Encoding and Interpreting Neolithic Sites: World Heritage Temples in Malta

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Understanding and interpreting landscapes entails the encoding of symbols and deciphering of codes left on the palimpsest. Interpreting the Neolithic and more significantly Neolithic temple sites, is challenging and rife with contested meanings. The overall landscape is used by adherents of the New Religious Movements, on faith-based visits, and as an extension, spiritual fulfilment is sought in the Neolithic temples of Malta. The same landscape is then part of both the inner and outer pilgrimage in the context of not only the modern designer religions, but also of the established religions. This paper presents a case study of the Neolithic temple sites located in the Maltese Islands, which are significantly located at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. The paper suggests that although these are shared spaces they are also contested space as the interpretation of these sites are firmly biased.

Key Words: New Religious Movements, temples, landscape, shared space, pilgrimage, interpretation, curators, tourist guides, custodians

Introduction

This paper presents a case study of the Neolithic temple sites located in the Maltese Islands, which are significantly located at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea. Malta may be, for the purpose of faith-based tourism, regarded as a Sacred Island (Munro, 2017), and this opinion has found some support in early archaeology too. Themistocles Zammit (1930), regarded as the father of Maltese archaeology, called Malta 'the holy island of Neolithic Faith' while Zuntz (1971:4) labelled it *isola sacra* – a sacred island.

According to Avellino and Cassar (2017) this unique legacy was used as part of the new product offer when the islands' tourism product started to undergo a switch from being solely reliant on the British Market to a more European-centric focus. To highlight this Avellino and Cassar, (2017) quote an excerpt from *DK Eyewitness Top 10 Travel Guide* which succinctly describes the varied Maltese landscape:

> The tiny Maltese archipelago, floating on the cusp of Europe and Africa, has been coveted and invaded throughout its history. The Knights of St John (later of Malta) bequeathed palaces, fortresses and the glorious golden capital Valletta, while the British left red telephone boxes, iced buns and a predilection for tea.

> It was the islands' earliest settlers who left the most spectacular legacy: the extraordinary megalithic temples, unparalleled elsewhere in the world. Malta, the largest island, has the most cosmopolitan resorts and the edge in cultural treasures, while sleepy Gozo and tiny Comino offer unspoilt countryside and a gentler pace (Gallagher 2007:6).

The Maltese Landscape

These varied landscapes bear a multiple of visible remains of the ancient past. A landscape is composed of different layers: not just physical but also cultural and spiritual which need interpretation., and according to Interpret Europe,[1] 'interpretation reveals the significance of the site or objects which visitors can understand and appreciate'. Arising from the many and varied forms of interpretation, pilgrims and faith-travellers regard a Malta to possess a wealth of sites and landscapes which they consider to be sacred landscapes.

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1. http://www.interpret-europe.net/feet/home/heritage-interpretation.html

Figure 1 : The Southern Wall of Ħaġar Qim Temple in Malta

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/Hagar_Quim_II.jpg

The landscape is a locus for insider and outsider meanings (de Haan & van der Duim, 2008; Knudsen, Metro-Roland, Soper, & Greer, 2008; Avellino, 2016:24). Understanding and interpreting landscapes entails the encoding of symbols and deciphering of codes left on the palimpsest. Interpreting Neolithic and more significantly, Neolithic temple sites is challenging and rife with contested meanings.

Davidson and Gitlitz suggest that the physical, outer journey is as important as the spiritual, inner journey or inner pilgrimage, facilitating change and enlightenment (2002:I, xvii), perceivably leading to fulfilment. Thus, the Maltese Neolithic Temple Landscape is fit to be appropriated by adherents of the New Religious Movements (NRM), while on faith-based visits to the islands, as an extension of their spiritual fulfilment. Landscapes are thus part of both the inner and outer pilgrimage in the context of not only the NRM, but also of the established religions.

Change is inherent in all cultures (Bruner, 2005:3), and the manifestations of it, together with one's understanding of it, also changes (Avellino, 2016:45). This poses numerous challenges to the interpreters and managers of these sites as although the physical environment may not have undergone many drastic changes, it is a repository of collective memory and identity (Huff, 2008 in Knudsen *et al.*, 2008; Mitchell, 2007), particularly when viewed from a nationalistic perspective.

The meanings which are attached to the landscape, are conditioned by the stories which are told by competing and cooperating actors and agents (Avellino, 2016:56). Lash & Urry (1987, in Park & Stephenson, 2007:55) argue that in the context of the changing tourism product, the older 'relatively uniform, modernist and ''auratic'' historical explanations' that were normally structured around some form of national history has given way to explanations and representations which are more varied, vernacular and regional and what could also be classified as postmodernist.

