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A New Dialogue between the Past and Future - The Archaeological Site of Viminacium, within the New National and International Frameworks

Emilija Nikolić
Institute of Archaeology, Serbia

Mirjana Roter-Blagojević
University of Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract

The main subject of the paper is the archaeological site of Viminacium, in Serbia, being, from 2015, on the UNESCO Tentative List, as a part of the monument *Frontiers of the Roman Empire – WHS FRE*. The aim of the paper is to present its wider context with protection and presentation processes which can not follow consistently stated principles of authenticity and integrity. Historical destructions caused the ruined state of the ancient structures, while open pit mining, conducted on the site, has made *in situ* presentation of many buildings impossible. These processes decrease the authenticity of the site and limit the possibilities for its preservation. However, on the other hand, they also create a reason for the establishment of a new concept for its presentation. The paper introduces Viminacium as a part of an ancient cultural route, the World Heritage Site, but also of a cultural landscape, aiming to improve its position within national and international frameworks, resulting in an increased visitor flow.

Keywords: viminacium, authenticity, integrity, cultural landscape, cultural route, WHS

1. Introduction

Archaeological excavations of Viminacium, a Roman archaeological site in the present-day village of Kostolac in Serbia, were conducted for the first time in 1882. After further excavations were carried out in 1902 and 1903, it was only in 1973 that the research was continued (Maksin et al. 2011, 329). The site was protected by the state in 1949, and in 1979 it was classified as a cultural property of exceptional importance (Pejić 1988, 19). In 2009, it became an official archaeological site with defined borders and protection regimes (Maksin et al. 2011, 343).

Viminacium was founded in the 1st century AD, near the confluence of the river Mlava and the Danube. It was an important legionary fortress where *Legio VII Claudia* was stationed and the capital of the *Moesia Superior* province, its administrative, religious, military and trade centre (Figure 1a). In the 2nd century, during the Dacian wars, Emperor Trajan consolidated his army in Viminacium, while during the reign of Hadrian, it became a *municipium*. In the 3rd century, it gained the status of a colony and the right to coin its own money. From the 4th century, it was one of the episcopal centres. In the 5th century it was destroyed by the Huns, being renewed as a border fortress under Justinian I, in the 6th century. It probably ceased to exist during the 7th century after the Slav attacks (Mirković 1968, 56-73). Austro-Hungarian travel writer Felix Kanitz wrote, in the 19th century, about the ruins of this luxurious city used as a quarry of material for medieval buildings like Smederevo fortress and, later, houses in surrounding settlements (Kanic 1989, 150-181, 542).

In 1870, an underground coal mine and the first mining colony in Serbia were established in a nearby part of the village, marking the beginning of the industrial age in Serbia. During the Second World War, the first open pit mine in Serbia and electric power generation in the thermo power plant were established in the newly formed town of Kostolac (Vučetić 2010, 2, 11, 48). However, in 1976, the decision to establish a new thermo power plant and an extensive open pit mine was made, now situated in the exact location of the Viminacium necropolis and its city periphery (Figures 1b and 1c). Since then, rapid and protective archaeological research on the border of the mine, financed by the Serbian Electro Power System, has been carried out (Maksin et al. 2011, 345).

From 2002, archaeological excavation has been an everyday activity of the Viminacium team (Maksin et al. 2011, 329). The multidisciplinary work of the team, consisting of researchers from the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade, and the Centre for New Technology, Viminacium, led by Miomir Korać, PhD, has put an end to the centuries long looting of the ancient city by local treasure hunters, made possible the presentation of the excavated buildings and established a fixed border between the archaeological site and the expanding mine (Korać et al. 2016, 109). Accepting Viminacium as a "non-renewable public cultural resource" (ICOMOS 1990), as university professor and archaeologist Zbigniew Kobyliński proposed while debating "the main purpose of modern archaeological heritage management", the Viminacium team decided not to deal with the site as an "archaeological source", which they "can hunt" for their "own fun, amusement, excitement and curiosity". Rather, they have focused their work on "precious scientific buried archive", which is "at the same time a cultural property having potentially enormous and diverse values for society": informative, associative-symbolic, aesthetic and economic values (Kobyliński 2010, 145, 157).



