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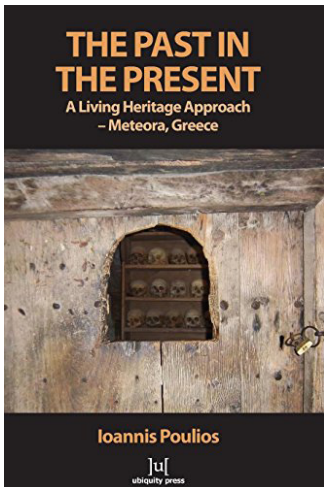
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REVIEWS

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**The Past in the Present.
A living Heritage Approach
- Meteora (Greece)**
[Ioannis Poulios]

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Even to the ordinary tourist visiting the Renaissance miracles of Florence, the dominating mosques of Istanbul or just a rural byzantine chapel, the problem of accommodating his travelling curiosity along with the needs of a pious pilgrim is quite obvious. Allocated spaces and timed visits or closure of the site on specific dates for different groups are some of the measures practised to resolve parallel or even conflicting uses of sacred spaces still in use. Problems like these become a greater challenge to manage when you bring into the equation communities that actually live in or around the monument and use it, fulfilling its original function, as for example in Angkor, Cambodia or Uluru-Kata Tjuta park, Australia. In dealing with these issues one might wonder: Is there a set of guidelines to resolve ethics issues in heritage management

of sacred sites in use, or even better is there a platform to discuss good practices and sustainability over political correctness?

Ioannis Poulios introduces us to such a complex terrain of appreciations, problems and possible resolutions concerning the byzantine Meteora monastic complex in central Greece. In his book, based on his 2008 PhD thesis, he examines a number of examples, the relevant bibliography, a variety of written sources, and some interviews. Ioannis links his analysis of Meteora with the 'living heritage' concept, a pattern developed by ICCROM[1], aspiring to overcome the contemporary, static conservation models, towards a more interactive, empowering and people-centred approach (ICCROM 2015). The book is divided in three parts and fifteen small chapters with frequent overview and conclusion paragraphs. Briefly, in the short first part he discusses the current conservation models; in the second, the Meteora monastic site, as a case study; and in the third part his proposal on the 'living heritage' concept.

World Heritage and the preservation of material authenticity

The urge to preserve 'our common heritage' was developed in the post-war climate of friendship and partnership in Europe, and put into practice with the establishment of intergovernmental organisations (UNESCO: 1945, ICOM: 1946) aiming to preserve and steward the tangible markers of the European identity, coming from the past. The 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage condensed that task into the establishment of a list to host the 'outstanding' heritage of mankind (UNESCO 1972).

Various voices critiqued the World Heritage List as early as the 1980s. Critical points -among others- were the absolute dominance

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1 ICCROM: International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property

of a top-down, western narrative in the appreciation and selection of the sites to be inscribed on the List, accompanied by the relevant, singular, scientific rhetoric in heritage interpretation and management (e.g. Sullivan 2004; Miura 2005). These markers of 'world heritage' also marginalised alternative views and uses of the sites in question and prescribed conservation practices that emphasised the physical carrier, the original material of the monuments, a pattern inspired mainly by the remains of the Greco-roman civilisation and eloquently described in the 1964 Venice Charter (ICOMOS 1964).

The critique had direct results and various attempts were made to amend the aforementioned issues[2]. This was backed by the general climate in heritage studies, infused in the postmodern trend, shifting towards a more social, reflective and open appreciation of cultural heritage. Decolonisation and other political parameters played their part but probably the most important milestone in this process was the 1999 Burra Charter prepared by Australia ICOMOS[3] that apart from prescribing participatory processes in the management of sites, configured a values-based approach in assessing the significance of cultural heritage, enveloping all the relevant stakeholders (ICOMOS 1999). The social value of cultural heritage and the importance of participatory management was further highlighted by a number of later moves, some in favour of indigenous mindsets, such as the inscription of East Renell on the List, a site "under customary land ownership and management" (UNESCO 2015a), LINKS project (UNESCO 2015b) or the establishment of the List of World Heritage in Danger with the upgraded role of the citizens in the inscription of sites (UNESCO 2015c; Lekakis 2011).

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2 See, e.g., the Operational Guidelines of the 1972 Convention published from 1990s onwards (Bortolotto 2007: 40).

