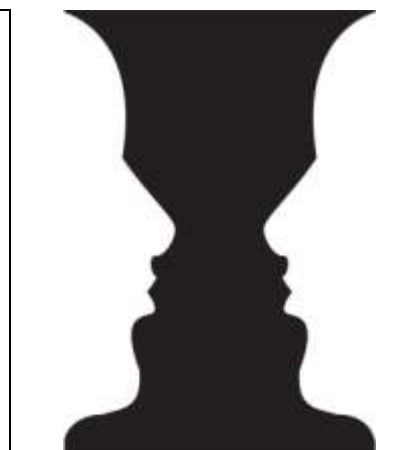


JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN
ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

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Volume 3, Number 1, Fall 2012
ISSN 2068 – 0317
<http://compaso.eu>



Conversing artifacts: an exploration into the communicative power of inanimate things

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Abstract

The present article argues for the evocative power of artifacts in heritage site exhibits and their ability to be recognized as active members of local culture, networks and practice, to embody and perform locality. Objects have the ability to speak, drawing on their previous social life and interactions with humans, long before they are displayed in museums. For artifacts to become socially and historically meaningful in the museum, curators have to recognize their potential to inspire conversations with and among visitors as well as the capacity of objects to seize control of story telling. Things produce and distribute knowledge, confirm and contest previously conceptualized worldviews, they speak to visitor personal experience and expectations, and give new meaning to history and heritage in changing political environments. This article argues that it is salient to account for the local nature of object life and experience; to understand that while heritage has become an international language that fosters conversations about the past in museums and historic sites, this discourse is constructed through different means locally. The restoration of the Neamț Fortress soon after Romania's accession to the European Union provides an excellent example of the way in which objects can index meaningful historical moments, stimulating debates about national and transnational belonging in times of political transformation. However, the Neamț Fortress exhibit has been highly successful particularly because artifacts can be recognized as local actors in a precise and familiar network of people and practices.

Keywords

Exhibits, artifacts, history, heritage, knowledge production

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Project origins and research methodology

The Neamț Fortress recognized me; its walls remembered my childhood curiosity! I never set out to research or write about the fortress, but in 2009, as part of my Museum Studies Certificate requirements I was offered an internship at the History and Archaeology Museum of Piatra Neamț (HAMPN). My hometown I had left behind a decade earlier was now my primary research field site as I pursued my doctoral degree in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan. I became interested in the Neamț Fortress because I found myself in the middle of its restoration project and its debates. It also seemed quite romantic to get involved with the restoration of the citadel that guarded my youth. I had visited the Neamț Fortress hundreds of times during school and family trips, history lessons and Moldova monastery tours with visiting friends. I kept a journal of my internship experience at the HAMPN not knowing at the time what would come of it.

I wanted to learn at HAMPN and believed that over the years, I had acquired numerous skills that the museum administration would recognize as useful. Given that this was my second preliminary research trip to Piatra Neamț, my plan was to work at the museum, tell people about my research project, ask for interviews and make connections. However, everyone at the museum seemed pressed by time and busy with the restoration project so I decided to get on board. My primary research methodology had become participant observation with the museum team during the restoration and following and interviewing visitors after the exhibit was opened. In addition to that, I began working on an electronic database for the museum library, which gave me access to hundreds of primary sources about local and national history as well as the privilege of engaging in numerous conversations with the museum librarian and staff. At times, I would witness unique debates about the restoration right in front of my desk.

However, my inquiries were not without obstacles; none of the museum staff agreed to a formal interview. Most of them did not understand the conditions of my being in their space. Why would the U.S. be interested in what they had to say? Moreover, what would a young lady like myself have to offer to such a knowledgeable group of scholars?² However, I did not get discouraged; I gathered information from any source I came across: recorded public statements and media interviews with the museum members, took notes about every instance someone mentioned the Neamț restoration in Piatra Neamț, the setting and circumstances of the conversation, visited the site as often as possible (even though I had to make my own transportation arrangements), gathered videos about the project and tourist materials from local news stations, researched history text books and popular literature about the fortress. After the grand opening, I followed around groups of tourists, interviewed visitors and members of the local community who had seen the exhibit, read the visitor log and recorded audience reactions as much as possible.

² From numerous conversations with my colleagues working in Eastern Europe I have found that my experience is not unique.

