

## **Interpretation at Religious Heritage Sites**

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### **Abstract**

This paper delves into the concepts, challenges, and techniques associated with heritage interpretation at sacred sites. The goal is to offer guidance on creating a meaningful experience through an efficient heritage interpretation system at holy sites. A qualitative literature review consolidates peer-reviewed papers, reports, case studies, and online resources on interpretation methods, challenges, and resolutions. The paper initially analyzes heritage interpretation, including its goals and elements. The study focuses on the difficulties associated with interpreting religious heritage destinations. It highlights the importance of having spiritually trained guides and site managers who can effectively convey the sacred message of these sites rather than simply providing information about their historical and architectural aspects. Furthermore, the paper outlines techniques to improve visitor experiences, including establishing a welcoming atmosphere, integrating spiritual elements, and fostering a better comprehension of the site's importance. By implementing these measures, religious heritage sites can enhance interreligious harmony, conserve religious legacy, and encourage cross-cultural understanding.

### **1. Introduction**

Religion has historically been the main driving force behind heritage production throughout human history (De-Caro, 2017). Therefore, religious heritage sites are vessels where historical events unfold and time transforms into history (Saengphueng, 2011). The concept of sacred space exists across various faiths and each religion manifests it in distinct ways concerning the construction, usage, perspective, accessibility, purpose, and conservation (Aulet & Vidal, 2018). These holy sites hold profound significance for religious individuals, who perceive them as the home of the divine. Consequently, they safeguard and manage these sites while utilizing them to transmit cultural values and foster collective identities (Aulet & Vidal, 2018).

The significant accomplishment in creating religious sites is shown in the numerous global

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heritage sites designated for their spiritual importance. Around 20% of the sites listed on the World Heritage List have connections to religion or spirituality. Many world heritage sites derive their "Outstanding Universal Values" from significant spiritual meanings (Rico, 2021).

Aulet and Sureda (2019) highlight the universal value of religious heritage sites by emphasizing the following aspects:

- These sites acquire their divine nature through their association with the sacred, serving as a gateway between the earthly realm and the cosmos.
- They act as spiritual centers where individuals can engage with their inner selves, replenish their energies, and open themselves to the world.
- They possess an aura of transcendence, set apart from the profane, representing a realm of immortality.
- These sites are inclusive, welcoming people of various cultures and religions, facilitating interfaith interactions.
- Religious heritage sites foster the creation and dissemination of sacred symbolism that transcends specific religions, promoting interreligious dialogue and interaction among diverse religious groups.

Religious heritage sites are places of interfaith gathering as they attract believers and non-believers alike (Bilim & Düzgüner, 2015). In other words, religious visitors are not the only ones who visit religious shrines; secular visitors are also popular at religious locations (Rojo, 2007). Indeed, it has been debated that secular tourists are attracted to religious heritage monuments more than their faith-based counterparts (Orekat, 2016). Spiritually oriented travel has been widespread and popular in recent decades, accounting for a sizable share of worldwide tourism and growing rapidly (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). According to the World Tourism Organization, the global religious tourism sector in 2017 was worth \$18 billion and annually attracts around 300 to 330 million passengers (Vidal-Casellas et al., 2019), with roughly 600 million national and international religious journeys taking place annually (Ali & Cobanoglu, 2020).

As illustrated above, visiting religious heritage sites has become increasingly popular among visitors from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, including those not practicing religion. People are motivated by curiosity about different beliefs and cultures and by these architectural landmarks' beauty and historical significance (Blackwell, 2007). Therefore, religious heritage sites are considered a means of interreligious and intercultural communication as they increase

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visitor knowledge of the culture that created them (Bilim & Düzgüner, 2015). Hence, the interpretation of religious heritage sites, which differ from others because they are associated with the sacred, holds significant importance in challenging stereotypes, dispelling misconceptions, and promoting cultural exchange and peaceful coexistence.

Indeed, these heritage sites are more responsible for presenting religious traditions, conveying sacred messages, bridging cultural gaps, and acquainting visitors with the unfamiliar religious culture associated with the site. Consequently, developing an effective interpretation plan becomes crucial for successful communication (Aulet & Sureda, 2019). Therefore, this paper aims to explore the different interpretative strategies that can effectively address the challenges of religious heritage sites.

## 2. Objectives

The aim of this paper is to

- Explain the concept of Heritage Interpretation and its underlying objectives and principles.
- Explore the various effective Interpretive tools utilized at religious Heritage Sites.
- View the challenges faced in the interpretation of Religious Heritage Sites.
- Discuss strategies for creating a more meaningful visitor experience at these sites.
- Highlight the benefits derived from implementing an effective Heritage Interpretation system at sacred sites.

