

From Region to “Regionalization”

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Abstract This paper critically examines the concept of “space” in heritage studies, highlighting how dominant theoretical perspectives, initially shaped by modernist views on nature and history as domains to be controlled and categorized, have gradually shifted towards a postmodern understanding that values diversity, participation, and fluidity in the interpretation of heritage. In addition, the present work showcases how the “digital turn” has further facilitated foregoing developments by transcending conventional boundaries of “space,” offering new avenues for engaging with and preserving cultural heritage. Through the examination of three case studies from Greece, what is underscored in particular is how the concept of “regionalization” may (a) reconfigure access to heritage, (b) enrich collective memory, and (c) challenge traditional notions of space, thereby advocating for adaptive heritage management strategies that accommodate the complexities of the contemporary, “hybrid” world. Conclusively, the paper calls for a re-evaluation of heritage policies to embrace these transformative theoretical insights, suggesting that a more holistic and flexible perspective on heritage management can radically alter perceptions of engagement and belonging in the digital age.

Keywords Space, “region” vs. “regionalization,” digital turn, non-locationist mnemonic practices.

Understanding the relationship between “space,” “heritage,” and the “past”

This paper delves into the intricate concept of “space,” a topic that garnered significant attention at last year’s forum in Heidelberg, as evidenced by the frequent invocation of spatial terminology such as “region,” “local communities,” “environment,” and “landscape” within the conference’s dialogue, but also more broadly within the current discourse of heritage studies. The emphasis on spatial terms underscores a profound and enduring connection between how we conceptualize space, interpret heritage, and understand our collective past—a relationship that is far from superficial, imbued with a rich historical context that merits a more detailed exploration.

Historically, the modernist era, spanning from the Renaissance to the early 20th century, heralded a period where emphasis was mainly placed upon providing an understanding of the world through the creation of clear, well-defined, and ‘purified’ categories set in opposition to one another (Catapoti and Relaki 2013). In this

framework, established as early as the 17th century, Newtonian physics proposed that space could be calculated and quantified, suggesting that space is fundamentally a measurable construct. Newton characterized the universe in terms of absolute space and absolute time where the laws of motion apply universally. This model enabled the precise mathematical depiction of the positions, velocities, and accelerations of objects, which could be systematically calculated and predicted using his laws (Strong 1957).

In a manner akin to Newton's conception of the universe as a measurable entity, "nature" too was seen as a quantifiable realm governed by physical laws rather than metaphysical forces. The mechanisms of nature were believed to be quantifiable through the formulation of scientific laws. For Newton, propositions in natural philosophy were "physical," if grounded in observational evidence. He argued that science could collect evidence from experiments to formulate general propositions about phenomena (an approach presuming not only the uniformity of nature but also its measurability) (Strong 1957, 49–50).

In light of these transformations, during the period of modernity, nature began to be approached through the employment of a spatial metaphor and was envisioned as a *territory*. In fact, nature was described as a territory to be shaped and commanded by human intervention but also as a domain to be comprehended and made intelligible through human *logos* (Thomas 2004). This duality in perception fostered a symbiotic relationship between socio-economic ambitions, such as those driving the industrial revolution, colonialist, and nationalist endeavors, but also the scientific imperative to theoretically decipher the natural world (Harvey 1990). Central to the modernist paradigm was the belief that scientific rationality was the primary, if not sole, instrument through which humanity could exert dominion over the environment, a belief that underscored the era's approach to both the natural world and the "world" of the past (Lowenthal 1985).

History and archaeology adhered to these very principles when they were initially launched as scientific disciplines in the 19th century (Catapoti 2013, 264; Hamilakis 2007). Interestingly, the understanding of the past as territory coincided with the Western powers' recognition of uncharted lands ripe for exploration and subjugation, notably the so-called New World. At a time when the ruling authorities of the West began to realize that there was new, previously unknown territory to be conquered and subjugated, in the same way, the past, a greater and more distant land, also became available for "colonization", through the new sciences of history and archaeology (Catapoti 2013, 10).

The conceptualization of the past as "territory" fulfilled diverse objectives and was exhibited through multiple modalities. The distance established between people and the past acted as a boundary for distinguishing "official," objective history from alternative (second order) interpretations, and by extension, engendered an asymmetrical relationship between "specialists" and "non-specialists." The past and its management were thus confined to specific institutions (i. e., heritage organizations, museums, universities), with the role of the steward (i. e., the territory's gatekeeper)

being attributed to the specialized personnel of those institutions (i. e., the scientists) (Hamilakis 2007; McGuire 2007). Institutional mechanisms designed to regulate access to the past ranged from the physical barriers surrounding archaeological sites to the curatorial practices of museums and the adoption of a specialized “scientific” language, all effectively mediating the public’s interaction with the past. Under this scheme, a narrative monopoly was established, with the interpretation of the past being confined to the authoritative voice of specialists, thus marginalizing alternative perspectives.