Figure 1

a) model of ancient Viminacium; b) archaeological park and strip mine; c) archaeological park and thermo power plant (from the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

The research of Viminacium has, to date, led to the excavation of more than 14,000 ancient graves and many buildings, with around 40,000 artefacts found. The number of graves makes this necropolis by far the largest excavated in the territory of the former Roman Empire (Korać 2014, 17, 67). Many of them were decorated with some of the most beautiful paintings of those times (Korać 2007, 147).

From 2006 and the opening of the Archaeological Park of Viminacium, the number of visitors has been constantly increasing. In 2007 alone, it was visited by more than 50,000 national and international tourists, while in 2013 that number had risen to 75,000 (Tomić et al. 2015, 8). In 2016, the old port in Kostolac was reconstructed, as a part of the state - funded project for Danubian ports in Serbia (MTT 2016).

2. Protection and Presentation of Viminacium

According to *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, from 1994 (ICOMOS 1994), a historic site should be accepted as testimony to the cultures and traditions it represents, and its authenticity is an expression of its tangible and intangible aspects. However, one of the most important dilemmas in archaeological sites is the method of preservation of the authenticity during protective interventions. Theoretical insistence on the significance of the physical authenticity in protection that had a great influence in past practices made pure preservation a primary goal, and restoration and reconstructions mostly unwanted activities. Modern times require a slightly different approach, embodied in reconstructions, as well as in the building of new facilities on the sites, which can help them to be actively used (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 36), adding to them "a layer of beauty and interest in the present day", provoking strong emotions among the visitors, but also making "a challenge for heritage theory and philosophy" (Burman 2011, 93, 101).



Figure 2 - a, b and c) Mausoleum; d, e and f) Amphitheatre (from the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

Over the *in situ* remains of the Roman baths, the northern gate of the legionary fortress and the Mausoleum (Figure 2a) in the Archaeological Park of Viminacium, wooden protective structures, covered with textile, were erected, in an attempt to protect the remains from atmospheric influences, mostly from strong winds and the sand and coal dust coming from the industrial facilities. The

Mausoleum is an *in situ* presented part of the necropolis, with a central burial structure which probably belonged to a person of high rank in the Roman hierarchy (Golubović and Korać 2013, 69). This is the starting point of the visitors' tour and the first site presented in Viminacium. The presentation comprises three interpretation levels which introduce visitors to the site, ancient funerary customs and beliefs. The first level is an overview of the site from the contemporary ground level (Figure 2a). The second level enters the space to give a closer view of the graves (Figure 2b), while the third provides visitors with the story of the underground world, taking them to the newly built dark halls with wall painted graves, providing an opportunity to observe the *in situ* art from the imagined level of the deceased (Figure 2c). This interpretative approach, different from the traditional and usual presentation of funerary wall paintings, whereby they are removed and exhibited in a museum, provides a specific experience for visitors, engaging their imagination, interest and emotions (Andjelković Grašar et al. 2013, 11-12). This kind of presentation challenges the existence of site authenticity, with a new structure incorporated into the ancient one but, on the other hand, allows a deeper comprehension of the site. Salvador Muñoz Viñas, contemporary theorist of conservation, uses the term "legibility" while citing other authors and arguing about authenticity concepts. Instead of "truth enforcement" as a result of uncompromisingly chasing authenticity, he uses "legibility" as "the ability of an object to be correctly comprehended or 'read' by the observer." Here, "the notion of truth is related not to the physical features of the object, but to its ability to convey its meaning" (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 99). Mausoleum visitors spend some time inside the space of a wall painted grave, alone or with one more person, and their reaction is one of great excitement (Andjelković 2012, 4). According to a survey carried out in 2012, among senior English speaking visitors of the Mausoleum, 74% based their impressions on the explanations given by the guides, reconstructions and costumed people, while only 26% gained their impressions on the basis of the remains of the structure (Andjelković Grašar and Tapavički-Ilić 2013, 195-198). Although it comes from the writings of the most influential theorist in the stream strictly connected with traditional preventive conservation, we can here apply a quote of John Ruskin where "the proof of a thing's being right is, that it has power over the heart; that it excites us, wins us, or helps us" (Ruskin 1853, 18). In this way, the Mausoleum presentation acquires *the notion of truth*, inseparable from a person's emotions.