## 3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative literature review methodology to analyze previous research and practices related to heritage interpretation at religious sites. Literature was gathered by searching academic databases in Google Scholar through keywords such as "heritage interpretation," "religious heritage sites," "visitor experiences at sacred places," and "strategies for interpreting cultural-religious sites." The literature was chosen for examination because it pertained to the principles of interpretation, visitor experiences, challenges, and strategies in the context of religious heritage places. Seventeen sources were studied in the literature to uncover common themes related to interpretation, characteristics of effective practices, and challenges specific to religious contexts.

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## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. what is Heritage Interpretation about?**

Interpretation serves as a means of transferring culture and effectively communicating the core message of heritage (Nowacki, 2012). However, it is essential to distinguish between simply presenting information about a historical place and truly interpreting a historical site (Aulet & Sureda, 2019). Simon McArthur (1998) emphasizes that interpretation goes beyond the delivery methods, whether a tourist center, label, pamphlet, slide presentation or play. Proper interpretation stirs individuals, challenges their assumptions, and ignites their desire to learn. It enhances visitors' experiences and gives them a memorable and immersive way to remember and relive their encounters with heritage (HERCULTOUR, 2018).

Tilden (1957) defines heritage interpretation as a recreational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships through direct contact with the resource or illustrative media, going beyond the mere communication of factual information. Aldridge (1975) describes interpretation as the art of explaining the role of human beings in their environment, raising awareness of the importance of this interaction, and fostering a desire to contribute to environmental conservation. The National Association for Interpretation (2000) defines interpretation as a communication process that establishes emotional and intellectual connections between the audience's interests and the inherent meanings of the resource (HERCULTOUR, 2018). The Spanish Interpretation Center defines heritage interpretation as the art of revealing, on-site, the sense of natural, cultural, and historical heritage to leisure visitors (HERCULTOUR, 2018).

The above definitions have many similarities; they focus on a communication process that is intended to assist individuals in forming emotional and intellectual ties with a cultural or natural heritage asset.

The ultimate goals of heritage interpretation aim to preserve and promote heritage, fostering visitor understanding of the significance of places, history, and the environment. It also strives to educate and inspire visitors to engage in environmentally and culturally responsible actions (Grimwade & Carter, 2000).

#### **4.2. Principles and Elements of Effective Heritage Interpretation**

Tilden (1957) came up with six principles for a successful approach to heritage interpretations that are still effective today:

- 1- The interpretation system should be tailored to visitors' unique personalities and past experiences for authentic engagement with visitors.
- 2- Interpretation is inspired by or based on information. But they are not the same thing. However, any interpretation contains information.
- 3- Interpretation is an art that combines different skills to understand the themes given.
- 4- Interpretation seeks provocation rather than instruction.
- 5- Interpretation must convey the whole rather than isolated pieces
- 6- The interpretation system that communicates with children up to twelve should not be diluted from the presentation to adults but needs different and separate techniques.

Tilkin (2016) identifies three foundational ideas in heritage interpretation based on Tilden's Principles. An interpretation system should:

- Provoke the visitor's interest and curiosity by offering new ideas or something out of the ordinary.
- Relate the prior knowledge and experiences of the visitors to the topics we want to impart to them.
- Reveal the core message of the site in a way that the visitor will remember.

#### **4.3. Interpretive Strategies for Religious Heritage Sites**

Nowacki (2012) presents two interpretive techniques applicable to any religious heritage space: personal and non-personal. The distinction lies in the level of interaction between the audience and the interpreter. Non-personal methods encompass a range of tools such as signs, printed materials, communication channels, autonomous routes, audiovisual devices, interpretive exhibitions, and visitor centers. In contrast, personal media involves guided tours, audiovisual systems attended by site staff, and assistance from staff members at information desks.

To interpret religious heritage effectively, Kanaan-Amat et al. (2019) propose selecting suitable instruments based on the specific features of each space. These instruments may include information panels or posters that provide historical, artistic, and cultural insights and

information on visitor conduct, tourist services, and guided tours. Brochures containing informative content, rather than promotional material, can be placed at the entrance of religious heritage sites or nearby establishments such as shops, hotels, or restaurants. Additionally, offering on-demand or scheduled tours with knowledgeable guides, supplemented by services like audio tours, 3D models, and exhibitions, can enhance the visitor experience. If developed appropriately, leveraging new technologies such as online web pages and QR codes can provide visitors with relevant information without compromising the site's sanctity.

#### **4.4. Challenges in Interpretation of Religious Heritage Sites**

Vidal-Casellas et al. (2019) note that existing information at many religious heritage sites primarily focuses on artistic and historical aspects, failing to convey the core message and compromising the sacredness of the place.

The lack of meaningful dialogue at religious heritage sites can be attributed to various factors, including superficial interpretive systems. Chey (2016) highlights that despite its popularity and significance, Angkor Wat, the famous temple in Cambodia, fails to bridge the cultural gap between visitors and the unfamiliar Khmer civilization associated with it effectively. Vidal-Casellas et al. (2019) mention other cases in Asia where the interpretation tools are not strong enough to explain the complex and mixed nature of some famous deities, such as the Hindu deity Tara, who has a mixed origin from Buddhist and Southeast Asian areas, as well as the diverse iconography and even mixing of religions concerning Buddhism and Taoism.

