Special Section Preface: Digital heritage Knowledge Platforms

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This *Virtual Archaeology Review* (VAR) special section explores international perspectives of digital heritage platforms and the challenges associated with them within the framework of cultural geographies. Current cultural heritage research and practice throughout the world has become more interdisciplinary, international, and digital. A further step in the conservation and dissemination of intangible and tangible cultural heritage is the development of digital heritage knowledge platforms. There has been an emergence of interlinked, interdisciplinary knowledge platforms that combine heritage information with the potentials of digital technologies. These platforms should be able to merge heritage knowledge from various disciplines that deal with conservation; this knowledge includes built heritage, arts, and intangible aspects of shared histories. Such platforms are continuously evolving and taking advantage of technological advances; there is great potential for virtual heritage applications that utilize the interlinking connections of these platforms, which should allow for heritage to be understood in its authentic contexts and origins.

Digital knowledge platforms can be used to share a wide variety of content – most often the digital versions of analogue resources. The benefits of digital archives and knowledge platforms for the transmission of cultural heritage may far outweigh the negatives, but we still need to examine and question the processes and decisions that go in to creating them. Digital media is not neutral – the process impacts the represented information and the way people interpret it. Representation on many digital platforms is ultimately a reduction of information and the product of choices. In many ways, it is a process of appraisal, an action of power that can and does change the object.

The beginnings of digitality lie in the concept of accurate message transmission with exact duplication, so that it is the same at both ends regardless of the mechanism, but that is not the case for more heritage and historical digital archives. At its core, digitality is about storing and processing but ultimately also about communication. The task of digitizing collections is overwhelming, and the choices being made (and those people making them) are not always clear. The raw data and sources go through selection criteria and the process of archiving re-creates them.

Unfortunately, despite all these archives and calls for preservation, the digital world is not necessarily durable. Technologies become obsolete, and the physical materials that sustain the digital world can disintegrate. So what can digitality and digital platforms offer cultural heritage and preservation? Surely, they offer many opportunities to create and access information in new ways. Additionally, they can open heritage to audiences who might otherwise not have access. At the same time, these technologies can put a strain on the heritage community. Technology is rarely cheap, and the necessary skills to create and implement new technology initiatives are in high demand.

The concept of this widespread accessibility can be very exciting for heritage communities and professionals; the ability to disseminate information not only builds awareness but also helps create beneficial networks and relationships. Creating a shared heritage network ultimately depends on understanding different approaches and visions of cultures and heritage and clarifying the processes through which digital platforms are created and curated.

The two papers in this special section highlight the opportunities (and potential challenges) of digitizing the past, architectural heritage, and intangible heritage. Barker and Swart's article on architectural heritage practice and digital platforms of knowledge in South Africa describes the development of analogue architectural platforms and their transition into digital forms. Through case studies, Barker and Swart explore the effectiveness of these platforms, particularly for cultural and architectural heritage practioners. The article by Rashid and Antlej tackles another aspect of the sometimes difficult transition to digital heritage platforms: the digitization and dissemination of the (largely) intangible and forgotten heritage of Australia's Afghan cameleers. Rashid and Antlej analyze the techniques and challenges involved in digitizating such a heritage and explore the potential to disseminate new, digitized knowledge through digital platforms and through AR/VR experiences. Together, these two articles underscore the various approaches that can be taken to cultural heritage and digital platforms around the globe and provide valuable insight for future cultural heritage digitization and dissemination projects.

Istanbul, January 2020

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