This article does not discuss every room or artifact in the Neamț Fortress exhibit; instead it focuses on the objects and rooms that visitors or exhibit designers chose to talk about; uncontrollable things, loud things, ordinary things, inauthentic things. This condition of my ethnographic material is most likely caused by the lack of an initial research question about the Neamț Fortress. However, one cannot ignore the value of self-emergent ethnographic material unconditioned by pre-established inquiries. The limitations of the circumstances above are most likely obvious: this discussion lacks a voluntary contribution from the museum side and the focus remains on a few objects that emerge as story tellers while hundreds of other artifacts remain silent. Perhaps this silence is to be explored elsewhere.

Discovering the Neamț Fortress

Located in Târgul Neamț, Romania (North-East Romania), the Neamț Fortress was built during Petru I Mușat's reign (1375-1391) but it is remembered in Romanian history for its days of glory during the reign of Ștefan the Great (1457-1504) who expanded and fortified the citadel to defend Moldova from the Ottoman Empire.

The works carried out here during his reign consisted in upraising the old walls, building the four bastions of the exterior court and the arch-shaped access bridge sustained upon eleven stone pillars. Thus reinforced, in 1476 the fortress withstood the siege of Mohamed II after the battle from Valea Alba-Războieni.³

Sanctified by the Christian Orthodox Church, Ștefan the Great, one of Moldova's most successful medieval rulers, cannot be divorced from how the Neamț Fortress is remembered in contemporary Romania.

Praised in Romanian literature by Costache Negruzzi, the Neamț Fortress is also remembered via the middle school short story⁴ of Sobieski, the Polish ruler impressed by the bravery of the hand-full of Romanian soldiers who, in 1691, resisted the Polish army and defended the citadel for a couple of days. For decades, Negruzzi's text was on the reading lists for high school admission exams⁵.

Today, the Neamț Fortress is the property of the Neamț County Council (*Consiliul Județean Neamț*) and part of the regional Museum Complex dedicated to preserving and displaying the local history of the Neamț County. The administrative center of the Museum Complex is represented by HAMPN, where I completed my three-month internship in the summer of 2009. For three years, the Museum complex, in partnership with the Neamț County Council, the Târgul Neamț Mayor's office and with funding received from the European Union (PHARE 2004 in preparation for EU accession in 2007)

³ "Brief History" plaque at the Neamț Fortress exhibit entrance.

⁴ *Sobieski si Romanii* by Costache Negruzzi

⁵ In 1999 the educational system was redesigned and students do not take the same exam but Negruzzi's text continues to be on the middle-school reading lists.

was engaged in an ambitious restoration project that transformed the Neamț Fortress as a historical monument (M.H.L. 2007).

Until 2006, when the HAMPN received over 2.5 million Euros from the European Union to undergo the restoration project, visitors at the Neamț Fortress could only imagine what the few walls in ruins used to represent for 15th and 16th centuries Moldovans. However, it is exactly the citadel's former potential to call on one's own imagination that led some visitors to claim that the fortress was now "way too restored"⁶. Considered a historical artifact itself, the fortress was not a proper environment to display any other objects: there were no closed rooms and the interior court walls were almost completely destroyed (see figure 1-left). Located on top of a hill, visible from miles away, but accessible only by a thirty minute hike, the Neamț Fortress began to speak to visitors long before their arrival in town. Its walls destroyed by warfare and time passing, its grandiose recognizable medieval structure, its remote location and fortification spoke about the turmoil it endured, about a time in history when such refuge locations were necessary for survival, and about various medieval techniques employed to exhaust and defeat a powerful enemy. To all this, the visitor would contribute her individual knowledge, however limited, while a tour guide would collect and arrange the pieces of a historical puzzle by contributing stories and answering visitor questions. The citadel did not always inspire the same story; sometimes it would talk about its architectural makeup, or its ties to local religion, history, literature, etc. The visitors' purpose there called upon the proper story to be told and the citadel did not hesitate to react; manipulated by circumstance and manipulative of time, the fortress would call upon the useful historical moment that would make visiting the fortress meaningful for every visitor.



Figure 1. The Neamț Fortress (left- before restoration, right - after restoration)

⁶ Visitor log at the Neamț Fortress August 8, 2009

“Walk the road of the past”: the exhibit

The Neamț Fortress reopened on July 3, 2009 completely restored and is now home to 21 exhibit rooms that guide the visitor through what is understood to have been medieval everyday life (see figure 1-right).

