

Abstract

Ahmed H. El Antably

It's Hard to Be Down When You're Up: Interpreting Cultural Heritage through Alternative Media

Heritage places are characteristically imbued with a multiplicity of meanings contingent on the specificities of the society, time and space in which such places are perceived. The interpretation of places also depends on the affordances of the representational medium through which these places are perceived and the ways in which such a medium is socially deployed and interpreted. Using the ancient settlement of Sirkap, located in modern-day Pakistan, as a case study, the present article demonstrates that a change in the representational medium entails a change in the interpretation of archaeological records. Most conventional historical accounts of Sirkap use two-dimensional site maps and city plans as the primary media to represent the urban fabric of the ancient settlement. These media lend themselves to interpreting the Block D Apsidal Temple complex as the dominant socio-religious structure in the affluent northern parts of the settlement. When the authors developed an interactive three-dimensional reconstruction of Sirkap using gaming technology – a medium that allows users, through their avatars, to explore the settlement from the standpoint of a pedestrian – it was immediately obvious that the aforementioned Block D Apsidal Temple complex did not demand such an interpretation. Instead, the authors argue that, at least in the affluent northern parts of the settlement, the northern gate, its adjacent fortifications, and the Block A stupa court were the dominant structures. Such an interpretation leads the authors to question the canonical understanding of the role of the state and its military apparatus in the socio-religious life of Sirkap.