New Religious Movements in Malta

In the context of this article, the landscape referred to, belongs to two very iconic Neolithic sites on the south-west coast of Malta, the temples of Ħaġar Qim (Figures 1 & 2) and Mnajdra (Figures 3 & 4). These two sites, both about 5,600 years old, are situated within a contemporary construct of an archaeological park and lie circa 500 meters apart. The surrounding landscape is gently sloped, with low hills on one side

Figure 2 : Entrance to the Megalithic Temple of Ħaġar Qim in Malta

Berthold Werner- https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/09/Malta_Hagar_Qim_BW_2011-10-04_16-39-32.JPG

and the sea on the other. It is one of the few places in Malta where there are no modern buildings (besides the modern tent covering the temples) and where traffic cannot be heard.

These stone monuments or temples, for the lack of a better word, are managed by Heritage Malta, a parastatal organisation charged with the management, maintenance and interpretation of a number of cultural heritage sites. Although Heritage Malta provides different opening times to cater for NRM groups, there is no dedicated NRM interpretation available in the visitors' centre, and the general public is presented with a variation of views and histories firmly based on archaeology. Tourists will not be able to read about the alternative use of temples.

The NRM are a very diverse and somewhat secretive segment of the religious landscape and at present still at its fringe in Malta. Worldwide, however, NRM have become recognised religions in many countries. NRM adherents seek to fulfil needs which the historic Church cannot or no longer will fulfil, thus, some groups go back to their claimed or ideologically perceived cultural roots before Christianity arrived in their countries (Aitamurto and Simpson, 2013). Many are based on historical values of religions past or on symbolical or perceived values of the Neolithic or druidic past, such as seeking relationship with one's ancestors, predicting the future, fertility and the celebration of the cycles of life and death (Hutton, 1999). Some NRM take a new approach, not based on past or existing religions, while others are what Rountree (2002, 2003) labels as 'designer' religions, based on modern needs.

The NRM adherents approach their religion from the angle of lived religious experience and their ideals may differ from the official interpretation of Malta's Neolithic temples. For the NRM, this is a sacred landscape. For most tourists, Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra form part of a pretty landscape with a fine view, however, for some visitors the temple sites may have magical qualities or even be enchanted.

Reader (2015) argues that when new religions develop, they also look for places to go to for their pilgrimages or spiritual travels. In the case of Malta, the Neolithic
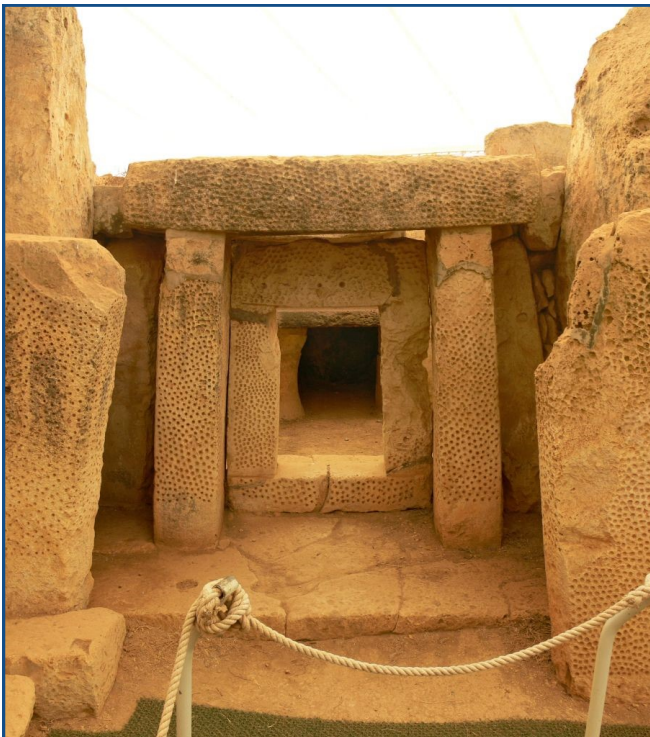
Figure 3 : Panoramic View of Lower Temple at Mnajdra

G. Mannaerts - https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Mnajdra_03.jpg

sites are real, but it is unknown what exactly these Neolithic people believed in, although cautious predictions can be made. These modern religions are not grounded in the historic reality or continuation of a cult or belief once present in the Neolithic sites of Malta; nonetheless, a replication takes place on the ritual level, as the NRM accept that the Maltese temples form part of the origin of their faith, and that the Mother Goddess, or Nature, or Earth itself is the

focal point of the pilgrimage. A unifying factor for the NRM groups may be the potency of the mystery which is empowered by the lingering vestiges of the divine in the temples and the surrounding sacred landscape.