Because all the rooms were rebuilt from scratch the exhibit designers had the opportunity to decide the spatial configurations of the exhibit. As Mason notes “awareness of the way people will move around a physical space or the amount of text they can be expected to digest, can be used to draw visitors attention to specific intended messages” (2000:202-203). In the case of the Neamț Fortress, exhibit designers wanted to preserve the historical spatial movement and give the visitors an opportunity to “walk the road of the past”⁷. Beginning with the thirty-minute hike to the top of the hill, crossing the long bridge over the fortified walls and pillars, the visitor arrives to the citadel’s massive wooden gates. One enters the central court from which he/she is guided by labels above each doorway. Unless one is a member of a guided tour, there is no imposed itinerary; the visitor can decide the order in which to visit the exhibit rooms and how much time to dedicate to different scenes and artifacts. Thus, while some of the rooms connect, as they did in medieval times, the experience is not as fluid as it would be in most conventional museum exhibits: in the case of the Advising chamber, the contemporary visitor is forced to return through the same room in continuing his/her exploration of the fortress, having to navigate around various daily-use objects: tables, chairs, the tall armour gazing from the corner, etc.

Ordinary artifacts “personalize history,” they help visitors “make the connections between history and the real world” while their spatial configuration allows for diverse experiences to unveil (Greenfield and Malone 2000: 14). In some of the exhibit rooms, objects were placed in their presumed medieval position and being replicas of original historic artifacts, the visitors can interact with these objects, not only visually behind a glass wall, but physically as well; one can sit at the council table⁸, imagine oneself among the historical scene presented by life-size dioramas, recognize objects in action as they are fulfilling their primary purpose: barrels in the wine cellar, grain spilling from collapsed bags in the supply room. Thus, objects bring about visitor contemplation about daily life in the citadel, thoughts and feelings in their relationship to things become inseparable; artifacts act as “companions” to visitor experience (Turkle 2007: 5). However, this is done in a remarkably localized fashion: artifacts are recognized as unique to the region as well as communicate local practice. Traditional wear on display sets apart the local visitor from the traveling one; their experiences of the exhibit, the conversations they engage in responding to things remain significantly different as they walk the road of the past. One local visitor explained to her young son, while pointing at the traditional costumes: “your grandfather had one of these. He used to wear it, as a boy, on holidays before the

⁷ While it might have been particularly intriguing to re-create an imaginary trail through the fortress exhibit in writing, the particular and somewhat unique layout of the space does not allow me to do so without imposing a particular exhibit experience.

⁸ Although this is reserved to larger groups, usually organized school trips and international tourist groups.

[communist] party took his family's land. Remember? We still have it at home"⁹. In this case, the artifact is made family, kinship ties are drawn to signal local wear and shared suffrage by recalling a time period that is not on display at the fortress: the communist era. Most likely, the costumes they had at home and the one on display were not identical but the few stylistic resemblances were enough to bring the grandfather's story to the front. While many local visitors have similar experiences, tourists digest information differently: impressed by the talent and patience that goes into the intricate sewing designs, they read the labels next to each artifact, gaze upon it again, and move on. Some might recall a picture or drawing from a tour guide they found years ago, "but maybe that was from Budapest, or Bulgaria"¹⁰.

Before the restoration, story telling was the primary instrument tour guides used to give meaning to visitors' experience and although hundreds of objects are now on display, the approach does not seem to have changed. Similarly to the Arab-American National Museum in Dearborn, U.S.A., the Neamț Fortress was reshaped into a "repository for stories;" that is to say the exhibits were created to assist the "walls in speaking" while helping the visitor visualize the material state of heritage (Silverman 2006:821). Museums and heritage sites are the best settings where the "evocative power of historic artifacts" is exemplified, because "curators present objects in an interpretative context" (Greenfield and Malone 2000:14-15). While this interpretation is facilitated in ways that range from labels, to slide-shows and movies, museum curators can never have complete control over the way in which an object will interact with individual visitors; placing objects in context only offers the space for conversations that can compete with or complete one another.

Although a coincidence, the Neamț Fortress exhibit reopened twenty years after the fall of the communist regime in Romania and since 1989 Romanians have struggled to make sense of their identity, have reconfigured national history, and have strived to "catch the train back to Europe" economically and politically. Romania's accession to Europe in 2007 was contingent on such political, social, and economic transformations imposed by the E.U. While many Romanians experienced everyday life as it was drastically reconfigured, many state and cultural institutions had found a way of grounding a shared Romanian heritage through E.U. funded preservation and restoration projects such as the Neamț Fortress. Heritage proved to be the "primary instrument in the 'discovery' or creation and subsequent nurturing of a national identity" (Graham et al. 2005:27). Exploiting newly identified heritage sites also proved economically necessary when thousands of state owned factories closed and collective farms were returned to private owners. As Hoelscher states:

one of the defining elements of contemporary world, heritage is a mode of understanding and utilizing the past that is, at its very core, deeply partisan and intensely felt. It is the source of vital economic revenue, and a foundation of personal and collective identity. (2006:200)

⁹ Visitor conversation, August 4, 2009

¹⁰ German visitor, visiting the Moldova monasteries with a larger organized group, August 4, 2009

Thus, the design of the Neamț Fortress exhibit represented one of many attempts in responding to the “urgent need to anchor [...] stories somewhere in a usable past” (Crew & Sims 1991:161), a process that will historically explain and legitimize the contemporary political, social, and economic instability of the Romanian state.

