

Abstract

Ahmed H. El Antably

Alternative Authorities: New Media, an Ancient City, and the Art of Interpretation.

The use of computer-generated three-dimensional virtual environments as a new medium for representing heritage sites unfolds new potentials for understanding history. It introduces often neglected sensory modalities and exposes some aspects of history that may otherwise go unnoticed. This paper discusses the use of such a medium for the reconstruction, and more importantly the re-interpretation, of the ancient settlement of Sirkap (fl. c. 200 bce – 250 ce), now located in modern-day Pakistan. We first outline the interpretations of Sirkap's urban fabric that have become canonical – interpretations that rely on traditional means of representation such as site maps, archival photographs, and textual narratives as well as the important heritage site activity of walking the ruins themselves. The interpretations derived from these modes of exploration most often highlight the socio-religious nature of the site. Further, it is assumed that these ardently “religious” inhabitants practice a religiosity which is highly “spiritual.” However, exploring the city using an interactive three-dimensional model deployed on a game engine offers some alternative insights. While we do not deny the impact the religious structures would have made on the city, we find that the most striking feature of the city is the ubiquity of its military apparatus. We thus re-present the experience of visiting two much discussed religious sites within the city – the Block A stupa court and the Apsidal Temple in Block D. The former is open and directly susceptible to surveillance from guard towers, creating a disturbing experience. While the latter seems to suggest a fortified reliquary and prompts us to ask further questions about the relationship between religious and military authority.