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Rethinking Heritage: A Critical and Personal Perspective

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Viewpoint

Beyond the stones: integrating unofficial heritage at Göbeklitepe

The discovery of Göbeklitepe marks a pivotal turning point in human history, so profound that it was announced as history's 'zero point' (Yolaçan & Aktın, 2024). Its significance is further cemented by UNESCO (2018), which has recognised the site as possessing Outstanding Universal Value across three distinct categories. Göbeklitepe is situated in southeastern Türkiye, approximately 15 kilometers northeast of the city center of Şanlıurfa, on a limestone plateau overlooking the Harran Plain. Its elevated position provides wide visibility across the surrounding landscape, enabling gatherings of early hunter-gatherer groups while also offering direct access to the stone resources used in the site's monumental architecture. This geographical setting is integral to understanding Göbeklitepe's spatial organisation and ritual functions, making its physical context an essential part of the site's broader narrative. While the global recognition is rightly celebrated, this viewpoint argues that a crucial dimension is being overlooked in the prevailing heritage narrative: the heritage of the local population. This essay highlights the risk of losing the unique rituals and deep-rooted connections the local community maintains with the Göbeklitepe landscape. It posits that by formally integrating this intangible, living heritage into the site's overarching story, we can not only preserve it but also profoundly enrich Göbeklitepe's collective value for all of humanity.

The contemporary global understanding of cultural heritage is predominantly derived from a Western perspective. This viewpoint solidified into an established paradigm in the post-World War II, reinforced by an emphasis on the 'common value of humanity' (Smith, 2006). In contrast, Critical Heritage Studies (CHS) has emerged as an interdisciplinary field that interrogates the very processes by which certain aspects of the past are selected and designated as 'heritage' in the present. CHS moves beyond a perception of heritage as a static, inherited relic, reconceptualising it as a dynamic socio-political process that is actively constructed, contested, and imbued with power. This paradigm questions existing power dynamics by asking whose heritage is prioritized and seeks to democratise heritage creation. Furthermore, it highlights the

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multiplicity of contested perspectives, aiming to include marginalised voices that have been historically overlooked (Harrison, 2010).

On top of that, Harrison introduces the concept of 'unofficial heritage'. In simple terms, unofficial heritage refers to aspects of cultural heritage that are deeply valued by a community or group but are not formally recognized, protected, or listed by official governmental or international bodies like UNESCO, a national ministry of culture, or a state historic preservation office. This unofficial legacy may encompass a structure, location, or landscape linked to specific memories, rituals, or narratives of community that fall beyond legal regulations; alternatively, it may consist of intangible beliefs or practices developed around official heritage sites.

The Wishing Tree anecdote in Göbeklitepe can be considered as an example of unofficial heritage rising around an official heritage, as in the second alternative. In the following sections, we will examine the frictional relationship between unofficial and official heritage, which can help enhance the value of the site's story. Before, I will walk you through my personal journey of insight, where we will examine our approach to examples of official heritage that we believe to be valuable from a Western perspective and the relationship that local people have with those examples when they encounter them.

A personal re-evaluation of heritage and value

My personal engagement with the concept of heritage began during my architectural education, where I developed a strong interest in architectural projects within archaeological sites. One such project was designed by Cengiz Bektas in the ancient city of Aphrodisias. While studying this project, I encountered a pivotal story about the photographer Ara Güler. The narrative describes how Güler, having lost his way, stumble upon a village that assembled a completely combined life with the ancient city of Aphrodisias and stayed there overnight. The following morning, he noticed and began photographing the villagers' use of ancient marble elements and artefacts in their daily lives—for instance, the seating unit in the village square brought from the ancient theatre or the column pieces placed under the posts supporting the roof of the village coffeehouse. His subsequent publication of these photographs is said to have been a catalyst for the official declaration of the area as a protected archaeological site, which eventually led to the relocation of the villagers.

Upon first hearing this story, my instinctive reaction was a somewhat condescending judgment: I assumed the villagers failed to recognise the 'value' of the cultural heritage surrounding them, a perspective subtly ingrained through my own Western-influenced education. However, upon engaging with Critical Heritage Studies, I began to question my own assumptions. A critical question emerged: Why didn't these people value these objects in the way I did? This line of inquiry led to a deeper self-reflection. I asked myself why the marble stones were valuable to me. Was it due to their aesthetic quality or their historical significance? Had I not received a formal architectural education, would I still have perceived them as valuable? If these objects were merely framed and displayed in a museum, divorced from their context, would they truly hold meaning for me?