To do so, the exhibit designers at the Neamț Fortress had to envision a clear story, supported by various cultural symbols understood as collectively shared, and extremely difficult to contest. The configuration of the 21 exhibit rooms is supported by archeological and archival research as historically accurate and closely depicting medieval everyday life. As visitors enter the interior court, their imagination is called upon by the plaques above each door entering various exhibit rooms: Advising Chamber, Throne Chamber, Arms Room, St. Nicholas Chapel, Living Space, Soldiers’ Chambers, Kitchen, Prison, etc. Thus, to ensure consistency in the story consumed by the audience, the fortress’ capacity to stimulate imagination is now controlled by various elements of the exhibit, and meant to restrict alternative interactions with the space. This specific exhibiting method was clearly meant for an international audience, as politicians could not imagine Romanians attempting to delegitimize such shared stories of the past. In the case of the fortress exhibits, museum history makers cannot take credit for the success the restoration had among the local population as they had no way of anticipating the interactions that were to emerge between things and local visitors.

No clear nominalization of space will prevent the visitor to “mistake” the Throne Chamber with the Kitchen due to the imposing stove and life-size mannequins sitting at a table holding glasses in their hands. This interaction with the space renders the throne, the centerpiece of the room, invisible. One visitor assured me that his interpretation of the space should not surprise me: “after all, the court would take temporary refuge at the citadel in times of turmoil and court etiquette would not be equally enforced. The throne would be meaningless in this period, because Ștefan would be at war”¹¹.

Moreover, the renovated fortress gazes now upon the local community, telling a new story: one of an economically prosperous future as more and more international tourists continue to place the heritage site on their itinerary maps. For Târgul Neamț inhabitants and Moldovans more generally, every object in the exhibit is a companion to their daily life, needs and practices; most local visitors do not read the exhibit labels because they recognize, interact, and converse with objects in personal and/or localized ways. There is absolutely no unfamiliar scene or archaic object on display to surprise the local visitors: some of the objects they own, others they can recognize from family pictures, and some will trigger comical vignettes from visitor life. One visitor smiles and tells me a childhood story about the time he knocked down and spilled the grain bags and the harsh punishment that followed. Another visitor points to the wooden mugs as he recognizes them from her husband’s wine cellar. As objects accompany visitors spatially and temporally home, their ordinary nature does not make them lose credibility; on the contrary, they tell compelling stories because they are so familiar to the local listener.

¹¹ Conversation with G. B. July 28, 2009

New objects tell old histories

While the restoration project structurally and visually transformed the Neamț Fortress, conservators argued that the materials used to (re)build it and the local climate still make it difficult to display historical objects and conserve them properly. Thus, all the objects on display are either identical copies of artifacts preserved at the HAMPN central location or objects created to resemble their representations in documents and drawings from 15th and 16th centuries. The problematic nature of investing heritage value in “inauthentic” artifacts was anticipated by some of the exhibit designers familiar with critiques of heritage. Hoelscher argues that critics summarize heritage as “bogus history” which commodifies the past, distorts the “real history” that is more accurately presented in written form, and shamelessly caters to the whims of tourists” (2006: 208).

However, most local visitors do not seem to be bothered by this seeming lack of authenticity but rather engage with the historical scenes in a symbolic celebration of what they understand as their local, national, and transnational heritage. The exhibit designers claim that their main goal was exactly that: to create a space where visitors can step outside the present and celebrate the glorious past the fortress represents—to converse with objects and the space.

If “authenticity is unattainable, all heritage being created in and by the present” (Graham et al. 2005:28) expressing and legitimizing contemporary social ideals and political views, how can one explain the authenticity of local visitor experience when interacting with familiar exhibit artifacts?



Figure 2: The Advising Chamber

Objects enter exhibits as “props for telling stories” (Silverman 2006:822) and in the case of the Neamț Fortress, imagined heritage artifacts underpin the idea of a continuity by calling on everyday practices that visitors can recognize as historical and contemporary as well. Pots and pans in the kitchen, jars and bags of flower and grains in the supply room, the altar and patron chairs in the Christian Orthodox Chapel, punishing the guilty in the Jail, stimulate visitors in identifying with the space as their own and fulfill the need to connect present and past in an unbroken trajectory (Graham et al. 2005:30).

