domains:

"(a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
(b) performing arts
(c) social practices, rituals and festive events
(d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
(e) traditional craftsmanship".

The domains of intangible heritage that the project focuses on include (c) and (d). In terms of (c) social practices, rituals and festive events, the information derived from the digital photo archive dated to the 1930s include gender roles (women working but not included in most community activities) and festive events (probably Eid al-Adha, documented with slaughtering an animal, cooking food and a feast; Figures 11a and 11b; as well as other festivities, music and dancing; Figures 12a, 12b and 12c). In terms of (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, there are many daily practices: agriculture and animal husbandry and types of cultivated crops (relatively less information but could be inferred from resulting products), commerce and industry (grocery store and car driver; Figures 13a and 13b), building materials and construction (houses in Tayinat Village and other sites, and the construction of a reed hut, the excavation house in mudbrick and the experimental archaeology project; also integrating domain (e) traditional craftsmanship; Figures 9a and 9b), clothing (work, leisure time and festivities, thus, formal and informal; Figures 5b, 6a and 12b), food and culinary culture (work breaks and festivities, including cooking what is defined probably as Aşur / Herise / Keşkek; Figures 11b, 12a, 12b and 12c), food preservation, and health practices (illustrated with a photo of cupping).

The interviews would provide additional information about these practices as well as in other areas such as education, women's activities, children's games and activities, traditional storytelling, especially of those stories related to the 1930s expedition and the people who once lived on the site in relation to domain (a) oral traditions and expressions. This process may help establish continuing practices, shown in the 1930s documentation, whose origins may be traced back to the 1st millennium BCE or 3,000 years ago.

The 2023 earthquakes in Turkey inevitably altered life and many intangible practices in the area. The changes and adaptations through the last century, including the aftermath of the disaster, would become one of the research areas while searching for connections with the ancient communities who once lived at Tayinat.

**Figure 11a and 11b. Slaughtering and skinning a sheep (ISAC DPA Tayinat 74-T; top) and cooking Aşur/ Herise/ Keşkek (ISAC DPA Tayinat 75-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

**Figure 12a-c. A festive event at Tayinat and village: music and dancing (ISAC DPA Tayinat 971-T; a (left)), people and their formal clothing (ISAC DPA Tayinat 972-T; b (top)) and feast (ISAC DPA Tayinat 974-T; c (bottom)). (Images: ISAC)**

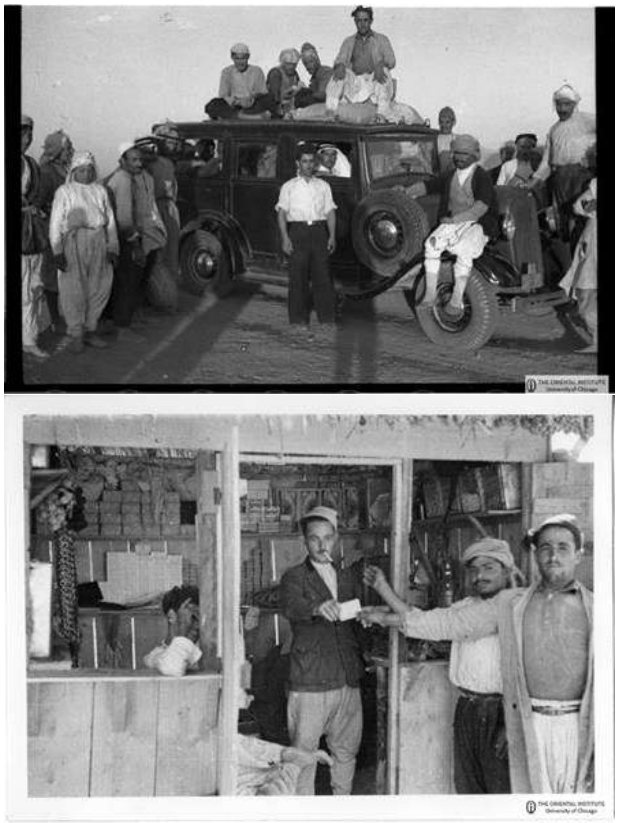

**Figure 13a and 13b. The expedition car as a novelty (ISAC DPA Tayinat 612-T; top) and a small grocery store, probably in the village (ISAC DPA Tayinat 511-T; bottom). (Images: ISAC)**

A continuing practice in domain (d) is Aşur / Herise / Keşkek (Figures 11a and 11b). This is a slow-cooked dish of whole wheat grains and meat, beaten to a paste, and prepared for community events, including celebrations and festivals. It was incorporated into the UNESCO World Heritage Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2011 with File Number 00388 as "Ceremonial Keşkek Tradition" from Turkey. However, this dish and its ceremony appear under the same name in many communities of Turkic origin outside Turkey as well as those of other ethnicities, such as Armenians and Syriacs in Anatolia while it is known as Herise in the Middle East and Aşur in Antakya.

The etymological root of Keşkek is related to milk and milk products, specifically to soured milk. Kaşk/ keşk/ kişk is used in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, southern Caucasus and Turkey in Indo-European, Sami and Ural-Altay and Caucasus languages (Aubaile-Sallenave 1994: 103). In different regions, periods and contexts, kaşk referred to sour milk or milk products such as yoghurt and cheese a well as barley paste, bread or soup; it could also denote more complex food including sour milk and/or barley or wheat (Aubaile-Sallenave 1994: 110-126, tables 8.1-8.3).

Uhri (2016: 61) takes the etymology of kaşk/ kişk, summarised as "gaş/ kaş/ kişk/ keşk", further back in time beyond the Middle Ages and states that it may be related with cultures of Near East and Mesopotamia through ga-še-a in Sumer and ga-ja-tu and ga-še in Assyrian; in Sumer and Akkadian, "še" is barley and "ga" is milk whereas the Sumerogram read as kaš denotes a type of barley beer as well as mixtures of milk and barley products. These food types are more similar to "tarhana", a wheat and sour milk/ yoghurt mixture, sometimes including other vegetables like tomatoes, fermented and dried for preservation and used in making soups through dilution and boiling. Uhri (2016: 54-62) describes the similarities between tarhana and keşkek and dates their origin to the Neolithic period in Northern Mesopotamia with the first cultivation of grains.

Aubaile-Sallenave (1994: 124-126) describes the keşkek on the UNESCO World Heritage Intangible Cultural Heritage List, including grains and meat as a later development, appearing in 15th and 16th centuries: It was described as something like Herise, and it was also mentioned by Evliya Çelebi in this context (Yerasimos 2023: 299, 323). It was known in Syria and Iran but beginning from the 19th century it was confined to Anatolia and northern Iraq; other ethnic groups used the Turkish name in their own languages, such as the Armenians and Syriacs in Anatolia (Aubaile-Sallenave 1994: 125-126).

Aşur on the other hand comes from the Arabic numeral 10, and is usually associated with a sweet dish, Aşure/ Ashura, prepared on the 10th day of the Arabic month Muharrem, commemorating the event at Kerbela in 680 CE as well as the end of the Great Flood in the time of Noah (Yerasimos 2023: 186, 234). However, it could also be connected to Syria and Assyria, which originate from mât Aššur (the land of Ashur in Akkadian), also the name of the ancient city-state and its principal deity. Nevertheless, Aşur synonymous with Keşkek may be more specific to Antakya and Amuq.

This intangible heritage practice is an outstanding candidate for drawing connections to the communities who lived at Tayinat 3,000 years ago and deserves to be studied further in terms of its traditional preparation and meaning as well as origins and connections.

Another continuing practice in domain (d) may be defined as building materials and technology. Comparisons between the architectural characteristics of Tayinat's Iron Age remains and the buildings of the 20th and 21st centuries could provide useful links in terms of construction practices. This is another track of the project and is also related with the new architecture (interpretive infrastructure) proposed in the next section.