3 Australia ICOMOS: The Australian chapter of the professional organisation offering advice to UNESCO on World Heritage Sites

What is more, the critique and the social turn in heritage management powered an important -although inhomogeneous- corpus of analyses and directives, prominent in the bibliography of heritage management. A number of these were actually compiled by Greek scholars and examined World Heritage Sites to locate relevant issues 'at a greater scale and in clearer focus' (e.g. Pantzou 2009; Alexopoulos 2010; Sakellariadi 2011). Ioannis' attempt is inscribed at the same reviewing process (Poulios 2008), focusing specifically on the exclusion of local communities, discontinuities in the original function of the monastic site of Meteora and the chimerical attempt to preserve authenticity in modern management practices.

Breathing sites

The latter points drew him near to the 'living heritage approach'. This model is basically a community-based approach in conservation, evolved in the previously described reflective climate by ICCROM for sacred sites of South-Eastern Asia, where their original function is still served by communities dwelling near or inside the ancient structures, forming an integral constituent of the site (Stovel et al 2005; ICCROM 2015). The 'living heritage approach' builds on the values-based model, giving priority to the living dimension of heritage, and could be examined in parallel to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, aimed at the preservation of oral traditions, skills and knowledge, performances and rituals, etc.; the cultural diversity of the human memory (UNESCO 2003).

Meteora Monastic Complex

Perched on top of natural sandstone pillars in central Greece, the six surviving monasteries named 'Meteora', literally meaning 'suspended

in mid-air', are the second largest monastic complex in Greece. Monks are said to have occupied the space as early as the 9th c. and the impressive sites of orthodox worship started being formed in the following centuries and further developed in 14th-16th c.

Meteora were abandoned during WWII and the Greek Civil War and re-occupied in 1950s. In this "afterlife" of the site (Pantzou 2009), parallel to the rekindling of monasticism and the occupation of the monasteries by monks that modified available space to serve their growing needs, new stakeholders appeared. The Greek State funded a number of restorations for touristic use, in accordance with the developmental activities in the wider vicinity, as Meteora turned into an important site-stop on the route Athens-Larissa and the more touristic Athens-Delphi-Ioannina-Metsovo. The potential was quickly recognised by the surrounding communities that orientated towards the tertiary sector of the economy at the expense of the other two.

Conflicting appreciations

Polyphony in the management of Meteora was not addressed at any stage (e.g. p.73-77). On the contrary, in this peculiar power struggle, the monasteries emerged as a key player. The status of the Church of Greece, as a legal entity governed by public law and owner of monuments in religious use, the independent and self-managed character of the orthodox monasteries, and mainly entrance revenue collected, granted them autonomy in the management of the site. Since the monasteries' Assembly was inactive and no collective decisions could be taken, this autonomy was expressed in case-by-case decisions on space syntax (the original meaning of which is thoroughly discussed in chapters 7 & 10), such as allocating touristic and not accessible spaces, changing uses of historical edifices for exhibitions and sightseeing, building

or upgrading accessibility infrastructure, or even constructing new buildings (as is the case of the Roussanou Monastery and the five-storey building erected to house the monks) while tourists occupied the original structures (80-87). Most of these were designed and implemented without the Ministry of Culture's (Ministry) approval, causing damages to the original fabric of the monuments and the landscape in general.

Ioannis maintains that this opening to the public/tourists, an enigmatic stance considering the anchoritic purpose of the monasteries, is related to the philanthropic-missionary activities run by extra-muros, ecclesiastical organisations that commenced in the 1960s (66-71). These diverge from the original monastic life and focus on outward activities, such as welcoming visitors in monasteries, publications, etc. However, to the eyes of the uninitiated the aforementioned activities cannot be disengaged from business-oriented activities organised by Monasteries and the Church around Greece, as in the case of the Prophet Ilias Monastery at Thera and the consequences of its 'religious tourism project' on the archaeological site of Aigletes Apollo and the wider Natura 2000 landscape in Anafi island (Thermou 2008; Kazalotti 2009; Kazalotti 2010) or the 'hotel project' of the Church in the area of the historic military hospital of Athens (Iliopoulou 2007).