I came to realise that what transforms an object into 'heritage' is not the object itself, but the narrative and the system of beliefs constructed around it. This realisation prompts a fundamental question: what is our own heritage? We must identify what we valued or cared about within our own culture, prior to the internalisation of this imposed Western perspective. Perhaps our true heritage lies in our traditional practices or even in our personal memories—a seashell from a memorable trip, a photograph, or a grandchild's simple drawing. These can constitute a personal heritage, valued and cared for because of the associated stories and emotions. In the example of Aphrodisias, the people who lived among those ancient marbles have built lots of personal ties, stories and memories as personal heritage. The only tangible traces of those days are the photos of Ara Güler.

Figure 1. Two examples of Ara Guler's photos (Demirci, 2022)

In short, what we officially classify as cultural heritage may often be a reflection of a transformation in our perception, shaped by education and institutional processes. The heritage that truly resonates with us on a fundamental level could be something entirely different. Organisations like UNESCO have begun to recognise this through categories like ‘intangible’ or ‘living heritage’. CHS aligns with this, advocating for a more inclusive interpretation of heritage that incorporates marginalised voices and frames heritage not as a relic of the past, but as a process orientated toward the future. From this perspective, the story of Aphrodisias and Ara Güler becomes a valuable part of Aphrodisias’ heritage; for me, his photographs now hold more significance than many of the statues they depict.

The case of the wishing tree at Göbeklitepe: a lesson in inclusive narratives

When we conceptualise heritage not as tangible objects but as the stories and beliefs they represent, it becomes apparent that heritage can hold diverse meanings for different people. In this context, we can examine the ‘wish tree’ at the Göbeklitepe archaeological site—a tree that was present even before the site’s discovery and which embodies this very principle.

In his work, Klaus Schmidt (2012), who led the excavations, devoted significant attention to this ‘Wishing Tree’ on the site. Such trees, common in Anatolian and other cultures, are often considered sacred. People tie pieces of cloth to their branches as part of a ritual of making wishes and vows. This particular tree, located on a hilltop and adorned with colourful fabrics, was especially sacred to local women wishing for children. Moreover, there are two graves thought to belong to two saints, near the Wishing Tree, that is why this area believed as a holly area by certain groups. This kind of belief brings respect and care, thus this certain group in the region has valued to this tree. So, with the term of Harrison they built an ‘unofficial heritage’ with this three at the Göbeklitepe.

Intriguingly, a stone plate (Figure 2) found around this tree is believed to depict a woman giving birth. This female figure is exceptional within the context of Göbeklitepe, where most carvings represent animals or male figures. While its exact meaning is debated, the possibility that this ancient motif is connected to a living tradition that persisted until the excavations began is profoundly exciting. It suggests a long bridge linking history to the present. This could just be a coincidence, but one cannot help but wonder, what if there’s a story behind why locals have turned this place into a sacred place for a similar purpose?

However, it is reported that this Wishing Tree has now lost its vibrant, colourful appearance. Despite signs identifying it, it no longer functions as a living ritual site. This raises a critical question: has the global promotion and musealisation of this world-famous heritage site, while providing economic benefits, inadvertently contributed to the marginalisation and loss of its living, unofficial heritage? As this example demonstrates, the living cultural elements of a place like Şanlıurfa can be vital for understanding even the deepest archaeological past. Anthropological studies and the preservation of living heritage are therefore crucial. The stories and connections revealed through such work can enrich the narrative of Göbeklitepe and foster more sustainable and interactive conservation practices with the local community.

The experience of the Sts’ailes Nation in British Columbia offers valuable lessons for Göbeklitepe. There, the integration of archaeological, ecological, and community knowledge has led to the recognition and revitalisation of ‘living sites’—forest gardens and ancestral landscapes that continue to be used, tended, and celebrated by the community (Beurteaux, 2024). This approach has fostered intergenerational transmission of knowledge, strengthened community identity, and promoted reconciliation by sharing living heritage with others.

Similarly, the management of Patan Durbar Square in Nepal demonstrates the importance of safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage through community engagement, participatory governance, and the documentation of oral histories and rituals (Shakya Bajracharya et al., 2025).

These examples highlight the potential for balancing conservation, use, and community well-being in heritage practice. Museums and cultural centres play a crucial role in documenting and presenting living heritage. The systematic collection of oral histories, personal narratives, and community memories enriches museum collections, fosters engagement, and preserves diverse perspectives, particularly from marginalised groups.