## 5. Conclusion: Designing for archaeology

The project started out as an architectural initiative for temporary and sustainable buildings for the archaeological site, both for the research team and visitors. Reversibility and ephemerality were important concerns: The buildings are being designed in a way they can easily be built without heavy machinery and taken down when they are no longer needed, to be replaced/ rebuilt in other locations if necessary. The building technology is inspired by the ancient and later traditional materials and architecture but improved to present standards.

The initial idea comes from a student project: An elective course on theory and design for 7th semester (cycle 2) students in the Architecture Undergraduate Programme at Hatay Mustafa Kemal University in the Fall semester of the 2021-22 academic year, the Conservation of Historic Urban and Archaeological Sites relied on the principle of research/ learning-by-doing. Theoretical issues addressed with the students in the first half of the semester were then used in design projects created by students in the second half (Kesim et al. 2022). The proposal was designed by Aycan Aydan during the course and under the direction of instructors Nilüfer Baturayoğlu Yöney and Berk Kesim and consultants Elif Denel and Sinan Omacan in an interdisciplinary process. The updated project (Figures 14a and 14b) was selected in the Open Call for the Türkiye Pavilion "Grounded" at the 19th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2025 and published in the booklet Grounded Forecasts, which was part of the exhibit.

Following this international recognition, TAP decided to pursue the idea further for possible implementation at the site. The first meeting of the project was held as a brainstorming workshop entitled, 'Designing for Archaeology: Lessons Grounded in Ancient Earth for Sustainable Architecture' in Yeşilüzümlü, Fethiye, Muğla, Turkey, hosted by AtölyeZEA on 25-28 September 2025. Workshop I aimed to bring together the project team with the archaeological research team and other researchers studying sustainable building methods and technologies, and incorporated new members to the team, including Timothy P. Harrison, Zeynep Ebru Aksoy, Emre Kishalı and Kenan Yurttagül. An exemplary structure was built for trial as well.

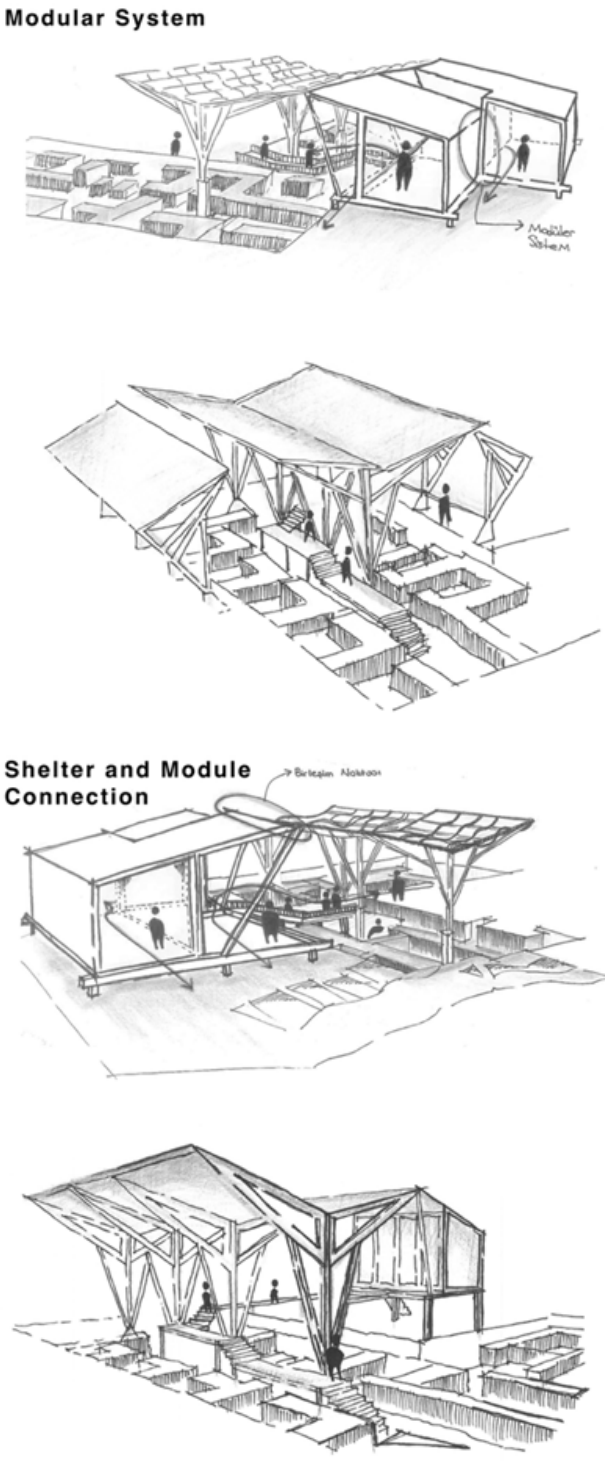


**Figure 14a and 14b. Initial architectural designs for Tayinat, including trench shelters and work/ rest modules for the research team and rest/ information modules for the visitors. (Images: TAP/ Aycan Aydan)**

The outcome of Workshop I was designing for a special project that will enable TAP to connect with the local communities and to raise their awareness of cultural heritage in general and Tayinat in particular (Figures 15a and 15b). The idea is established on creating new narratives from the archaeological research in the 1930s through the ISAC digital photography archive, a more relatable date, through which personal connections could be drawn. With this purpose, a new member, Evrim Ölçer Özünel, was added to the team.

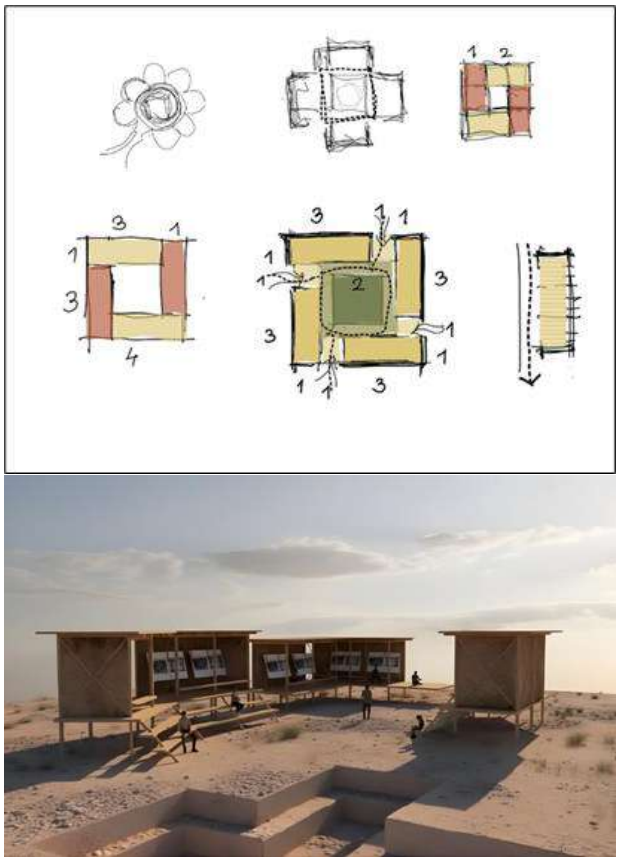

**Figure 15a and 15b. Initial architectural designs for interpretive structures for the narrative project at Tayinat: organisation of modules (top; Image: TAP/ Z. Ebru Aksoy) and modules at a probable location by the excavation site (bottom; Image: TAP/ Aycan Aydan)**

At present, the project is designing for a trial at the site during the expedition season in June 2026. This will include trials of architecture, building materials and technologies, as well as that of the oral history/ narratives project. As summarised above, the ISAC digital photo archive material provided more iconographical information than the family (hi)stories, opening new directions of related research. There are collections related to other expeditions and sites in the ISAC archive, such as al-Judeideh and

Chatalhüyük, Alişar, Kerkenes, Khorsabad, Megiddo, Medinet Habu, Luristan, Persepolis and many more as well as archives of other institutions, which would enrich the data and conclusions. This interdisciplinary project of TAP will continue to grow in the future with new research initiatives and narratives.