However, the latter part of the 20th century witnessed a paradigmatic shift, commonly referred to as the “postmodern turn” (Hassan 1987) which challenged the foundational premises of modernity’s relationship with the world. This shift was characterized by a questioning of absolute truths and a valorization of relativism, difference, multivocality, and even humanness (the quality of being human). For instance, in Michel Serres’ work “The Natural Contract” (Serres 1995) humanity’s relationship with nature is re-evaluated, while it is also seen as an essential shift from modernist cosmologies focused on humans towards a new model that places the Earth and its elements at the center (with humanity placed at the periphery). Serres’ work is largely attuned with the idea that traditional categories of subjects and objects are inadequate in a world of fluidity, exchangeability, and multifunctionality (Catapoti and Relaki 2013, 10). Castells’s network theory (Castells 1996) also suggests that we need to move beyond fixed entities and instead focus on networking processes as the primary unit of analysis in late 20th century epistemology. He claims that ultimately, what we study are complex, overlapping, and disjunctive orders where multiple, heterogeneous flows are interwoven across time and space, akin to a hypertextual pattern. In a similar vein, John Urry’s work (Urry 2000) advocates that we should envision the world as a network that accommodates spatiotemporally diverse, interconnected components. In fact, the sociological term “regionalization” refers precisely to the workings of such diverse spatiotemporal zones, which cannot be analytically captured by traditional sociological concepts (cf. Giddens 1984). Urry explains how these concepts are increasingly inadequate for understanding social relations that stretch across multiple and diverse spatiotemporal zones; he argues in particular that societies are no longer confined to specific geographical territories but are better understood through the lens of flows, movements, and networks that transcend traditional boundaries.

In the aftermath of all foregoing developments, from the 1980s onwards, the rigid boundaries that had once circumscribed the past as a discrete, uncontested entity also began to dissolve (Catapoti 2013; Catapoti and Relaki 2013). During this period, what was first and foremost re-evaluated was the exclusive stewardship of experts over the past; the new intellectual agenda advocated instead for a more inclusive and participatory approach to heritage that would recognize the validity of diverse voices, experiences, and interpretations (Hamilakis 2007). The past began to be seen not as a fixed territory of dense, coherent meaning but as a malleable resource capable of engaging with and being enriched by a multiplicity of alternative narratives.

The emergent reconfiguration of heritage discourse was not merely a theoretical exercise; it reflected broader socio-political and intellectual currents that emphasized the interconnectedness between past and present, an interconnectedness that put under severe scrutiny conventional spatiotemporal boundaries (Catapoti and Relaki 2013). Terms like “complex connectivity” and “network sociality” (Urry 2000) stressed the fluid, dynamic nature of social spaces, a condition that was taken to have the ability to constantly reshape spatial boundaries and scape-bound identities. Such theories have been integral to understanding how mobility is redefining social relationships and spaces in the modern world but have also prompted several critical inquiries with regard to heritage: What implications arise if space and time are not singular, but multiple? How do different communities and groups perceive heritage and what factors influence their choices to remember or forget specific elements? Furthermore, it is essential to identify the various stakeholders involved in these processes. Additionally, it is pertinent to examine the conditions under which heritage acts as a vehicle for social integration and the circumstances in which it becomes a contested arena. These questions underscore the complex interplay between heritage, community, and identity within diverse spatiotemporal contexts, highlighting the need for a nuanced analysis of heritage as both a unifying and divisive force (Catapoti 2013).

During the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, the “digital turn” further challenged traditional associations between heritage and space by emphasizing the emergence (if not gradual crystallization) of a hybrid existence that merges offline and online experiences (Malpas 2007). This shift redefined the concepts of community and subjecthood, which are now perceived as fluid and extending beyond physical space. The notion of belonging has evolved to become “anti-locationist” and “ec-static” (beyond *stasis*), indicating a dynamic state of being that defies static definitions and resists confinement. These changes significantly influence how heritage is approached, prompting critical questions about its definition, its stakeholders, and the decision-making processes that determine its value (Cameron and Kenderdine 2010). Questions such as for whom and by whom heritage is curated, and which communities and subjects are involved in its management, are central to current scientific discourse. Today, there is therefore an urgent need to adapt to the multifaceted and evolving nature of our hybrid world, to rethink strategies for heritage management, and to reconsider our locationist understanding of space, heritage, and the past.