The Viminacium amphitheatre is not covered by a protective structure, but has had different kinds of protection, using partial reconstruction in temporary materials (Figure 2d). It is the only Roman amphitheatre being excavated in present-day Serbia and a monument that has survived centuries of destructions, removal of building materials and earth coverage. During the state celebration of 1,700 years of the "Edict of Milan", in 2013, the wooden auditorium and arena hosted 2,000 spectators, who enjoyed "Aida" (Figure 2e), performed by the Serbian National Theatre for the first time in open space (Ilić and Nikolić 2014, 235). This was a unique experience for visitors, as well as for the singers, dancers and musicians, who were surrounded by ancient walls while performing. Various shows have since been held here, from Roman festivals with children (Figure 2f), to classic cars driving in the arena. It was also used as a backdrop during the filming of a historical fairy tale.

From a conservation perspective, the issue of site integrity - the state the site "has acquired by the present time", comprises the preservation of its visual, structural and functional aspects (Jokhiletto 2012, 79-81). However, even the smallest intervention made in a historic area represents a new purpose and "imposes numerous alterations in the spirit of modern times" (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 36). In *Recommendation concerning Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas*, it is advised that "every historic area and its surroundings should be considered in their totality as a coherent whole whose balance and specific nature depend on the fusion of the parts of which it is composed and which include human activities as much as the buildings, the spatial organization and the surroundings" (UNESCO 1976). The activity of open pit mining makes the preservation of many Viminacium buildings *in situ* impossible. The area of Viminacium covers over 450 ha but, with the establishment of the border between the park and the mine, only 355 ha is protected from the industry (Maksin et al. 2011, 328, 342). Many ancient buildings have been destroyed to date but, fortunately, many of them, including aqueducts and associated water supply structures, have been relocated to the safe areas of the archaeological park, while structures not endangered have been presented *in situ* (Golubović and Korać 2013, 65-71). In the future, many as yet undiscovered buildings will be at risk of disappearance, unless they are relocated. Does this destructive human intervention on the landscape, embodied in surface mining, present the "reality of permanent change that makes the authentic so fragile", as Wilfried Lipp, university professor and art historian, wrote, while discussing how "delicate a matter it is to speak of originality, genuineness, and authenticity" of monuments and sites? (Lipp 2010, 272) Here, we can compare the discussion by Salvador Muñoz Viñas of the authenticity of a damaged painting and its authenticity after restoration. He takes the present, restored condition of a painting as "necessarily authentic" and "the only actually authentic condition", because "any other presumed, preferred or expected condition exists only in the minds of the subjects, in their imagination or in their memory", while also arguing that all successive conditions are "all equally authentic, silent testimonies of its actual evolution" (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 94).

3. Viminacium as a part of the Cultural Landscape, Cultural Route and World Heritage Site

Very important and significant steps have been taken in the preservation of Viminacium. However, further development of the site needs one more kind of improvement, which is the introduction of a new overall concept of its protection and presentation, with a change in the perception of Viminacium only as a Roman archaeological site. Its aims should have the respect of all natural, historical, cultural and social factors of the area, as equal contributors to the area's development.