## Acknowledgements

The interdisciplinary project team includes the following people, who are all part of the TAP research team as of 2026: Nilüfer Baturayoğlu Yöney (architect, professor of architectural history and preservation, University of Central Florida, ICOMOS member), Timothy P. Harrison (professor of archaeology, the director of TAP and University of Chicago ISAC), Elif Denel (archaeologist, PhD, assistant director of TAP and director of ARIT Ankara, ICOMOS member), Berk Kesim (urban planner, PhD, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University), Emre Kishalı (civil engineer, PhD, associate professor in architectural preservation, Kocaeli University, ICOMOS member), Aycan Aydan (architect), Z. Ebru Aksoy (architect, founder of AtölyeZEA, specialising in sustainable building design), Kenan Yurttagül (archaeologist and conservator, TAP and former director at the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism), H. Sinan Omacan (architect, founder of Atölye Mimarlık, specialising in new buildings on archaeological sites), Evrim Ölçer Özünel (professor of Turkic languages and literatures, Hacı Bayram Veli University, UNESCO member, specialising on intangible cultural heritage and its contribution to UN Sustainable Development Goals). The author would like to thank all of the team members for their contribution.

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# Narratives of vanishing landscapes and collective loss – from mourning to community empowerment

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**Abstract**
Narratives of vanishing landscapes, ecological grief and heritage loss can move beyond mourning to empower communities and inspire future-oriented action. Often, stories from local communities convey grief and loss of familiar landscapes abandoned or irreversibly altered. Drawing from nine community-based projects on Greek islands, this paper explores how local stories attached to cultural landscapes, food heritage, agricultural practices and water management interpret loss while activating collective imagination and stewardship. Through this work, narratives are co-created, abandoned landscapes are reframed as spaces of regeneration and possibility, while traditional practices are revitalised for future resilience. The cases demonstrate how place-based narratives can reconcile communities with change and open them up to present and future possibilities, offering transferable insights for community empowerment in times of uncertainty and environmental transformation.

**Keywords**
place-based narratives, vanishing landscapes, ecological mourning, community empowerment, regeneration

## Introduction

We live in an era of profound rural change and unprecedented ecological loss (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018, Ahlmeyer & Volgmann 2023, Camrass 2023, Bailey & Gerrish 2025). Rural areas are transforming ever more rapidly, as interrelated environmental (e.g. climate crisis), social (e.g. fewer and older people) and economic (e.g. deepening inequality) crises accelerate.

In 2007, for the first time in recorded history, more people lived in cities than in rural areas worldwide. And humanity never looked back. In Greece, less than a third of the population is rural and even fewer people are expected to live in the countryside in the future (OECD 2022). Those who remain are often more vulnerable and marginalised, with rural identities eroding and community institutions weakening.

Ecological mourning and grief for heritage loss are not new (Bailey & Gerrish 2025), but are now becoming commonplace, especially among young people (Gorman & Lewis 2024) and those connected to the natural world, such as farmers (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018). Bailey and Gerrish (2025) further analyse ecological grief, distinguishing

'unprecedented grief' associated with the ongoing environmental collapse from 'unacknowledged grief' linked to the uncomfortable and unpredictable lifestyle changes required in response.

Apart from landscapes that are literally disappearing (sinking islands, retreating glaciers, etc.), other familiar beloved landscapes have been irreversibly altered to such a degree that we should wonder what will be left of the world for younger people and future generations to live with. Landscapes are not merely physical spaces; they embed cultural identities, shared memories and affective attachment. Therefore, when landscapes vanish, the loss is existential (Ingold 2000).

This paper draws insights from nine projects on Greek islands, under the unifying objective of revitalising natural and cultural heritage together with local communities in the face of rapid transformations and rural decline. The accompanying stories, recorded from locals, make sense of and give life to these cultural landscapes. Often, these stories are steeped in nostalgia for once-vibrant communities and ecological grief over what has been – or is being – lost as a healthy place to live. To many, it feels like an impasse or a vicious cycle of decline. This paper explores the role of place-based narratives in empowering communities to reinterpret loss and shape meaningful futures. Drawing on three thematic case studies – heritage trails, living food heritage and traditional freshwater management – it examines how narratives attached to landscapes can transform experiences of loss into opportunities for stewardship and regeneration.

Regenerative narratives from Greek islands

Working at the nexus of cultural and natural heritage offers unique perspectives on how local communities connect with the landscapes and the natural world. The vast body of local knowledge, which reflects this connection, is a central element in the cases presented below. Transmitted across generations, local knowledge is dynamic and adaptable, while also supporting biodiversity and guiding responsible environmental stewardship (Vandebroek et al. 2011, Bennett et al. 2018). This tenet has guided the work presented here, which seeks to combine safeguarding with heritage-informed innovation. The three case studies illustrate how place-based narratives emerging from local knowledge and practice can support regeneration processes in different domains of island life. Their main characteristics are summarised in Table 1 (below).

**Table 1. Overview of the three case studies**

| Case study | **(1) Nurturing a community of practice on heritage trails** | **(2) Supporting a unique food community to thrive** | **(3) From an abandoned practice to a national-level solution** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Thematic areas | Sustainable tourism | Food | Water management |
| Islands | Kythera | Lemnos | Kythera, Paros, Sifnos, Ios (scaling to national level) |
| Main narratives | Heritage trails as catalysts for sustainable tourism & wellbeing | Living food heritage supporting landscape conservation & rural innovation | Revived traditional practice as a nature-based solution for resilience |
| Approach | INCREAte approach; cross-disciplinary collaboration | Landscape-level living lab approach; cross-disciplinary collaboration | Multi-method approach combining technical studies, construction sites & community work |
| Tools | Environmental & cultural assessments; community visioning; ethnography, fieldwork; stakeholder analysis; interpretive guiding, etc. | Biodiversity surveys/ fieldwork; GIS & remote sensing; ethnography; participatory design; educational programmes, etc. | Ethnography; fieldwork; pre/post monitoring on biodiversity & aquifer; hydrogeological and hydraulic studies; educational programmes, etc. |
| Impact | Formation of a local community of practice & shift towards sustainable tourism | Strengthened local food networks & valorisation of food heritage | Revival of a traditional practice informing a national-scale solution for water management |
| Enablers | Active community, local coalition, innovative work | Long-term holistic programme, active farming sector, rich food heritage | Wide-ranging collaborations, concerted research and policy work |

### Case study 1: Nurturing a community of practice on heritage trails

Vanishing landscapes are not only the ones disappearing or altered, but also the vacant ones, which lie 'outside of our collective sight'. As traditional human activities on Greek islands have retreated, large tracts of land have become abandoned and inaccessible, in the absence of maintained walking paths. Thus, researching old traditional trails offers an ideal entry point to abandoned cultural landscapes.

On the island of Kythera, following an integrated approach (Georgiadis et al. 2019), a 100 km long trails network was built (Project: Kythera Trails) by restoring and connecting old traditional trails (Zafeiriou & Georgiadis 2022). Along those trails, 489 narratives have been created, attached to Points of Interest (POIs), based on primary data (ethnographic research, fieldwork, participant observation) and secondary data.

For instance, during a recent initiative (Project: M21), we uncovered a whole farming and irrigation system in the ravine of Tsakonas, including terraces, gardens, an extensive network of irrigation channels, a complex of reservoirs and troughs, a water bridge, retaining walls along the stream, stone weirs, water mills, etc. This system represents a remarkable collective project that displays multi-level local knowledge, based on a profound understanding of the local landscape. Local stories, rare toponyms and elements of local ecological knowledge were distilled to create narratives. Together with a wealth of other abandoned sites (e.g. salt pans, olive groves) along a newly-restored 20 km long trail, 72 narratives build an interpretive walk to unravel the island's rich food heritage.