Moreover, the Advising Chamber was designed to display the past while serving present educational purposes (see figure 2). Initially, exhibit designers wanted the room to be a “touch free” exhibit but after a series of discussions with the mayor of Târgul Neamț, Decebal Arnautu and the president of the Neamț County Council, Vasile Pruteanu they decided to create a fully functional environment where student groups could gather and experience history as they learn about it. The large table, as the central artifact of the Advising Chamber exhibit is a “culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986:68). Students embody history as they sit at the council table. They imagine themselves as part of the past they are gaining knowledge about. At the same time, the space changes as student experience unwinds; it enters new memories of learning, leisure, childhood. Thus, objects gain new meanings shaped by visitors’ experience and the connections they are allowed to draw between objects, previous knowledge, and their individual present lives. Consequentially, authenticity can be located in the museum-visitor encounter filtered through the designer’s intent and the visitor’s willingness to consume a specific story. Crew and Sims argue that in a museum:

objects have no authority; people do. It is people on the exhibition team who must make a judgement about how to tell about the past. Authenticity—authority—enforces the social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds. (1991:163)

In the case of the Neamț Fortress exhibit (and many others) we cannot talk about objects with “no authority.” Before designing the exhibit, curators surveyed what objects were available, what else was *needed*, and how they could be procured. This *need* was indexed by the pre-existing purpose of each room at the fortress: What does a sleeping quarter or a chapel need to be recognized as such? In this process of selection, there were myriad artifact-curator conversations that decided the final exhibit configuration; things were socially meaningful and they could speak to the local community, long before they were put on display.

The debate around the Advising Chamber exhibit exemplifies the level at which the local community was involved in the restoration project. While the County Council and Mayor’s office were active participants in the process, they represent the Romanian state before the needs of the community. Compared to projects such as the Zibwiing Cultural Center concerned with the preservation of Native American history, there was no committee established to represent the Neamț community in designing the Neamț

Fortress exhibit. Thus, the objects selected for the exhibit symbolize what the HAMPN administration and the County Council understood to be a Moldovan shared culture. In this process, visitor imagination could be restricted and heritage entrusted in the hands of a specific group, while excluding others; but that is not to say that an informed visitor would not be able to contribute to the conversation.

Indeed, awarding possession to some, while excluding others, gives heritage its primary function. Heritage, therefore, is a faith, and like all faiths it originates in the deeply rooted human need to give meaning to temporary chaos, to secure group boundaries, and to provide a symbolic sense of continuity and certainty that is often lacking in everyday life. (Hoelscher 2006: 216)

In the case of the Neamț Fortress, various objects were fabricated to select a particular past that serves larger contemporary purposes: to call upon existing shared values in the local community, to create a coherent story for the newly revived tourist economy, and to generate opportunities where excluded audiences can join the community by interacting themselves with the objects on display. The massive armour guarding the Council Chamber was commissioned in 2008 for citadel exhibit. For a trained historian, the full body iron armour does not particularly belong in the era or geographical location displayed throughout the exhibit. However, because it rests in the corner of the room, resting upon its weapon, it is as quiet as any fortress guard would have been in 15th century, unless provoked. During the restoration, the armour was not properly stored and arrived at the exhibit rusty and damaged. It was soon cleaned and repaired and silently hides its story of the new object-restored. The value of these artifacts rests upon their ability to accomplish these socio-political goals when placed in a specific space, calling on a particular time, and allowing for a variety of visitor experiences where meanings of culture and power are defined (see Graham et al. 2005:29-30).

“Sacrifice” and European belonging

As mentioned above, the restoration of the Neamț Fortress came at a time when Romanianness was being continuously renegotiated away from a communist past towards a long delayed European belonging. Constructing and preserving heritage offers the opportunity to locate Romania in a continuous set of events and erase moments of historical rupture. Contrary to common belief, the concept of heritage is a modern construct and connotes a specific identity and sense of belonging. Hoelscher claims that:

heritage might look old—after all, the language of heritage focuses on preservation, revitalization, and restoration—but closer inspection usually reveals contemporary concerns. Lurking just below the surface of the reclamation of a heritage are the needs, the interests, and affairs of a present generation. (2006:206)