The European Landscape Convention, adopted in Florence in 2000, linked the landscape with a need "to achieve sustainable development based on balanced and harmonious relationship between social needs, economic activities and environment" (Council of Europe 2000). Particularly emphasised was the role of the natural environment, in terms of ecological, cultural and social aspects

(Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 35). Changes "in agriculture, forestry, industrial and mineral production techniques and in regional planning, town planning, transport, infrastructure, tourism and recreation" as well as "changes in the world economy" were noted as being instrumental in "accelerating the transformation of landscapes" (Council of Europe 2000). The term *cultural landscape* has the subject of many definitions. It is "a tangible manifestation of human actions and beliefs set against and within the natural landscape", representing or reflecting "the patterns of settlement or use of the landscape over a long period of time, as well as the evolution of cultural values, norms and attitudes toward the land" (Brown 2008, 6-7). Natural features have had different impacts on people throughout history, helping them to settle and build all sorts of structures (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 35). However, during those processes, people have consciously changed the natural environment. Here, one can recognise Viminacium and its surroundings as a unique cultural landscape (Nikolić et al. 2013, 260-271). The development of the modern mining industry in the second half of the 20th century is considered the most important intervention in the landscape (Špulerová and Petrović 2011, 156). However, although the intention of recognising a cultural landscape is not to *freeze* it in time, the new uses should be compatible with the old ones, not overshadowing them (Lennon and Mathews 1996, 38-39). The approach to heritage should have development as an aim of its protection (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 35), within the spirit of the *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (UNESCO, 1972). Here, we should ask ourselves whether a cultural landscape can connect the preservation of traditional and agricultural areas with modern economical systems and development which demand faster and more grandiose exploitation of all resources.



Figure 3 – *Domus Scientiarum Viminacium*: a) central peristyle; b) exhibition hall; c) filming Roman life with participants of the local community as actors (from the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

In the context of the sustainable development of sites, a kind of balanced and harmonised relationship has to be established, between cultural, economical, social and environmental needs (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 36-37). One of the most important steps in this process is the development of local community awareness, regarding the importance of heritage, through knowledge and understanding. Community involvement in Viminacium's development has been cherished from its very beginnings. After being a part of the agricultural processes for centuries, the lives of the community have rapidly changed over the last few decades, especially with the disappearance of land as a result of the mining activity. Today, many of them work in Viminacium as guides, hosts, associates in scientific research and excavations, and interpreters (Korać et al. 2016, 109-110) (Figure 3c). This, in accordance to the *International Cultural Tourism Charter*, encourages them "to take a direct interest in its care and conservation" and facilitate their "understanding and appreciation of the heritage significance" (ICOMOS 1999). One of the park facilities with employees coming from the local community is the *Domus Scientiarum Viminacium*, a centre built for researchers and tourists (Figures 3a and 3b). The centre hosts many international conferences and meetings, as well as workshops, schools and events presenting Roman games, food and fashion. In 2011, the 9th Summit of the Heads of State of South-East Europe, entitled "Contemporary Art and Reconciliation in South-East Europe", under the auspices of UNESCO, was held in the *Domus* and, in 2013, the national exhibition "Constantine the Great and the Edict of Milan 313: The Birth of Christianity in the Roman Provinces on the Territory of Serbia" was staged in its exhibition halls (Nikolić 2014, 181-188). Concerns about the local community still remain. If we accept the view that culturally sustainable development needs to "consider intellectual, moral and aesthetic standards of a community" (Dokić et al. 2008, 86), then Felix Kanitz's writings about the looting of Viminacium by the community over the centuries emerge. "Will these people, who inherited the ancient ground and who so willingly destroy even the last traces of monumental wealth of the former Moesian capital, be capable of building similar communities, decorated with art and technique?" (Kanac 1989, 542) In this way, he assigned us with the task of protecting and presenting Viminacium to the world, contributing further to its development as a cultural landscape, and giving the community new opportunities.

Today, the Archaeological Park of Viminacium is the focal point of the 600 km long cultural and touristic route *Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae* (Korać et al. 2009), conceived to connect Roman sites in Serbia where eighteen emperors were born (nearly a quarter of all emperors from the 1st to the 6th century) and with an estimated more than 300,000 visitors per year (Korać 2014, 11, 16). An exhibition presenting the route, named "Journey to the Past – Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae – Viminacium", which has been organised by the Archaeological Park of Viminacium from 2013, has gained its important international attention. To date, it has been held in many cities of Europe, as well as in North and South America and has had hundreds of thousands of visitors (Viminacium 2017) (Figure 1a). A very important factor for the future international presentation of Viminacium is its inclusion on UNESCO Tentative List since 2015, under the name of *Frontiers of the Roman Empire (WHF FRE)*. As one of the most important locations on 450 km long Danubian frontier in Serbia, part of the border line of the Roman Empire that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean, through Europe,