**Figure 1. Irrigation and food production in the ravine of Tsakonas, Kythera Island. From left to right: Vasilous' water mill, Dimitrakis' water bridge and part of the extensive network of irrigation channels beneath Viaradika village (Images: Rigas Zafeiriou/ MedINA)**

The narratives of the island's trail network are cross-disciplinary, blending applied research with local personal stories, in an attempt to understand the landscapes, showcase local ingenuity, lament what is lost and alert people about what is under threat; above all, they evoke our collective imagination about what is possible, locally (Zafeiriou 2023). Not only do they raise awareness about heritage, they are also inclusive by blending the experiences of people with diverse migration backgrounds (Project: Rural Migrantour). The Interpretive Guide seminar was organised to train local residents on sharing those narratives with visitors, although they are also accessible to everyone via interactive maps on the website and a dedicated navigation app.

Many of the heritage trails are now restored and landscapes once 'vanished' are now cherished by visitors and locals alike. What was a fringe idea in the 2000s, became a mainstay narrative in the 2020s, embraced by an island-wide community of practice. Trails have been adopted by local associations, businesses and individuals, while more than 140 weekly events have been organised for the locals in the winter to walk together and share stories, always with a feast at the end, hosted each time by a different village. Collective loss became a seedbed of possibilities with new initiatives building on this wave of regeneration like small-

scale sustainable tourism businesses, innovative projects and more.

### Case study 2: Supporting a unique food community to thrive

On the island of Lemnos, the landscape is dotted with countless stone-built complexes for people, crops and farm animals. These mandras are the heart of the island's unique agro-pastoral management system – yet they are under threat. This biodiversity-rich agricultural mosaic is a vanishing landscape; as traditional manual labour retreats and intensive farming methods expand, mandras are increasingly abandoned or altered (Georgiadis et al. 2022). This transition marks a period of collective loss in which the erosion of the physical environment reflects a fading living food heritage that once unified the island's social and productive life.

To reverse this trend, MedINA embarked on a multi-year journey aiming to promote, safeguard and valorise the living cultural heritage of the rural space of Lemnos. This journey started with an initiative (Project: Terra Lemnia) to conserve and restore the Lemnian food heritage at landscape level. In this framework, traditional biodiversity-positive farming practices were coded and the 'Terra Vita' certification scheme was developed to support farmers. Narratives have been crafted to raise awareness about those certified products. More importantly, the Land Stewards Network was developed to safeguard the mandra system (Lyratzaki et al. 2023). At the same time, the inscription of three elements in the Greek National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) was coordinated: the art of melichloro (melipasto) cheese making (2020), the mandra system (2021) and the viticultural tradition of Lemnos (2024), strengthening the formal recognition of the island's ICH.

These three elements served as the core themes for a network of co-designed food trails (Project: Via Lemnia). This phase shifted the focus to active, community-led implementation, utilising a participatory storytelling framework to ensure the local community remained the primary narrator of its own heritage (Zafeiriou 2025). Prioritising community ownership over expert-led documentation, four thematic routes were co-created with local producers and public bodies through two dedicated workshops, unravelling the stories of the island's distinctive identity:

- Agricultural Lemnos, highlighting traditional landraces and the mandra system, along with cultivated fields, product-processing spaces and the local varieties and products that characterise the island's agricultural landscape.
- Lemnos' livestock tradition, focusing on the island's pastoral heritage, its dairy products – particularly the distinctive melichloro cheese, its honey and the landscapes shaped by livestock farming.
- Lemnos' vineyards, exploring the island's viticultural tradition through its vineyards, wineries and distilleries, as well as the vine-based products that form part of local production, such as wine, tsipouro and grape molasses (petimezi).
- Agri-food Lemnos in a day, offering a holistic farm-to-table experience that allows visitors to discover the island's rich agri-food heritage through its landscapes, producers and flavours.

The food trails connect visitors with farmers and food professionals involved in local value chains, to empower those who continue to work with the land. Thus, the narratives along the food routes are rooted in Lemnian heritage – from the volcanic soils to the artisanal mandras – while contributing to the island's evolving identity as an exemplary culinary destination.

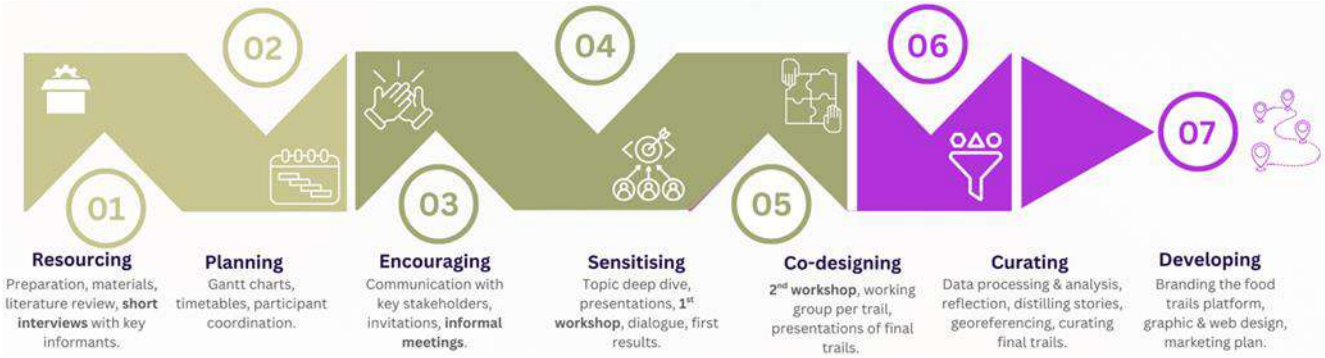


**Figure 2. The 7-step co-design process for the participatory development of the Via Lemnia food trails (Source: Zafeiriou 2025, MedINA)**

Yet narratives are not confined to the routes themselves; they continue to be reinterpreted and retold within the island's social fabric, including in educational settings. 21 teenagers from the Moudros Secondary School 'Argyrios Moschidis' engaged with local heritage by conducting ethnographic interviews with older members of their families and with participants of the island's Elderly Day Care Center, transforming these accounts into fictional stories through creative writing (Project: Heroes by Nature). In one such story, titled Cotton, come back!, cotton – the island's most important cash crop during the 1960s and 1970s – becomes the protagonist narrating the decline and ultimate disappearance of cotton farming. Rather than simply capturing the grief associated with agricultural heritage loss, these stories reveal a process of reconciliation with what has been lost, whilst looking towards the future with courage through the eyes of younger generations.

Beyond remembering what has been lost, narratives can also support the continued cultivation of local crop varieties, linking past practices with present-day efforts to sustain them. Local crop varieties are part of the island's genetic heritage, carrying unique qualities shaped by centuries of selection and seed-saving practices by farmers. In Greece, however, many local varieties are in steep decline, with several already extinct or under threat.

On Lemnos, two landraces have been inscribed in the National Register of Crop Varieties, while a further eight are currently under review, aiming to provide economic incentives for farmers. More importantly, narratives accompany each variety to inspire renewed interest in their cultivation. These narratives are also placed along the value chain, reaching visitors to Lemnos through selected tavernas where the varieties are highlighted on the menu (Project: LEMRACE). A network of seed guardians has been established alongside a community seed bank, and this work has recently been extended to Kythera Island (Project: KYTHERACE). In this context, narratives act as place-based prompts for regeneration, reflecting on how diverse crops can support thriving rural communities.

**Figure 3: Multi-pronged approach to strengthening the food community of Lemnos Island, Greece. From left to right: (1) A traditional mandra; (2) Creative writing session at school based on ethnographic interviews; (3) Everything produced on the island: a dish combining the local aspromytiko bean variety, puree made of the local afkos (Cyprus vetch) variety and locally-grown oyster mushrooms with accompanying narratives in the menu (Images: MedINA)**

The work presented above reflects elements of MedINA's broader approach in Lemnos, which has recently been recognised as a Good Safeguarding Practice of ICH through its inscription in the National Inventory of ICH of Greece (Hellenic Ministry of Culture 2026). As the first Good Safeguarding Practice entered in the Inventory, this recognition brings an approach developed within a specific island context into a national safeguarding framework, highlighting how locally grounded practices for safeguarding living rural heritage can inform broader efforts in other areas.