The importance of landscape for the fulfilment of this kind of spiritual travel, lies also in the understanding that landscape may trigger an incentive or disincentive for fulfilment (Munro, 2017). Notwithstanding the discussion of differences between the idea of a pilgrim and of a tourist, as per the well-known pilgrim-tourist dichotomy of Smith (1992), a sacred landscape or a sacred site within a landscape may not only provide simultaneously a number of different experiences to different categories of visitors (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Moreover, it may also provoke a shift within the same visitor from one experience to another (Munro, 2017).

Malta- the Sacred Isle and the 'Third Space'

The Neolithic sites of Malta went through a process of being an externalisation of an indigenous cult present in Malta between roughly 5,600 and 4,500 years ago (Trump, 2002), then modified or neglected until early modern times, when curiosity to the past sparked some general interests. At present, these sites are one of the most important elements in the tourism product of Malta, while alternative use by NRM is on the rise.

Olsen (2006) remarks that the touristification of religious sites consists of an overlap between the religious and the touristic space; he calls this the duality of space, while Collins-Kreiner prefers to call this shared duality in religious sites a 'third space'. Shared space is then a concept applied to the Maltese

Figure 4 : Porthole slab in Mnajdra temple, Qrendi, Malta

Sudika - https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Sudika_Mnajdra_porthole.jpg

landscape and its ancient sites, although the interpretation of that landscape and sites is still firmly one-sided and mostly controlled by authorised heritage custodians.

Cohen (1992) and Smith (1992) proposed the idea of third space in order to avoid the somewhat simplified notions of faith-based visitor or holidaymaker as pilgrim and tourist respectively, when such categories share the same space or site. Collins-Kreiner (2010), proposes that the third space concept also acknowledges, both in implicit and explicit terms, that pilgrims and tourists are interdependent entities and that the social construction of a site can be sacred and secular at the same time.

It is acknowledged in the research literature, however, that people's experiences at sacred places will most likely be different. Nyaupane *et al*. (2015) found in research literature a confirmation that, based on the visitors' religion or religious affiliation, they would experience sacred sites differently.

Rountree (2010) claims that the dichotomy between the emic and etic perspective - that of the pilgrim versus tourist and tourist versus locals - is not especially relevant when one tries to understand the multiple interpretations, values and functions of the Maltese Neolithic structures. Her research among special interest groups of pilgrim-tourists, consisting of Neo-Pagans, Wiccans and Goddess-followers, shows that such visitors contest the official interpretation and management of sites and are found in all the groups of the pilgrim-tourist continuum. Within the continuum of visitors and stakeholders, such groups are finding unexpected dissidents and unforeseen sympathisers.

From this perception it follows that persons may also interpret their own experience in a different and personal manner and this can be quite diverse from the intended experience offered by the site (Biran *et al*., 2006). One may visit an archaeological Neolithic site and have a profound religious experience and also marvel about the architecture of the site. Thus, the concept of the third space also implies a general usage only and may exclude particular purposes.

Some of these groups of visitors may want to visit a site when there are only like-minded people present, in order to preserve their privacy, dignity and freedom of religion. This helps them to enjoy their type of meaningful experience to the full without being bothered by curious outsiders, being stared at by custodians or being laughed at by other visitors who do

not understand or appreciate the meaning of the experience. These experiences can be a Catholic Mass in a foreign language, a concert in a church for the exclusive enjoyment of a particular group, or a ritual in a Neolithic temple by NRM.

Interpreting the Landscape

The roles that tourists and locals play are never straightforward: it becomes even more complex when mediators or brokers enter the fray (Avellino, 2016:42). Practising on site interpreters and guides feel that the work they do when they are taking visitors around has the most impact on what a visitor will take in to inform the experience, however, in many situations this is not the case. The front-liners such as guides, and interpreters as well as media such as hand held guides or apps are to a varied extent influenced or even dictated to by the back end of the system: namely, the curators, tour operators, academics and experts such as architects, archaeologists, historians and so on. The tourism industry is an arena where discourses concerning the landscape, culture and nature of tourist places are represented (Norton, 1996:358 in Avellino, 2016:42) and dynamically exchanged and challenged. One of the main reasons for this is that that landscape is the reification of identity (Huff, in Knudsen *et al*., 2008). This resonates with Mitchell's assertion that the landscape is a 'repository of memory both individual and collective [and] is a site of and for identity' (2007:42). For visitors, the sacred landscape is the space where the feelings and emotions associated with identity, belonging, memory and meaning are negotiated. Through tourism, the palimpsest landscapes are deciphered and recorded (Knudsen *et al*., 2008), through a process of re-definition of place identity (Avellino, 2016a:80).

Research Findings

The data for this paper were collected by the authors between 2010 and 2017, mainly through participant observation and interviews, so as to gather rich ethnographic data. The following section notes the significant points identified in this research.