Additionally, one of the most common reasons for the absence of more meaningful dialogue at religious heritage destinations is the little knowledge of tour guides (Vidal-Casellas et al., 2019). In the past, the task of guides was to lead pilgrims safely during their trip without any obligation to provide interpretation (Mesaritou et al., 2015). Nowadays, the role of tour guides has evolved in modern tourism (Duda, 2019). They are now responsible for not only providing information about the location, history, and culture but also actively conveying these concepts through appropriate storytelling methods and communication techniques. Research indicates that the services of well-trained guide-interpreters are highly sought after by both pilgrims and visitors (Duda, 2019).

According to Magablih et al. (2010) guide profession is about filling the cultural gap. Through the ongoing wide range of tour guide training courses that cover different subjects, there is a lack of spiritual training, which is very important in religious heritage sites to convey the sacred

message.

In this context, the organized training courses in Catalonia (Spain), under the supervision of the project Catalonia Sacra, have shown that tour guides are interested to learn about the "meaning of the holy" and the spiritual component of locations. With the help of lectures of the religious community, the training courses targeted initially the obvious faults of tour guides method. Although there is certainly space for improvement, tour guides claim that the course information is quickly integrated into their presentations, to varied degrees, out of professional interest (Vidal-Casellas et al., 2019).

Insufficient training among site managers and heritage specialists also contributes to the lack of deeper dialogue at religious heritage sites. For example, Tintagel Castle in England, which holds a strong connection to the Arthurian myth, is often perplexing for both tourists and experts. Similar challenges arise in heritage sites like Machu Picchu, where Catholic and South American Pre-Columbian beliefs intersect (Vidal-Casellas et al., 2019).

#### **4.5. Creating a More Meaningful Visitor Experience**

Prabhu (1993) proposes several factors to enhance visitors' experiences at religious heritage sites, urging the implementation of a receptive host environment that fosters a sense of welcome and security. This can be achieved through well-maintained physical structures equipped with necessary amenities, genuine ritual practices, a tranquil atmosphere, and the avoidance of profit-driven commercial activities. Religious staff members play a crucial role in adding an authentic spiritual dimension to the experience. For example, at the Mount Sinai Monastery, the monks warmly welcome and guide tourists through the holy site, facilitating the transmission of the religious essence (Coleman & Elsner, 1994).

Askew (1997) introduces the concept of a "Ministry of Welcome" to create a more peaceful and fulfilling experience at religious heritage sites. This approach involves three key steps. Firstly, visitors should be made to feel genuinely welcome and secure in their surroundings and interactions. Secondly, accessible information about the religion should be provided, either through written or spoken means, to demonstrate how the site reflects theology through the integration of art, architecture, and liturgical practices. Lastly, individuals seeking an authentic experience should be encouraged to engage in prayer or meditation within the spiritual space. This may result in generating emotional or spiritual on-site experiences for non-believer visitors

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while strengthening the religious identities of believers. As a result, visitors may undergo a transformation, transitioning from mere tourists to pilgrims.

#### **4.6. The Benefits of an Effective Heritage Interpretation System at Religious Sites**

According to Knudson et al. (2003), a well-executed heritage interpretation system at religious sites brings forth several benefits: Firstly, it provides educational advantages as many tourists visit these sites with the intention of acquiring knowledge and understanding. Secondly, it offers recreational benefits by ensuring that visitors have an enjoyable and engaging experience while exploring the heritage site. Thirdly, a successful interpretive system has the potential to inspire individuals, encouraging them to consider new ideas or alter their attitudes towards people and the environment. Additionally, it contributes to the enhancement of a democratic system by fostering well-informed citizens who possess a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage and its significance. Finally, it facilitates the comprehension of ethical lessons associated with the visited sites and places them within a broader context, promoting a greater understanding of moral values and historical perspectives.

Vidal-Casellas et al. (2019) highlight the significance of a competent interpretation system in cultivating a strong bond between visitors and religious historic sites. When visitors establish a profound connection with these sites, they are more likely to actively participate in their preservation efforts and share their experiences with others through word-of-mouth recommendations and social media platforms. Moreover, gaining a deeper understanding of religious heritage has the potential to reshape visitors' perceptions of different cultures and religions, leading to a reduction in fear and the promotion of tolerance. Knowledge and understanding act as potent tools against prejudice and hate, facilitating positive social change.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Religious heritage sites have great potential to promote understanding and embrace diversity by carefully interpreting their cultural stories. An efficient interpretation system for religious heritage sites can maintain religious traditions and promote harmony among different faiths groups. Effective interpretation encourages valuable interfaith dialogue and fulfills tourist expectations, preserving religious cultural heritage as a vibrant aspect of society. Future study could further investigate effective practices by doing comparative case studies on interpretive approaches at religious sites worldwide.



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