### Case study 3: From an abandoned practice to a national-level solution

Back on the island of Kythera, *deseis*[2] are stone-built weirs constructed in streams to decrease the speed of water flow, forming small ponds from which to collect water for farmland and animals. This traditional freshwater management technique was virtually lost, and it was re-introduced in 2020 (Giannakakis et al. 2022). A total of 26 weirs were restored along the ravine of Karavas in the northern part of Kythera to recharge the aquifer, provide water for farm use and support biodiversity (Project: Traditional Stone Weirs).

**Figure 4. Building 26 deseis in September 2020 in the ravine of Karavas, North Kythera (Images: Rigas Zafeiriou/ MedINA)**

These weirs lie along one of the organised trails of the island (Kythera Trail M49A). As a result, the experience of visitors is enriched as they walk along a lush green corridor of ponds. The 'stories of water', accessible via the Kythera Trails web platform and smartphone app, form an interpretive walk connecting the five most emblematic weirs and other water-related POIs around the common theme of reviving a traditional practice as a nature-based solution for a sustainable future (Figure 5).

This initiative garnered considerable interest and led to larger projects on other islands. For instance, on Paros, 33 stone weirs were built at Kavouropotamos ravine, coupled with research on their impact on biodiversity and groundwater replenishment (Sakellarakis et al. 2023). On Sifnos Island, 120 stone weirs were built across Taxiarchis Skafis and Chonis streams, while another 50 were constructed in Mavroudi stream of Ios Island.

These projects brought deseis to national attention, emerging as a simple, low-cost, no-regret, nature-based solution to address pressing challenges faced by Greek islands, such as biodiversity decline and water scarcity. Consistent research and policy work are gradually building institutional support for broad implementation (e.g. including stone-built weirs in the technical development work programmes of local island authorities).

Recently, deseis were built again on Kythera, but this time on a larger scale and with institutional backing. After the devastating wildfire of July 2025, the official post-fire anti-erosion study, approved by the General Directorate of Forests and Forest Environment and the Piraeus Forest Service of the Ministry of Environment and Energy, included stone weirs as part of the portfolio of technical measures. It marked the first time that this solution is part of an

[2] *Deseis* mean 'ties' and in the Kytherian idiom this term refers to the stone walls, which are built perpendicular to the streamflow, thus 'binding' both sides of the stream.

institutional forestry project – thus, it set a precedent for all future studies.

With the support of NGOs, communities and researchers, deseis are becoming a national-level story of heritage revitalisation for future resilience. The technical dimension alone would not suffice to bring this solution forward; deseis gained momentum because they are socially embedded in insular communities as part of our collective heritage. Recent projects emphasise community work. On Ios Island, the worksite was open to local volunteers, and a hands-on workshop and apprenticeship programme for young craftspeople were also introduced. Students from the island's secondary school created a short documentary and played with stone weir models in their schoolyard.

Building deseis is a practice appropriate to the scale of small streams on islands, part of an extensive body of local knowledge about freshwater management, which was born to optimally utilise the scarce water resources. In some way, deseis belong to the landscape – they do not alter the landscape. Articulating such narratives can help reintegrate the practices into place-based storytelling and reshape how civil engineering projects on islands are imagined in the future.

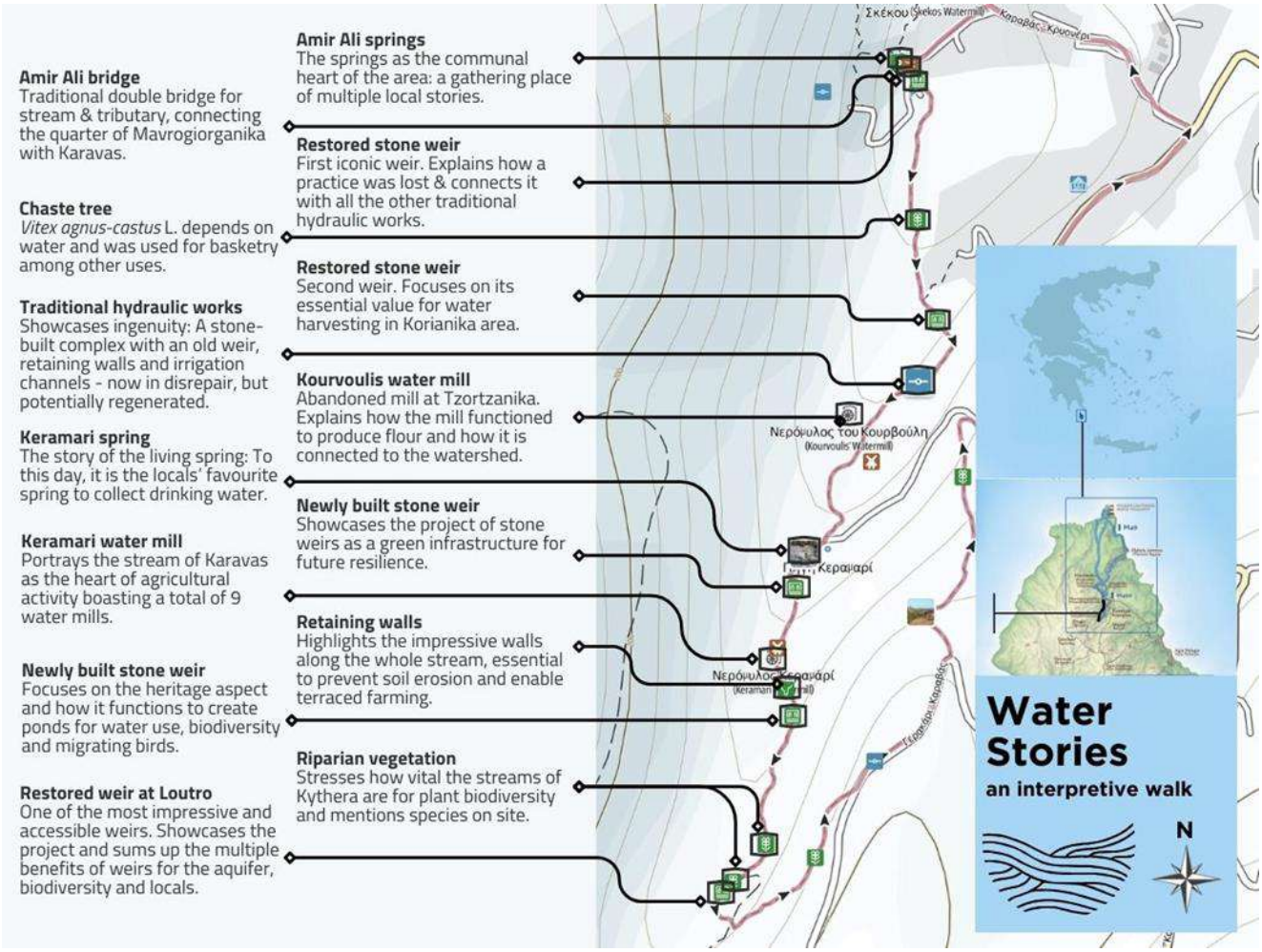


**Figure 5. The main message of each of the narratives along trail M49A at the northern tip of Kythera Island. These narratives build up an interpretive walk, which highlights local ingenuity and details how heritage practices can spearhead a resilient future. (Image: Rigas Zafeiriou/ MedINA)**

## Discussion

Across these projects, a central narrative of regeneration emerges that seeks to engage with the collective imagination of real-life grounded possibilities of resilience, stewardship and community, living together through change and uncertainty (Rinallo 2000, Chua & Schreer 2024). Each place has a unique multi-layered story, which is the foundation of regeneration practice (Camrass 2023). Place-based narratives can become more inclusive not only to past changes, but also to current transitions and possible future opportunity and loss (Venture et al. 2021, Camrass 2023). The initiatives mentioned above provide 'ladders' to regenerative futures.