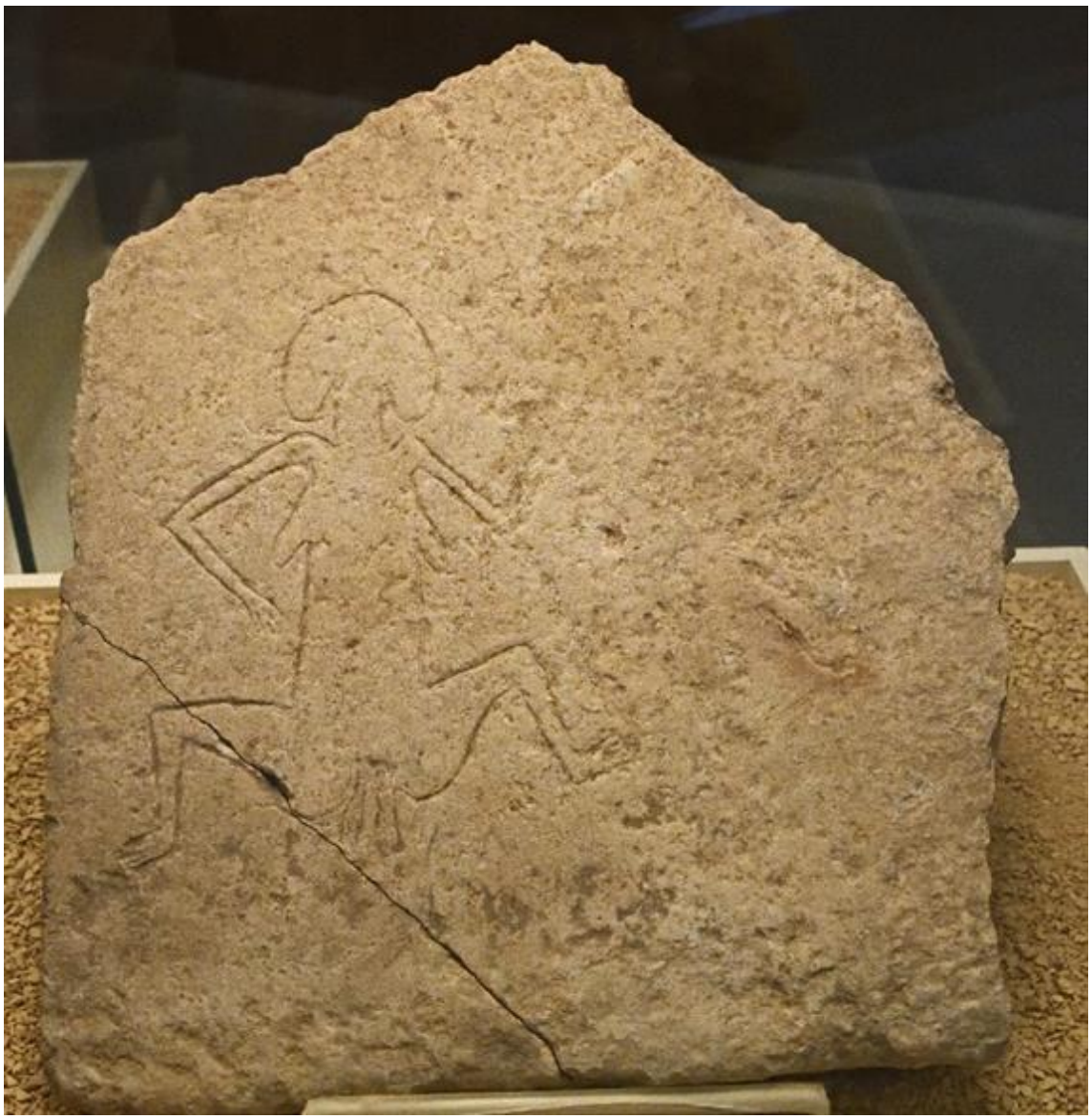

Figure 2. A stone carved with the figure of a woman giving birth in the Göbeklitepe section of the Şanlıurfa Museum (Osseman, 2019)

Conclusion: towards a more careful and inclusive heritage management

Göbeklitepe's designation as a 'zero point' of history need not signal an end to its story. This viewpoint has argued that the site's profound significance is not only found in its ancient stones but also in the living heritage of the local community, as exemplified by the Wishing Tree. The erosion of such unofficial heritage in the face of global recognition reveals a critical flaw in top-down management models. By drawing on the frameworks of Critical Heritage Studies and

lessons from global examples, we see that a more inclusive approach is not merely an ethical imperative but a scholarly necessity. It enriches historical understanding, fosters sustainable conservation, and ensures that heritage remains a dynamic, living process. The challenge ahead is to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and undertake the careful, reflexive work of weaving these marginalised stories back into the official narrative. In doing so, we do not diminish Göbeklitepe's global value; we complete it, transforming it from a monument to humanity's past into a testament to its living, diverse present.

Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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