

The Role of Poetics at a Tense World Heritage Site: Pasargadae, Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract: When Pasargadae, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, was designated a World Heritage site in 2004 it was praised for, among other values, its ancient connection to the Achaemenid Empire which is thought to be one of the first empires to respect cultural diversity in its multiple peoples. A contemporary western approach to interpretation would usually develop this aspect of the site making strong links to current social values. Social diversity, however, is not a value of the Iranian government. A chronological approach to interpretation of the site would necessarily result in interpreting its pre-Islamic past, also not necessarily desired by the government. A provocative, question-raising approach, likewise, would probably not gain official approval. This paper explores the possibility of poetics as the interpretive springboard at Pasargadae. It argues that poetics would open up the site to personal and shared experiences, while remaining within a preferred official interpretation. Poetics would allow the exploration of the historical, environmental and architectural values of the site. The openness of poetics should be adopted by western sites as an interpretive strategy, whether or not they face political challenges. The current western preference for developing sites within regional themes is producing repetition and denying site specificity.

Keywords: Interpretation, Islamic Sites, Pasargadae, Place, Poetics

THE EUROPEAN IDEALS of World Heritage are very clear when examining the criteria for the 2004 inscription of the ruins of Pasargadae. The site was judged to have World Heritage status because of its evidence of “human creative genius; interchange of values; testimony to cultural tradition and significance in human history” (UNESCO, 2009: 714). These criteria are the same ones that are used to describe many other places on the World Heritage List although an implication of World Heritage Listing is that a place is unique. Criteria in a bureaucratic and forensic context need to be repeatable and testable, stalwart labels for site evaluation which facilitate dealing with hundreds of sites in a huge variety of political and social contexts. These descriptive criteria at a World Heritage site in the Islamic Republic of Iran, however, are alien to the guiding political and spiritual principles of the government.

The UNESCO guide colours in the criteria with its brief history notes describing Pasargadae as the first dynastic capital of the Achaemenid Empire which was founded by Cyrus the Great. It has “outstanding examples of the first phase of royal Achaemenid art and architecture” and “spanning the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt to the Indus River, it is considered to be the first empire that respected the cultural diversity of its different peoples” (UNESCO, 2009: 714). Although cultural diversity is not only respected, but indeed celebrated in many western countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is not an ideal of the Iranian religious state. These comments are jarringly out of step with some important government

factions and thus highlight some of the problems implicit in both the World Heritage List and, of particular interest for this paper, interpretation of places on that list.

This paper grapples with the interpretation problems posed by Pasargadae, the history and description of which have been covered by Ali-Sami (1971) and many others. This paper argues that western styles of interpretation, resulting in subtle provocation at heritage sites, can co-exist respectfully with some apparently contrasting Iranian heritage principles, leading visitors, for example, to contemplate the Divine, an ideal discussed by Hodjat (1995). This paper considers, first, some limitations in entrenched western interpretation before setting out briefly an interpretation of poetics at Pasargadae with a foregrounding of the senses and imagination. It then considers some key problematics implicit in the poetics approach.

Possible Interpretations of the Site

If site curators were guided by the UNESCO criteria it is highly likely that their interpretation would give offence to many Iranians and possibly not be permitted to be installed. In a paper linked to this paper and written at the same time by my colleague, Ali Mozaffari (2012), the complicated political and religious contexts and the consequent intractable interpretation problems posed by this site are outlined. The two most obvious interpretive approaches would be unworkable here. The first most likely approach, consistent with many western sites, would be the adoption of a linear chronology of the ruins describing the various periods in which the site has been used, its historic and mythic associations with great people such as Cyrus and the Mother of Solomon, its political rise and fall from greatness. The classical chronology would also cover the site's use as an Islamic site of worship, evident in the remains of the mosque which was demolished in the nineteenth century by archaeologists aiming to return the excavated site to one dominant, glorious historical period, that of the Achaemenids. Crucially, the Islamic past would be only one of the pasts encompassed by the chronology and would certainly not be used teleologically, an implicit demand made by some factions in Iranian Islamic cultural politics (Hodjat, 1995). The custodian of the site, the Parsa-Pasargadae Research Foundation suggests this approach (Mozaffari, 2012), but it would be likely to offend many.

The second likely approach at Pasargadae would be an insistence on curatorial dialogism which would lead to this site being framed by ideals of pluralism and provocation. This approach would insist on the Islamic past being interrogated, no doubt abrasively, with politically unpalatable links made to contemporary Iran. UNESCO's (2009) observation that Pasargadae is associated with early respect for cultural diversity, noted above, would be the launch for a dialogic approach.