As we move forward, ambivalence is inevitable (Bailey & Gerrish 2025); flexibility and adaptability are key to embracing inevitable change and loss, understanding heritage in flux and harnessing opportunities as they emerge in periods of rapid change (Venture et al. 2021). By distilling multiple local stories, past and contemporary, place-based storytelling can formulate meaningful visions of a territory, beyond stereotypical representations (Ichumbaki et al. 2023, Pesce et al. 2024). Narratives can unleash people's imagination and become the seedbed of local discourse and placemaking (Pesce et al. 2024). Those narratives can also serve as interpretive media for visitors to immerse themselves in the local lived culture and engage with regenerative practices (Nowacki 2021, Haley 2025).

Beyond these observations, the cases suggest that storytelling is not simply an add-on to conservation initiatives but a connective element linking memory, practice and future orientation. Rather than starting from entirely new practices, narratives reframe and reconnect existing agricultural, spatial and infrastructural elements with a shared meaning, allowing them to be reinterpreted, mobilised and updated in response to change. In situations of rural decline and ecological transformation, storytelling mediates between grief and action. While ecological grief has been described as a response to environmental loss (Cunsolo & Ellis 2018), in the island contexts examined here, it becomes socially processed, enabling communities to view abandonment not only as an ending, but as a moment that calls for reflection and adaptation. This process is often intergenerational, as younger people engage with how older generations experience landscape change and reinterpret their experiences through new narratives. Facing ecological grief is dealing with loss; but more constructively, grief can activate change and regeneration (Bailey & Gerrish 2025), and place-based narratives can empower that transition. In some cases, initiatives that emerge locally can extend beyond their place of origin, demonstrating how place-based responses to loss can influence wider practices and institutional approaches at regional or national levels.

## Project links

Further information about the projects mentioned in this paper can be found on the following links.

Kythera Trails: https://kytheratrails.gr/
Trail M21: https://med-ina.org/project/the-intangible-cultural-heritage-on-the-trails-of-kythera/
Rural Migrantour: https://sites.google.com/view/ruralmigrantour/home
Terra Limnia: https://terra-lemnia.net/en/
Via Lemnia: https://www.vialemnia.gr/en/
Heroes by Nature: https://med-ina.org/project/heroes-by-nature/
LEMRACE: https://lemrace.med-ina.org/en/
KYTHERACE: https://med-ina.org/project/kytherace-eng/
Traditional stone weirs: https://med-ina.org/project/traditional-stone-built-micro-dams/
Trail M49A: https://www.outdooractive.com/en/route/hiking-trail/cythera/kythera-trail-m49a/802452046/

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# Abstracts of other presentations

## Continuous acts of beginning: Descendant healing, a U.S. Confederate Memorial, and lessons learned from collaborating on interpretation

### Cassie Anderson et al (USA)

What happens when a U.S. national park responsible for interpreting a plantation and confederate memorial admits its mistakes, prioritises healing, redesigns its storytelling to uplift descendant voices, and then gets censored by its own agency? We'll explore recent years of dialogue, trust, and interpretation between descendant families and the National Park Service at Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, in Virginia, U.S.A.

In 2021, enslaved and enslaver descendants came together through dialogue and formed the Arlington House Family Circle. They've built skills, and nurtured trust and familiarity both among descendant family members and between descendants and the park service. These learnings have necessitated bold, new interpretive approaches in order for the park to honour descendant voices and help park rangers share this complex story with the public. We will reflect on the journey and the challenges ahead as we continue moving forward together.

**Cassie Anderson** is the former interpretive manager of Arlington House. Together with Stephen E. Hammond and Custis Glover (Arlington House Descendants' Family Circle Members) and Dr. Susan M. Glisson, founder of the Welcome Table Collaborative, the team brings perspectives of enslaved and enslaver family descendants, a racial healing facilitator, and site interpretive manager.

## The potential of networking for heritage interpretation

### Alicia Castillo Mena (Spain)

Within the framework of the project Care, People and Archaeology in a Resilient World: Innovating through Community-Based Processes and Networked Work in Cultural Heritage and Museums for the Latin Context (PID2021-127248OB-I00), this presentation reflects on heritage networks as caring and living spaces. It will discuss heritage networks as essential connections for building relationships, as well as strategies for heritage interpretation grounded in the co-creation of multivocal and glocal narratives. We will question collaborative practices and explore the benefits, tensions, and opportunities of networked alliances. Finally, the discussion will address how networks can serve as a future-oriented strategy for heritage interpretation, capable of redefining roles and contributing to more holistic and sustainable practices among institutions, professionals, communities, and stakeholders engaged in cultural heritage.

**Alicia Castillo Mena** PhD is Full Professor in the Department of Prehistory, Ancient History and Archaeology at the Faculty of Geography and History, Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). She is Co-Director of the Research Group on Cultural Heritage Management, her main area of expertise, and Principal Investigator of the CIPAMUR project.

## Combining natural and historical heritage: Co-creating interpretive narratives for the Gyaros Marine Protected Area

### Vasiliki Denaxa et al (Greece)

Gyaros is an Aegean island, uninhabited for most of its long history, with a multifaceted identity shaped by high natural values and a challenging past as a place of political exile until 1974. Today, as a strictly protected Marine Protected Area, it raises key questions about how nature conservation and historical memory can coexist within a shared interpretive approach. This contribution presents the participatory process used to co-create an interpretive narrative for Gyaros, involving multiple stakeholders and perspectives. The process resulted in a mosaic of narratives integrating natural, cultural and historical aspects of the site. Through a short digital, video-based interpretive piece combining insights from this process with visual material from the site, the presentation will explore how multiple narratives can be translated into interpretive practice and serve as a basis for discussion.

**Vasiliki Denaxa** is a fisheries biologist working with WWF Greece. She leads local awareness and engagement activities in Syros and the surrounding islands. She collaborates with various stakeholders and users of the Gyaros Marine Protected Area.

## Heritage Remix: Who controls the playlist of the past?

### Dubravko Fijacko (Croatia)

Heritage is not a record to play but a track to produce. In this session we become architects of resonance. Through a live shared interface we will negotiate contested voices, amplifying some and layering others, leaving space in between. The outcome is not consensus it is a collective audio composition where tension remains audible. You will depart with both a shared artifact and a practice for turning places of memory into spaces of democratic encounter. Interpretation becomes not what we say but what we choose to hear together.

**Dubravko Fijacko** is a heritage transformation strategist and licensed interpretive trainer bridging participatory design and digital innovation. He empowers guides and communities to co-create meaning from contested pasts, moving institutions from storytelling to civic sense-making. He is the founder of Heritage-ID, and is a passionate advocate for heritage as a living dialogue for peace.

## Narratives of dissonant heritage: Practices and problems

### Stephen Gundle (UK)

[This presentation was accepted to the programme but the author was unable to present]

The Atrium (Architecture of Totalitarianism in European Urban Memory) association (www.atriumroute.ed) is an EU cultural route composed of numerous municipalities of varying sizes across seven countries. Each municipality presents remains of architecture or urban development strongly related to their origins in fascist or communist regimes. Atrium, therefore, is continually dealing with narratives and counter-narratives, viewpoints and practical heritage issues. It also coordinates projects, including a current one (EUrbanDeco) dealing with the heritage of colonialism which draws in cultural associations and universities. The presentation will focus on this project and the problems and issues it has brought to light in terms of the memorialisation of colonialism and decolonisation, museum culture and urban spaces. It will shed light on the variety of ways in which problematic heritage can be harnessed to practices of awareness-raising, education, community organisation, the reconfiguration of public spaces and cultural and artistic projects. While narratives remain important, and controversies often revolve around them, it will be argued that diverse creative practices can bring important new dimensions to present-day responses to negative pasts.

**Stephen Gundle** is a member of Atrium scientific committee. A professor at Warwick University, UK, he is a specialist in film, media and cultural history with specialist interests in fascism and communism.

## From silent inheritance to shared responsibility: Adult education as a space for working with contested narratives (thematic table)

### Miljenko Hajdarović (Croatia)

Adults are often treated as 'already educated' regarding history and heritage—an assumption that overlooks how formal education is frequently shaped by ideological framing or selective silences. This thematic table will explore adult education as a vital landscape for engaging with contested narratives in heritage interpretation. Moving beyond mere correction or confrontation, the discussion will focus on practices that cultivate narrative awareness, reflection, and ethical responsibility while mitigating defensive reactions. Drawing on experiences from post-socialist and post-conflict contexts, this session will investigate how adult learning spaces can disrupt the persistence of exclusionary or simplified narratives. Through dialogue, interpretive literacy, and co-creation, participants will share methods that promote democratic engagement. The goal is to develop the capacity to navigate narrative complexity and foster a more nuanced, shared understanding of heritage.