Romanian politicians presented the accession to the European Union as a natural stage in national history that had been long delayed by the tyranny of the communist regime. This rhetoric served a dual function: to distance the Romanian people from communist ideologies and legitimize the nation's place in Europe. Thus, heritage preservation projects such as the Neamț Fortress exhibit were endowed with the responsibility to display an identity that is not only local and national but also transnational¹². Portraying the Neamț Fortress as the refuge for brave men who have sacrificed themselves to defend Europe from the Ottoman Empire opened up endless possibilities of claiming a shared history with the members of the European Union. Ștefan the Great's days of glory against the pagan Turks are often associated with his relationship to the Christian faith: it is said that Ștefan built over forty monasteries (one for each victory against the Turks) many of which still stand in Neamț and Suceava Counties. Victimized by its geographic location and imperial expansionist ambitions, Romania enters history as the gatekeeper of Europe (Constantinoiu 2002). The artifacts in the Neamț Fortress exhibit facilitate the creation of visual and experiential history reinforcing textual accounts of the past. Sharon Macdonald argues that:

trying to create historical accounts that eschew national or ethnic narratives as well as causal or progressive trajectories is undoubtedly a difficult task; and one that needs to be tackled through aesthetic strategies [...] as well as through content. (2003: 10)

All this is not to say the Neamț Fortress exhibit is not concerned with local identity and history since the spatial presence of the citadel impacts understandings of everyday life in Târgul Neamț. Similarly to the exhibitions in the Transcultural Galleries, exhibit designers at Neamț “employ the idea of *locality* not so much to ‘museumise’ a clear-cut identity as to highlight the plural nature of the locality and to explore the theme from multiple perspectives” (Macdonald 2003: 8). In other words, exploiting historical constructions of local identity—that of men who, faced with foreign/pagan invasion resisted the attacks and defended their lands with their lives—offers the opportunity to further legitimize belonging first, to the Romanian State, second, to Europe and third, to the Christian international community.

From the difficult journey toward the Neamț Fortress to every aspect of daily life presented in the exhibit rooms, the visitor contemplates: he first complains about the lack of accessibility realizing then how difficult it must have been to prepare the citadel with supplies and arms before a war; “every pavement stone speaks to you” says L. B. as she catches her breath upon her arrival at the citadel gate. The road inspires more contemporary concerns for other visitors: “What if you need to get an ambulance here?” Toward the end of their historic journey, after they have “walked the road of the past” and visited all the chambers, most visitors agree that all the “sacrifice”—theirs today and their ancestors’ then—was worth it.

¹² Especially when funding for heritage projects came primarily from international (European) sources.

Conversing (with) objects - envisaged audience(s)

As expected, visitors' reactions to the Neamț Fortress exhibit varied widely: some considered the Fortress was not transformed enough, others believed the restoration stripped the citadel of its "true meaning," but most visitors were impressed with the new image of the historical monument. The latter represent the ideal audience who interacted with the artifacts as expected by the exhibit designers and for whom the symbols worked. However, exhibit rooms did not have an equal impact on visitor's experiences: older audiences were particularly impressed with the Christian Orthodox Chapel while teenage visitors were intrigued by the Arms Room and Jail. These individual interactions with the space were born out of visitors' initial expectations and intensified by the artifacts on display. The emergence and contribution of social history were salient in reshaping the way history has been written in museums and heritage sites. Shifting the focus from historical grand narratives to daily social practices, museums have managed to attract a wider audience that relates to the symbolic meanings invested in displaying and allowing objects to speak in specific contexts. Thus, what is "representative of the current thinking in history museums about the meaning of things" is that objects have no inherent value outside the exhibit (Crew & Sims 1991:162-164). However, as we have seen above, that is not the case at the Neamț Fortress, as the exhibit is most successful when local visitors recognize these objects as part of their daily life and practice, shared suffrage and guardians of faith. These particular artifacts have to be taken out of context and brought back as community members, because simply utilizing the language of heritage does not seem to be enough for local visitors.



Figure 3: St. Nicholas Chapel (left—before the restoration; right—the altar in the Chapel after restoration)

St. Nicholas Chapel exhibit (figure 3) is a fully functioning spiritual space where Mass is held by a local priest on selected Sundays and religious holidays. For the older audience, the chapel captures the continuity of the Christian Orthodox faith in Romanian history and connects to their present spiritual belonging. One can enter the Chapel as a detached visitor and witness its aesthetic specificity but for the majority of visitors I have

observed the Chapel exhibit is recognized as a place of worship just as any other Church: people enter silently and many times perform ritualistic actions identified with the Orthodox Christian faith (i.e. making the sign of the cross, bowing their head in prayer, always facing the altar).