Tourist guides, being mostly free-lancers, are more at liberty than staff employed at a particular museum or site, to interpret a location or landscape in any manner they like, often depending on their audience. At times, a tour operator or travel agent based on their clients demands, will request to a specific type of interpretation (i.e. there is a group from a Catholic institute, and the interpretation should be tailor-made for them).

Tourist guides, in many cases, when in national sites, can say whatever they feel necessary, but preferably based on solid arguments. Sometimes this is not the case, and this causes irritation with the curators. There are indeed among this profession, the good, the bad and the awful. One curator of an archaeological site, told one of the researchers that they were appalled by the lies the tourist guides sometimes tell. According to this curator, the tourist guides should start with the right chronology and stick to the archaeological knowledge, not go about in fantasies. A reaction from a tourist guide was that chronology is something which is often told outside the museum, or on-site at a different temple, otherwise the visit will take way too long, or becomes too boring or repetitious. The content of their narrative, and the emphasis here is on story-telling, it is not telling the archaeological truth (whatever that may be at the moment). Tourist guides prefer to use their freedom to explain a wider 'credible interpretation' rather than a narrow 'truth'. Telling the 'Truth' does not make for good story-telling, as it often runs into pedantry. Of course, if a guide is leading a group of archaeologists, then archaeology it will be. If the guide has a group of Mother Goddess followers, who are not the least bit interested in the topic of archaeological truth, then it is the Mother Goddess who centres in the story telling.

One tourist guide informed the researchers that to ensure that she stays informed of all the latest developments and to continue with her professional development, she attends all the educational events organised by the national as well as the ecclesiastical authorities. She recently attended a hands-on event which involved a leading academic well-versed in Neolithic sites. The academic asked her to lead the group, but she refused and asked the academic to do so, so as to compare with her own way of interpreting the site. She informed us that what she was exposed to, that is the interpretation given by the academic as well as an ex-curator of the site was near-identical to what she tells her visitors.

The points which are raised above also indicate that the curators, custodians and some guides tend to be focused on facts such as dates and names. However, professional interpretation aims to go beyond that, as it is now being incorporated in the management function of sites: it provides for the means of communicating or explaining to visitors the significance of the place they are visiting, so that their visit experience is enhanced (Avellino-Stewart. 2016:97). Good interpreters know that factual information is the basis, but they will also ensure that they 'reveal' the meaning behind the facts which address the visitors' need for information and they also will address the emotional and sensory aspects through animation and story telling (Avellino-Stewart, 2016; Munro, 2017).

> Interpretation is a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource (NAI, 2016).

It constitutes a communication path, a bridge, which connects audiences with tangible and intangible phenomena (Avellino-Stewart, 2016). From the researchers' communication with visitors, this does not always happen at the Neolithic sites.

Most of the guides of foreign origin in Malta obviously do not have that intrinsic Maltese identity drive and are less 'Maltese' in their delivery but often compensate this lack of local sentiment by having adopted an appreciation for the Maltese way of doing things. In this way, a Maltese guide of German origin can still convey 'Malteseness' to the visitors. However, a foreign guide, coming from abroad will lack any local knowledge and will present Malta to the foreign visitors through foreign eyes. The result is then rather cold, clinical and distant, and adds little or nothing to the visitors' experience of being in Malta, instead of getting a full-sensory experience of the country, warts and all.

The EU, in its drive to create a mobile workforce throughout Europe, encourages foreign tourist guides to work in countries other than their own. This is not good news for cultural diversity and cross-cultural interpretation, because without the local knowledge, identity or sentiment, a great deal of different views and insights are withheld from the paying visitor. In the worst-case scenario, they might just as well have stayed home in front of the television.

Conclusion

This paper highlights two important issues: firstly the Neolithic sites on the Maltese islands are unique and attract all forms of tourism, ranging from fervent pro-Catholics to neo-pagans. If the island is to respect all visitors, then the service providers such as curators, custodians, guides as well as cultural brokers such as travel agents and tour operators must recognise that there are different markets with different needs and requirements. The second point is that most of the service providers mentioned above do not possess interpretation or delivery skills. They do not

understand that good interpretation is not just edutainment (education and entertainment) but also a platform for thought provoking discussion and discovery (Avellino-Stewart, 2016). This means that a guide or a curator cannot be an expert in all areas, with the understanding that guides have a wide knowledge about many things and curators a deep knowledge of fewer things (Munro, 2107). The researchers recommend that Interpretation becomes part of the educational programme for persons such as those involved with guiding, curatorship and so on, so that they are given the necessary tools and inspiration so as to provide not only education and entertainment on site, but a spiritually and emotionally fulfilling experience at locations such as the Temple sites of Malta

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