**Miljenko Hajdarović** is a Croatian historian and sociologist, PhD candidate and educator at POU Čakovec. He designs teacher training and digital learning materials, supports EU-funded projects, and researches AI pedagogy and media literacy. His work also focuses on Holocaust education, memory studies, and countering historical revisionism.

## Beyond competing narratives: Vertical storytelling in heritage interpretation

### Jon Kohl (Costa Rica)

Interpreters deploy narratives horizontally: multiple human narratives coexist or compete in the same space. While promoting inclusivity, it also leads to interpretive paralysis, relativism, or unresolved conflict when narratives occupy the same structural level but diverge in meaning. I propose that narratives can operate vertically across the chain of being—from physical and biological processes, through individual and collective human stories, to civilisational and cosmic narratives. By defining narrative as actors in processes over time under tension or change, storytelling is inherent not only to humanity but to matter, life, and universe. Interpreters can then situate contested human narratives within larger non-human frames—lower (ecological, material) and higher (societal, galactic)—that reveal shared conditions, values, and plots. Vertical narration transcends conflict, fosters dialogue, and invites audiences to reflect on the past and futures still open to collective choice.

**Jon Kohl** is an interpretive planner, author, and researcher whose work explores how narratives shape meaning, decision-making, and collective futures in natural-cultural heritage contexts. He has written multiple books on heritage interpretation as well as a science-fiction romance novel, bridging professional interpretive practice with deep experience in story craft.

## From mining to culture – Heritage interpretation and community voices

### Lucia Leca, Iulia Balint & Constantin Zainea (Romania)

From mining to culture – a short conversation on heritage interpretation as a tool for transition in the Roșia Montană post-industrial region of Romania. After years of relocation campaigns, despite the site's Outstanding Universal Value, followed by a legal case won by the Romanian state and strong civil society support, the community is now shifting from mining toward culture-led development and tourism. Heritage interpretation has become a bridge to community narratives, adapting co-creation tools that involve residents alongside NGOs and institutions. Local community memory holds contrasting viewpoints, while key concepts carry layered meanings. The Roșia Montană Mining Landscape Interpretive Strategy is guided by principles of moving beyond polarisation and fostering openness to deeper understanding without ranking perspectives. Partnerships are emerging as generators of responsible shaping of a common future, while serving as platforms for co-knowledge, mediation, and cultural renewal.

**Lucia Leca** is an architect at the National Institute of Heritage, Romania. Among her responsibilities in the preservation and enhancement of UNESCO sites, she has developed projects dedicated to community engagement in the revitalisation of cultural sites. Her work includes supporting heritage interpretation initiatives and recently she has focused on co-creative methods to foster deeper understanding of places and communities.

**Iulia Balint** is a sociologist and a member of the Roșia Montană World Heritage Association, where she serves as Cultural Manager. She works on projects that promote sustainable cultural-tourism development.

**Constantin Zainea,** the initiator of the 'Trai cu Rost' project, dedicated to sustainable development and responsible tourism in the area, is president of the Roșia Montană Cultural Landscape Association, whose goal is to raise public awareness about protecting mining heritage. He actively participated in organising the Save Roșia Montană campaign.

## Peeping Tourist: Revealing hidden narratives of surveillance and tourism under communism in Albania

### Brunilda Licaj (Albania)

The presentation focuses on tourism in Albania during the communist period, centred on Albturist, the state monopoly that managed foreign visitors. It brings hidden narratives to life within a historic house in Durrës, where visitors can experience recreated accommodations, archival documents, and audiovisual materials. Through this immersive setting, the exhibition reveals how tourists were guided, monitored, and controlled, inviting audiences to engage directly with the past and reflect on the intersections of travel, memory, and state surveillance.

**Brunilda Licaj** PhD is a tourism scholar, curator, and lecturer at Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës. With a PhD in Tourism Marketing and 25+ years' experience, she focuses on destination marketing, sustainable and maritime tourism, and projects like Peeping Tourist, translating archival research into mobile and permanent exhibitions exploring tourism, surveillance, and collective memory under communism.

## Limits, learning and conflicts in the narrative for the design of routes within the Jaguar Corridor Project (Colombian Amazon)

### Evarist March Sarlat (Spain)

[This presentation was accepted to the programme but the author was unable to present]

The Jaguar Corridor project is an initiative sponsored by UNDP for the development of the territory in the Amazon region of the Guaviare Department, from a perspective that includes the conservation of both natural and cultural heritage, and support for the local communities that live there through the promotion of ecotourism practices.

**Evarist March Sarlat** has been an IE Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) trainer since 2014, with a significant level of experience in delivering courses in Latin America, especially Colombia. He is a professional guide specialised in nature, environment and culture related interpretation. Evarist is the Director of Naturalwalks.

## Anti-oppression learning for heritage interpreters

### Linda Norris (USA)

If our institutions are to achieve their full potential and serve their communities in the most effective ways, then reworking museum, heritage and public history pedagogy to better support the growth of radical, anti-oppression museum professionals is critical. Learning takes a lifetime of building understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and the relationships we are engaged in. Anti-oppression learning confined to just one period will always be incomplete, as the fundamental nature of the work is to be able to grow and adapt in relation to an infinitely diverse, complex and changing world. To sustain individual growth across a museum career, we do need anti-oppression pedagogy – but more importantly, we need anti-oppression learners, creating a continual approach and mindset. This interactive workshop will provide concrete tools and approaches for heritage interpreters to explore and develop their own approaches to continued learning.

**Linda Norris** helps cultural organisations and communities reimagine how they tell stories—making them more inclusive, relevant, and impactful. She is co-founder of Creative Futures LLC, a collective that develops dynamic interpretations, builds internal capacity, and fosters community-centred approaches to heritage. She has led training courses on dialogic practice, interpretation and other topics around the globe. Linda is the co-author of Creativity in Museum Practice.

## Balancing emotion and critical thinking in interpretation

### Georgia Pyriovolis (Greece)

[This paper was accepted to the programme but the author was unable to deliver]

This contribution explores how heritage interpretation can balance emotional engagement with critical thinking. It highlights approaches that invite visitors to connect with narratives while reflecting on multiple perspectives. By combining immersive storytelling, reflective prompts, and interactive tools, interpretation can support meaningful, memorable experiences that foster both empathy and analytical awareness. The presentation reviews methods for integrating emotion and inquiry without diminishing either, demonstrating how contemporary heritage practice can encourage visitors to engage thoughtfully with diverse, layered narratives.

**Georgia Pyriovolis** is an English teacher, certified tour leader and mountain guide, as well as a pioneer of Forest Bathing practice in Greece, recognising the profound link that nature plays in cultivating health and wellness. She facilitates nature-based experiences that foster reflection, dialogue and meaningful connection with place.

## A place for conversation: Interpreting complex narratives through dialogue

### Tamara van Dyk & Aarin Crawford (Canada)

Bellevue House National Historic Site is the former home of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. Located in Kingston, Ontario, traditionally Cataracoui/ Ka'tarohkwi—on the lands of the Wendat, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, this 1840s site has been reimagined to critically examine whose stories are told, who determines which narratives are centred, and how visitors engage with legacy. Through renewed exhibits and dialogic programmes, developed in collaboration with Indigenous partners and community members, Bellevue House presents Macdonald's life alongside the lived experiences of those affected by his vision of Canada as a British society. Rather than offering a single authoritative narrative, the site uses facilitated dialogue, role-based activities and a 'many voices' approach to encourage reflection and discussion. This presentation explores how interpretation can redistribute authority, amplify silenced voices, and support visitors in navigating complex histories.