On a parallel universe of values and priorities, the Ministry continued applying its agenda on Meteora, focusing on protection and touristic use. In 1967 Meteora were recognised as one site, while in 1988 the site was enlisted in the World Heritage List (under the Criteria i, ii, iv, v). Buffer zones were scheduled in the 1990s and the site was declared 'holy' in 1995. These activities were again designed and implemented without the participation of the Monasteries or the local communities, whose touristic orientation did not converge with the Monasteries' views; Ioannis mentions a study commissioned by the local administration for the regulation

of the touristic activity that was turned down by the Monasteries, without further discussion (77-79).

Towards a 'living' or a 'zombie' heritage approach?

Meteora is currently a widely-known site, destination for pilgrims, nature lovers, climbers and, in general, for more than a million tourists annually. Its iconic views are referenced in a wide spectrum of cultural products spanning from scientific studies to the location of the Eyrie in HBO's fantasy serial drama Game of Thrones.

However, examining the canvas of conflicting views and practices, as set out by Ioannis, one could easily observe that consensus management is not a visible goal in the near future. But could this be resolved through the 'living heritage approach'?

The concept provides an interesting framework, although quite wide, theoretical and not free from pitfalls. Apart from the positive feeds, there are points that need systematic exploration and justification.

The 'living heritage approach' is described as an undemocratic twist (130) of the values-based model, in favour of the 'core community', the community that has an established relation with the site. The Holy Grail is the preservation of continuity and original function that should be preserved and invested upon. This is directly related to the indigenous archaeology schemata of respect and traditional management patterns, transferred to western communities (e.g. Atalay 2007), attempting to formalise an organic process that aids the community to continue living in its ways without imposing external concepts of heritage management.

However, the quest of continuity assembles a precarious environment, already known in the critique of the national appropriation of 'cultural property' (Lekakis 2012), where the nation-states call upon a glorious, uncontaminated and clearly imagined past. In this mode, modernisation could be bluntly mourned as a disruption in continuity (25-26), evoking a dead-end nostalgia for the lost or even problematic interpretation of that uncontaminated past (see for example the concept of 'indigeneity' used for the pre-modern past of rural Greece, Hamilakis 2008). This blanket perception blurs the need to systematically examine the 'disruptions' (e.g. in the Meteora case: the introduction of female Monasteries in 1920s, the abandonment during WWII, or the 1950s-1960s introduction of tourism) and especially prevents reworking of the catalytic disruption: our approach to the past, through the concept of cultural heritage.

In our case, continuity in Meteora is related to the modus operandi of the orthodox monasteries, the 'Tradition'; a canonistic set of rules, some of which God-given, that are embodied through the introverted daily life of the monastery's focus on the worship of God. However, the interpretation of the 'Tradition' is not a unanimous process and, far from our realm, lies with the Head Monk/Abbot of each monastery. Also, it seems that it can be 'updated', according to surrounding socio-political factors, as the moving of the Roussanou monks to a new building reveals, or the philanthropic-missionary trend described above, or the environmentally conscious turn of the patriarchate and the silent declaration of the current head as the 'Green Patriarch', from late 1990s onwards (Papagiannidis 2000).

Finally, preserving continuity and sacralising new creations in heritage sites, endangers the original fabric and tangible or intangible values related to them, cultivating conflicts and bringing the life in the monastery at a stark contrast with the practices of

the Ministry and the relevant law framework that even the Church should abide by. This manichaeistic approach is far from useful, as it undermines cooperation and imposes new hierarchies, creating in the end semi-alive heritage sites.

Living happily ever after

It seems that this exact exposure of contrasting interests, values and practices among stakeholders is the main benefit of the 'living heritage approach' in this book. Apart from ticking various politically correct boxes of participation, sustainability etc., if systematically analysed, the concept could provide the platform to debate heritage management in inhabited places by communities that claim special, even religious, affinities with the remains. Considering the latter, it could actively be engaged in the re-interpretation of 'holy sites', as declared by the Ministry (e.g. Law 2351/1995), towards an alternative understanding, probably more people-centred, of heritage sites in Greece.

It seems that this is the main focus of the author as well, i.e. providing a space for debate, as the open access version of the book published by Ubiquity Press and the recent discussion in the seminars of the Association of Heritage Managers in Greece (ΕΣΔΙΑΠΟΚ) reveal. These actions along with his intention to examine the intangible aspect may lead to a much-needed, applicable reframing of the 'living heritage approach'.

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