Although both of these approaches are entrenched in western heritage practice, they would be difficult to sustain at this site in Iran today. As discussed by Mozaffari (2010: 55–57) in relation to the doctoral thesis of Hodjat (1995), “heritage is a western discourse alien to people's Islamic identity”. He describes Hodjat's attacks on western heritage: it “conveys materialistic values and messages rather than spiritual values to which the traditional Islamic society subscribe[s]”. By contrast, an Islamic use of heritage concerns “a hidden truth about immutable Divine traditions... it has an educational-spiritual function perceived primarily through the emotions”.

The possible failure of the two approaches outlined above in the Iranian Islamic context reveals an opportunity to reconsider ways to approach a site. This paper argues that focusing

on the poetics of the Pasargadae ruins would enable a form of interpretation that would be rich for any visitors, including those from the west, while insisting on respect for official Iranian Islamic ideals of the correct role of heritage. Local villagers who live only 400 metres from the Tomb of Cyrus, and the nomads who move around the site, could be interested in being involved in site protection and interpretation because they would not be alienated by an interpretation of the site which was outside their knowledge, that is, a scholarly historian's approach. The poetics of the site embrace the same natural phenomena that the nomads experience. The exclusion of local stakeholders from World Heritage sites is a danger to be avoided as discussed by Pradhananga and Landorf (2008) in the Nepalese context; at Pasargadae nomads could be more fully included in the site as powerful stakeholders. Poetics would enable the site to be embraced in the utmost present and encourage perception through emotion and the body.

Poetics are not offered as a way to pacify the site, that is, to avoid the political problems raised by a direct historic approach as discussed by Mozaffari (2012). To the contrary, becoming alive to poetics should energise a site. Poetics of place encompasses all of the ways that a site is inhabited, moved through, experienced. It embraces all the elements of a site, both historic and imaginative, and magnifies the spatiality of the past in a place. It can be linked to site aesthetics, but goes beyond aesthetics to embrace the lived quality of the everyday.

By contrast to the qualities of immediacy and visitor-centredness that can be achieved by foregrounding site poetics, the poetics of many historic sites are often reduced to a theatrical backdrop on which curator-centred interpretation rests. Such curation refers to a lost past, usually disconnected from the present in all but lessons to be learnt, for example, the laudable respect for cultural diversity shown by the Achaemenids. This style of curation also implies that the spectator is disconnected from the site.

An interpretation based on poetics enables a very different perception of the site. It brings the past and the present together insisting that visitors participate by actually inhabiting the site during their visit. Such interpretation depends on the visitor experience of the site and necessary day-by-day changes. Poetics brings together nature and culture, powerfully linking past and present; as visitors move around the site they inscribe and re-inscribe place, highlighting daily the importance that Pasargadae has for Iran and World Heritage. Sensory aspects of a site have been long neglected in western interpretation in favour of chronology, individual narratives, nationalism/localism and teleology. This paper examines key questions surrounding an interpretation grounded in poetics.

Approaches to the Past

The long fascination by the western world with ruins contains a history of changing ways of looking which indicates the potential malleability of ruins in heritage practice. In seventeenth century Europe, ruins were appreciated for their reassuring aesthetic qualities leading to considerable poetic, imaginative play with specific places in art (Thomas, 2008: 654). Simmel (1965) identifies the dynamic play between nature and art in a ruin. They were regarded as melancholy places which showed how civilisation had improved (Ginsberg, 2004; Thomas, 2008: 67). Hertzler (1982) extends this Romantic view in the twentieth century to define a new aesthetics.

We do not have here only natural beauty or only artistic beauty, but we have a *third kind of beauty: a ruin beauty, which is a new category of being...* In a ruin, so-called natural beauty intersects with human-made beauty in a unique manner... Together they yield a new kind of beauty, a new immateriality that is neither human nor natural but both. (Hetzler, 1982: 105)

By contrast, the nineteenth century, reeling from the shock of the French Revolution and its immense destructive force, took an historical stance towards ruins (Thomas, 2008: 65–67) seeing in them a witness to destruction wrought by humans; they were, therefore, places that showed the collapse of the continuity of time, a break in human experience. “People experienced an at times apocalyptic sense of things overturned, and of the present as utterly cut off from the past” (Thomas, 2008: 63).

Further to the violent change wrought by revolutionary events and the Napoleonic Wars was bureaucratic change. Bann (1989: 104) argues that the establishment of the Public Record Office in London in 1837 was a decisive moment in determining ways that were officially acceptable in understanding the past. Until that time, artistic methods had been one of the many possible ways. After 1837 the steady bureaucratisation of ways of accessing “truth” statements about history severely limited ways of knowing the past. This is even more evident today in the rapid expansion of controlling powers of various styles of heritage agencies. The archivally verifiable mode, especially as embodied in paper documents, has become the preferred official mode. As documentary evidence attained huge testamentary power through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so painting, music, songs, theatre and literature were correspondingly downgraded and disempowered.