**Tamara van Dyk** has worked across Canada in interpretation, outdoor education and product development to share Canada's diverse natural and cultural heritage for the past 37 years. She shares this passion as the Site & Visitor Experience Manager at Bellevue House where she builds teams, fosters engagement and provides experiences that incorporate an inclusive approach to interpretation.

**Aarin Crawford** is of mixed heritage, Algonquin Anishinaabe and European descent connecting deeply to her mother and father's Indigenous communities of Shabot Obaajiwan and Snimikobi, giving a unique perspective on the world and the changing climate of today. Her desire to live in balance with Mother Earth has led to a 24-year career with Parks Canada. Currently, as Indigenous Liaison, Aarin is working to reconnect other Indigenous Peoples to land and bring untold histories of Canada to the forefront; helping to change how Parks Canada shares hidden truths of the past, to learn from and ensure a more inclusive future.

## From community action to interpretation: A values-based approach at Beļava Manor House

### Ilze Vanaga (Latvia)

Beļava Manor House (Gulbene County, Latvia) is a mid-18th-century Baroque style monument of national importance, housing 11 nationally significant art monuments. The heritage site lost its function in 2019. In response to the lack of involvement of the site owner in the revitalisation of the manor house, in 2024, a group of volunteers launched projects to activate the local heritage community, raise the site's visibility, and connect the municipality (owner) with other stakeholders, following values-based management planning principles. These initiatives resulted in the development of an interpretation plan for the site, based on identified social, historical, economic, aesthetic, and ecological values, as well as helping to spur local political discussions on preservation and development of the site. The case highlights the effectiveness of the values-based heritage interpretation methodologies and the crucial role of heritage leaders.

**Ilze Vanaga** is a heritage projects coordinator and practitioner. Since 2014, Ilze has gained

experience in managing national and international projects (Erasmus+, Interreg, Latvian Culture Capital Foundation, LEADER etc.). For the last two years she has led several initiatives aimed at activating the heritage community of the abandoned Beļava Manor House, identifying its potential functions, developing an interpretation plan and building a bridge between the local community and the municipality.

## Beyond the plate: Food images, memory, and community cartographies in Malaysia

### Kenneth Wong (Malaysia)

This presentation examines how food images and food-based storytelling function as visual and social cartographies in two community-oriented cultural projects in Malaysia: Siamese Reversed and a proposed digital cultural food mapping initiative in Jenjarom New Village. Moving beyond food as an aesthetic display, it argues that food imagery operates as a medium of memory, care, and political imagination in contexts shaped by displacement and cultural loss. Drawing on visual culture, food studies, and curatorial practice, we explore how images of food act as edible memorials, ecological archives, and platforms for collective authorship. Siamese Reversed mobilises communal meals as practices of mourning and remembrance following the demolition of Penang's last Siamese house. The Jenjarom project focuses on the village's 'New Four Treasures'—handmade buns, youtiao, egg sponge cakes, and traditional peanut candy—using photographs and geolocated narratives to document kopitiam culture and everyday food labour as living social infrastructure. Together, these cases propose food imagery as a modest yet powerful tool for negotiating belonging, visibility, and cultural continuity.

**Kenneth Wong** is an independent curator and cultural researcher based in Malaysia. His work explores heritage interpretation through community narratives, food memory, psychogeography, and participatory mapping. A recipient of the Asian Cultural Council Fellowship, he has worked across Southeast Asia and New York, USA, focusing on living heritage, plural narratives, and practice-based interpretation rooted in lived experience, dialogue and co-creation.

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# The role of narratives for 21st century heritage interpretation – Appendix I

## IE Online Symposium 2026

## Questions for the call for proposals

### 1. The evolving role of interpretation and interpreters

How is the profession adapting to new contexts, expectations, and meanings?

- How does the intention to integrate multiple narratives influence the identity and scope of the interpretive profession in the 21st century?
- Can heritage interpretation itself be understood as a meta-narrative practice – one that both creates and critiques narratives and stories?
- What is the relationship between interpretation and mediation – are we moving from interpreters to mediators/ facilitators/ curators of meaning?
- Can anybody be an interpreter – and if so, what does it take?
- Is the term interpreter still justifiable for our profession, given that we now do many more things besides interpreting?
- Is a professional who is interpreting for others always necessary, when dealing with narratives?

### 2. Power, ethics, and agency

Whose stories are told – and who decides what is legitimate, acceptable, or excluded?

- What issues come up if we want to deal with multiple and even contradictory narratives?
- What rank do 'prescribed narratives' have (e.g., the OUV in a WHS)?
- How should we deal with narratives that are factually or ethically questionable?
- Are there narratives that shouldn't be accepted as part of the exchange? If yes, for what reasons and who decides?
- What should we do if narratives are silenced because they challenge institutional or political comfort zones ('cancel culture', 'political correctness',…)?
- How can heritage interpretation contribute to healing or reconciliation when narratives are contested or painful?
- Who should have how much power and means to foster their narratives and share their stories?
- How do we manage power imbalances when co-creating interpretive strategies and plans (between institutions and communities, experts and locals, dominant and marginal voices,…)?

## 3. Narratives, identity, and collective meaning

What is the role of narratives in shaping how people relate to heritage, identity, and place?

- What is the relation between narratives, brainscripts and stories?
- Are narratives, brainscripts and stories the 'human way' of bringing order to things?
- How can narratives shape collective memory, identity, and belonging?
- How do narratives contribute to community cohesion, or conversely, to division?
- How can narratives contribute to a conscious and responsible shaping of our common future?
- How can working with narratives foster civic dialogue and democratic engagement?

## 4. Narratives, themes, and meaning-making

How do narratives interact with the interpretive tools and principles we already use?

- How are narratives defined (in general? in HI? within Interpret Europe?)
- How can we design interpretive experiences that reveal, rather than hide, the existence of multiple narratives?
- To what extent do current discussions about narratives influence how we deal with interpretive themes?
- What formats (digital, performative, participatory) best allow multiple voices to coexist without confusion?
- How can we use 'narrative tension' (contradictions, paradoxes,…) as a creative and reflective device?
- What does an interpretive strategy or plan based on narrative pluralism look like in practice?

## 5. Facts, truth, and epistemic boundaries

How do we balance factual accuracy with narrative richness?

- What role do facts play when dealing with multiple narratives, especially contradicting ones?
- How do we deal with narratives that are not based on proven facts (e.g. local legends)?
- How do we deal with narratives if scientists or experts prove them wrong?
- If narratives are part of the perceptual memory, how can we use this in our interpretive work?
- Can interpretation be a way of contextualising rather than correcting non-factual stories?
- Should we aim to (and can we) separate factual explanation and interpretation?
- How can we teach critical thinking within interpretive experiences without diminishing emotional engagement?

## 6. Skills, learning, and interpretive literacy

What values and what competences do we need to work with multiple narratives?

- What does interpretive literacy require from interpreters/ enablers/ facilitators – and what from the 'wider public'?
- Which tools do we need – as professionals or facilitators – to work with multiple narratives?
- How can we teach skills that help interpreters/ enablers/ facilitators to foster/ invite/ manage multiple narratives.
- How can we teach skills that help participants/ users to accept/ stand/ embrace multiplicity.
- Can LLs become spaces for co-creating new shared narratives, not only preserving existing ones?
- How can we strengthen trainers as mentors to encourage and enable interpretive agents to work with ambiguity and uncertainty?
- What methodological approaches (story circles, reflective practice, dialogic learning,…) can cultivate those skills?

## 7. Digital narratives and AI

How do emerging technologies reshape narrative authority and diversity?

- What ethical frameworks should guide the use of AI in heritage interpretation?
- Can AI help us collect neglected narratives, or does it mainly reproduce dominant ones?
- Can AI's ability to collect multiple perspectives from the internet lead to false or fake pluralism?
- Who is setting or controlling the algorithms, and what happens once AI starts controlling the algorithms itself?
- How do digital storytelling and AI-generated content affect authenticity and authorship?
- Can interpretive literacy become a safeguard against misinformation and algorithmic bias?