For many visitors, the Neamț Fortress represents one of the many “commemorative and redemptive acts, pilgrimages to sites of deep historical significance and ancestral suffering” through which people make sense of and actively engage with their past (Benson & McCaskie 2004:94). The Chapel is not just a museum display: a particularly skilled artist was commissioned to restore and paint the altar, visitors cannot go behind the altar, and most women cover their head upon entering. The Chapel inspires spirituality and speaks to why the Neamț Fortress is included as a main site in all monastery tours around Moldova.

For the younger audience, the Jail (dungeon) and the Arms Room present them with a symbolic connection to a heroic past, transposed through fairytales and stories into the morality of the present: “we can grow up to be as great as these men [who defended the fortress] even if it is by different means.” One visitor was amused by the fact that he had an identical sword as the one displayed, hanging above his mantel at home. Talking to his friend, he was first disappointed that the museum displayed a “fake” but he then appreciated the personal connection he suddenly had with the exhibit. Although he could not touch the displayed sword, he knew how heavy and extremely hard to handle it was and explained all this to his peers.

Central to the designers’ vision is the educational function of the exhibit. The Neamț Fortress was not meant to be experienced individually but rather be the site of collective discussion and exchanges. Thus, the individual members of the audience were not envisaged as “empty vessels” where information about the past can be collected and stored. Similar to what Clifford calls “contact zone,” (1997) the exhibit facilitates communication, interaction, and discussion between members of the audience as well as between people and things (Mason 2000:201-202). Furthermore this is not limited by temporality as visitors can engage in conversation with past and future audiences through the visitor log at the exhibit exit: another object that stores and delivers continuously renewed knowledge.

However, the heritage rhetoric employed around the Neamț Fortress restoration suggests that exhibit designers have not come to terms with the idea that museum audiences are always engaged in “free-choice learning.” That is to say, individuals carefully select the information they are willing to appropriate during their museum experience, according to personal interests, ideas about belonging to a class, nation, culture, etc. Tensions between competing audience needs could be partially addressed by their acknowledgement and inclusion in the exhibit, as well as recognizing the problematic nature of assuming “one true history.”

Museums need to embrace the fact that they are in the business of supporting individuals in their quest for knowledge and understanding—not the knowledge and understanding we might deem that an individual needs, but

rather the knowledge and understanding that an individual decides that they need. (Falk et al. 336)

Unfortunately, the potential of the Neamț Fortress exhibit to address competing and parallel histories was not sufficiently explored. Funding and political circumstances have focused designers' attention on grounding one coherent story of the past for international audiences. The particularities of local exhibit experience have remained local, as they have not yet been documented, collected, and utilized as additional story-telling techniques.

Heritage and things that forget

As "single real histories" begin to materialize in museum exhibits, "unfit" objects are left out; historical texts are hidden in the back of dusty shelves, and ambiguities are erased. The employment of the concept of heritage proved productive in creating this state of "selective amnesia." In defining the nation and its relationship to others, heritage is "making explicit" the cultural/social/political symbols that tie and/or divide. Macdonald argues that museums were "capable of articulating two temporal narratives: one, a distinctive national trajectory and, two, the nation as final triumphant stage of successive progression." (2003: 3) The Neamț Fortress exhibit is no exception: the religious symbols draw on a shared continuous spiritual history with Europe while the victimization of the region and interpretation of sacrifice legitimizes the formation of the nation-state. How do multiple stories disappear in the process of remembering the past? Hoelscher explains that:

heritage displays rely on artifacts, including buildings and landscapes, costumes and cuisine, to impart its messages of the past. Open-air museums, historical re-enactments, theme parks, and conservation districts emphasize the visual, rather than the purely textual, making it difficult to present contradictory and ambiguous material. (2006:204)

The designers of the Neamț exhibit seem to have managed to write a "single story" by calling upon multiple types of evidence: aesthetic, textual, and an exploitation of familiarity, of what the visitor was understood to relate to and actively engage with. However, evidence was carefully selected to fit the national story rather than investigate it to discover competing versions of the past and what is missing from the exhibit is transparency about this deliberate choice.