to the Black Sea, through the Middle East to the Red Sea, across North Africa and back to the Atlantic coast (UNESCO 2015, Korać et al. 2014, 16, 36), Viminacium will be, among other heritage sites on the line, also discussed by hundreds of researchers that will participate in the XXIV Limes Congress, one of the most important world archaeological conferences that Viminacium and Serbia are honoured to be hosting in 2018 (Limes 2016). The *Itinerarium Romanum Serbiae* and the *WHS FRE*, as mutually compatible projects promoting Roman heritage in national territories as a common world legacy, can open new opportunities for Viminacium, incorporating its national context into an international framework. Whilst these great opportunities should not be missed, they should also be taken very wisely. They can offer new methods of recognition for Viminacium, but the consequences of these processes must not be in opposition with its preservation as a cultural landscape. Furthermore, the overall result of Viminacium's preservation needs to be the unity of the tangible and intangible heritage of the area, with all steps man and nature has been taking in their deeply interdependent acts.

4. Conclusions

After centuries of abandonment and neglect, archaeologists and visitors, as its new inhabitants, share a common task with the local community, bringing Viminacium back to life. Its presentation today can be connected with *The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites*, where "effective interpretation and presentation should enhance personal experience" (ICOMOS 1993), but also with the charter of cultural tourism, which states that "conservation and tourism planning for heritage places should ensure that the visitor experience will be worthwhile, satisfying and enjoyable" (ICOMOS 1999). Also, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* reminds us of its importance as "a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development" (UNESCO 2003). The intangible aspect of Viminacium's authenticity has been generated through interpretation, and physical and digital reconstructions, "trying to recall the lives of people, their traditions and rituals" (Roter-Blagojević et al. 2009, 36). The small amount of discovered remains are supplemented with different methods of interpretation, which develop positive emotions among visitors (Anđelković Grašar and Tapavički-Ilić 2013, 203). Once a large Roman city, with only a small part of its territory having been excavated so far, it is waiting for generations of researchers to come. Until then, reconstructed structures, such as the amphitheatre or city walls made of temporary materials, will be the view-points for us to imagine the city's grandeur, allowing us to point to the spots where once basilicas or temples stood.

Although Roman Viminacium is recognised as something which gives historical and cultural importance to the area, coal exploitation with its technological and economical importance, has become a pertinent constituent of the landscape. This landscape reflects the change from an agricultural pre-industrial area to a destructive industrial area, which could become a sustainable post-industrial area, as a result of an evolution in society and its relationship with nature. It needs to be preserved with all phases protected (Bayerl 2007, 67-71). Viminacium is not only a place which, according to the proposed "Justification of outstanding universal value" of the *WHS FRE*, fulfils the criteria of an "exhibition of an important interchange of human values", "bearing a unique testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization" and "being an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble and landscape" (UNESCO 2015). It also fulfils one more criterion, as "an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement" and land-use, and as "a representative of cultures and human interaction with the environment", because "it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change" (UNESCO 2016, 17, 18).

We can conclude with Professor Kobylinski, who wrote that archaeological management should include "long-term conservation of archaeological landscapes (not the isolated sites), through development (not retarding or stopping the development), with the participation of the local community (not against the community), informed by archaeologists (not for the benefit of archaeologists)" (Kobylinski 2010, 157). Recognising most of these recommendations as fulfilled in Viminacium's management to date, it is left for future *guardians* of the site to improve its protection as a unique landscape, while continuing to keep in mind that "we have an obligation, both towards those who preceded us and those who come after us, to consider and apply our valuations conscientiously... in good faith, plus a little visionary inspiration, defined and limited by own time and space, hoping that we make no serious miscalculations in the process" (Laenen 2008, 108).

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