Non-locationist communities: Three examples from Greece

In the wake of all foregoing developments, the present paper argues for a re-evaluation of the concept of space within heritage discourse, advocating in favor of approaches that embrace the complexities and diversities brought forward by the “digital turn.” By acknowledging the limitations of traditional frameworks and by exploring the possibilities afforded by new understandings of space, we can foster a more inclusive, dynamic, and engaging relationship with heritage. To illustrate this

point further, the present paper embarks on a brief presentation of three case studies from Greece, each illustrating innovative approaches to heritage and spatial engagement. Through these examples, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the emergence of new topologies offers a wide array of alternative perspectives on heritage and community engagement, transcending geographical constraints and traditional modes of interaction.

GYAROS 1949: Stories from Exile

Gyaros, an uninhabited island in the Cyclades, has a poignant history as a place of political exile, first in the early Roman Empire and prominently between 1948 to 1974, when it became a site of imprisonment for more than 22,000 political prisoners. Despite its harsh landscape and the passage of time, the island’s legacy endures, marked by the physical remnants of its past and its ecological significance as a NATURA Special Protection Area for the Mediterranean monk seal (<https://www.marineregions.org/gazetteer.php?p=details&id=29487>). In collaboration with Ms. Vasia Toufekoula for the purposes of her MA thesis (Toufekoula 2018), we embarked on an initiative to spotlight Gyaros’ historical importance through an anti-locationist perspective. Our approach was influenced by the digital project *1917 Free History* (<https://project1917.com/>), which uses a simulated social network to recreate historical events in real-time, thus offering a template for immersive, interactive historical engagement. Toufekoula’s work proposed a digital platform that would allow users to explore Gyaros’ history through a mix of archival materials and interactive features, creating a virtual space for engagement free from the constraints imposed to the visitor of the physical site. This approach not only ensured the preservation of the site’s ecological integrity but also democratized access to its historical narrative, allowing for a personalized and immersive exploration of its past.

Decorated Bread (<https://decorated-breads.tavros.space/en/>)

This project, led by new media artist Maria Varela (and curated by Olga Hatzidaki, under the scientific supervision of the author), investigated the tradition of decorated bread, a significant cultural practice in rural Greece, through the prism of contemporary art and digital collaboration. By fusing traditional bread-making techniques with algorithmic design and facilitating online collaborations between artists and bread-makers, the project embodied a rhizomatic model of knowledge-sharing and cultural expression. The project’s innovative approach fostered a symmetrical collaboration among participants, blurring the lines between tradition and modernity, art and craft, experts and audiences. This culminated into a hybrid exhibition that not only challenged established roles and perceptions within the art and heritage sectors but also promoted a multifaceted exploration of spatial distance and proximity, emphasizing the fluidity of identity and community-building in the digital age.

Curating a museum both online and offline

Kostas Paschalidis, an archaeologist (with a specialization in Mycenaean Prehistory) and curator of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (NAMA), extends the boundaries of his professional role through his active presence on social media (<https://web.facebook.com/kostas.paschalidis.5>), where he connects historical/archaeological narratives related to NAMA with contemporary socio-political issues. His approach extends the museum experience beyond the confines of the museum, drawing parallels between the past and present and engaging online users in meaningful dialogue. Online engagement with Paschalidis' posts has significantly increased visitor numbers in the physical confines of the Museum. His (unofficial) role as an online curator exemplifies how an expert's investment in the creation of personal as well as socially sensitive narratives in digital platforms can enhance the visibility and relevance of cultural institutions, fostering a sense of intimacy and connection that ends up transforming user online experience into a museum visit.

Conclusions

The three case studies demonstrate how hybrid cultural heritage projects transcend traditional spatial and conceptual boundaries, facilitating new forms of social engagement and interaction. Such initiatives offer accessible, inclusive, and dynamic experiences, underscoring the potential for digital technology to reshape our understanding of space, community, and heritage. They highlight the importance of alternative strategies in heritage management, especially in addressing the challenges posed by (long dominant) locationist approaches. They also reveal the transformative potential of digital tools in rethinking access to cultural narratives, enabling a participatory exploration of the past that enriches our collective memory and identity. As we move forward, the lessons learned from these case studies may inform broader strategies and expand the rich initiatives in heritage discourse.

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