How is the story transformed if we take in consideration that Ștefan the Great was infamous for his mass executions of boyars who did not share his political views and for violent outbursts while under the influence of alcohol during various celebrations? (Constantinoiu 2002) How would we justify that the Orthodox Church recognized him as a Saint when he committed what are now accepted as the gravest of mortal sins? Moreover, Ștefan was a strong supporter of slavery and endowed the forty-some monasteries he built with thousands of Gypsy slaves captured during the campaigns

against the Ottoman Empire (Hancock 1987). In a sense, these accounts are “new memories” brought about by the contribution of social-historians and because they are new, the repercussions of their integration in “history” have to be fully assessed. Macdonald argues that:

[n]ew memories do not necessarily just jostle alongside existing ones, like new products on a supermarket shelf, but may expose previous silences, raising questions about their motives or the power dynamics of which they were part. [...] Memory inflation, then, may not only challenge specific existing memories but may also unsettle the traditional view of heritage itself, making it more likely to be regarded as contestable and contingent. (2009: 93)

Moreover, if heritage is “making explicit” particular historical events based on present socio-political needs, such memories can never come into conflict with one another. Some have explained Ștefan’s hostile behavior towards the boyars as resistance against peasant exploitation and a medieval form of acknowledging universal equality. By doing so, there was an attempt to directly tie contemporary “modern” ideologies to the actions of the past. However, the tension in “modern” ideology between resisting against class exploitation while supporting the slavery system turns these “new memories” into “difficult heritage” which

is concerned with histories and pasts that do not easily fit with positive self-identities of the groups of whose pasts or histories they are part. Instead of affirming positive self-images, they potentially disrupt them or may threaten to open up social differences and conflicts. Difficult heritage deals in unsettling histories rather than the kinds of heroic or progressive histories with which museums and heritage sites have more traditionally been associated – histories that perhaps sometimes veered too close to manipulation rather than interpretation.” (Macdonald 2008:9)

Including the story of Gypsy slavery in Romanian history draws additional ties to present social and economic conditions of the Roma (Gypsy) minority in Romania. Identified by the European Union as one of the main “problems” Romania should address, the Roma minority is completely invisible in Romanian history. Allowing for their visibility would not only explain various political and social economic tensions in Romania and Europe today but would create possibilities for disruption of and resistance against the national story.

The Neamț Fortress Jail depicts four individuals: three chained standing next to the wall in torn dirty clothing and one sitting on the floor across from them (see figure 4). The latter has a long, dark beard and is wearing a dirty shirt and bright turquoise, satin, baggy pants. For most visitors, he is the only one that remains in their memory of the jail because his bright blue pants speak about his origins: “There was definitely a Turk there, sitting on the ground!” A. H. remembers. However, some international tourists as well as younger children have mistaken him for a Roma individual based solely on his darker hair and bright piece of clothing, which happened to fit perfectly with their preconception of

the ethnic group. “Why are the other prisoners chained to the wall while he is sitting somewhat comfortably on the ground? Can it be that he has managed to somehow buy a more humane treatment for himself?” asked a visitor, smiling.

Things communicate to those prepared to enter discourse; artifacts, especially in the museum, are things visitors think with (Turkle 2007), sometimes regardless of what curators had in mind. Many times, objects facilitate prejudices and strengthen stereotypes because they speak to visitor pre-existing knowledge and misinformation, especially when context is ambiguous and difference is such displayed. In some ways, these are things that forget: objects that, separated from the ones rendered “unfit,” lose their coherence.



Figure 4: The Jail (Dungeon)

Conclusion

Things at the Neamț Fortress inhabit two social orders: the historical period they represent, encapsulating the knowledge about daily life and the contemporary interactions they have with exhibit visitors while being on display. However, the artifacts' ability to embody locality, to speak to local needs and act as companions of local community, renders the borders between the two social orders fluid. The concept of “heritage” offers the language to talk about and a variety of possibilities for creating identity and ideas of belonging and continues to shape discourses about preserving history. Heritage is culturally created and reshaped in the context of museums and historic sites through objects, to serve the urgent need of grounding a community in a specific continuous past. However, heritage is best performed for an international audience; one that cannot recognize when artifacts acquire local personalities, acting as extensions and performers of local culture and practice, speaking to local communities through different means. Thus, authenticity is not located in the objects themselves but rather in the public's experience of the objects as they are invested with specific cultural meanings. The social life and acquired meaning of things in everyday life helps visitors relate more easily to a distant past particularly when they can be recognized by local audiences as active members of familiar networks and social practice. Recognizing

visitors and things as active participants in reading, encapsulating, and writing history is crucial in creating a successful exhibit while increased transparency about the intended curatorial goals can relieve the tensions emerged out of the problematic nature of the concept of “heritage.” Exhibitions of the past are shaped by the political agendas of the present and are thus used as tools for achieving historical continuity and erasing disruptive fissures that can jeopardize the stability of contemporary political rhetoric. Acknowledging local visitor-museum experience, encapsulating and collecting it, and subsequently translating it could offer a new mechanism to add to the more general museum audience experience.

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