As imagination and the body have been steadily removed from the experience of western heritage places, it has been easy to take for granted the hegemony of a limited historic focus as an appropriate way to interpret the past. The historic focus usually demands emotional detachment from the visitor. Other than a modicum of empathising with past experiences of people who might have occupied a site, most interpretation assumes that the visitor is aloof, both emotionally and in terms of time. Although many sites have tried to provoke questioning about interpretations of the past, they have done little to reduce the barrier implied by the “pastness” of the past, that is, the sensory qualities of the place seem to be sealed-off from the present, frozen as a material archive. Approaching the poetics of Pasargadae, however, one has a wide choice of elements that can prompt the visitor to ask questions about the past while insisting that the interpretation does not represent a sealed-off past.

Poetics move beyond representation to insistence on the immediacy of lived experience. An interpretation of poetics would enable Pasargadae to be itself rather than a place that bears traces of former events. The present qualities or the “nowness” of the site, plus the auratic quality of the original fabric, would be foregrounded. Experiences perceived through the body could be consistent with Islamic site appreciation leading to engagement with the Divine.

Consider the poetics of Pasargadae: the feel and sound of the wind in different seasons and different times of the day; the light falling onto ancient stones; reflections; poppies in spring time blooming in the cracks of the sun-warmed blocks; the deep blue-green of the parched, barren hills which frame the ruins; the delicacy of the Fisherman relief carving in comparison to the monolithic quality of the heavy construction stones; the angle of the legs of the carved fisherman and the hooped animal which follows him; the deep vertical repeated

shadows thrown by the pillars of the fortified terrace of Tall-e Takht onto the creamy platform and their profile against the hot blue sky; the solidity of the Mausoleum of Cyrus and its relatively small size in comparison to the surrounding grandeur; the contrast between the Mausoleum and the broken, barely supported ruins of the tomb of King Cambyses; pathways made by the nomads who still live around the site; their flowing, soft clothes in contrast to the stone. Of crucial importance in poetics would be all the dynamic processes of the site: smells, fretting stone, dry and damp, which alert us to the life in the ruin and the active force of a ruin as it contains death and life simultaneously. Ginsberg describes life in a ruin.

Vegetation has entered here and there, the blame falling on the fallen roof, but the floor has been transformed into earth... Though the artefact has been destroyed, the ruin is free to be creative in its own terms. (Ginsburg, 2004: 56)

Poetics move far beyond the visual, acutely so when ruins are the object of sensory experience. Hetzler discusses the senses, a human perception capacity dramatically disallowed because of the exclusive power of the archived document and material, historical evidence in knowing the past.

The senses are deeply involved with the experience of ruins. *Touch* has been called the sense of certitude. In a ruin touch is a marvelous combination of the human and the natural. In touch one meets the resistant body, an alien. There may be the sensuousness of the smoothness of stone, marble or wood... Man's perceptions of ruins, like the ruins themselves, are part of the dynamic cosmic process that is somehow united by time. (Hetzler, 1982: 106)

The difficulty of aesthetic perception of nature is discussed by Fenner (2006) who says that it is the quality of flux and dynamic openness which have made aesthetic judgement difficult.

These reasons may even incorporate the view that evaluation is impossible when the object in question is constantly moving. The difficulty with such a posture, however, is that it relegates environmental aesthetics to an exclusively academic role. (Fenner, 2006: 10)

Drawing on Carlson, Fenner (2006: 10–11) describes the way in which a typical art object is “distinct from the appreciator”. By contrast, “the object of nature appreciation is all around the appreciator, encompassing her, forming a living and dynamic context for her appreciation... a sensory envelope”. This is vital. Grasping that the visitor or appreciator is at the centre of the site, its meanings and sensory possibilities, is fundamental to understanding why an interpretation based on poetics can push a site to a new level of heritage sophistication. Early in this paper I noted the way that curator-centred interpretation results in a dominant curator and a detached visitor. Interpretation based on poetics, however, centres the visitor, leading to a dynamic visitor experience and connecting the site to the present.

In addition to the natural aspects of Pasargadae, consider also the power of imagination: visitors can be asked to recreate in their minds the idea of the Pasargadae primal, symmetrical garden, possibly the world's first garden, with its wall that invites you to push away the rest of the world and turn in towards a living space. By contrast, visitors could also be asked to imagine the might of Cyrus's army in this place. These two historic elements of the place

could thus be treated in terms of poetics and contrast rather than in terms of chronology or even cultural achievement. Further, visitors could be asked to imagine the violent removal of the mosque which had surrounded Cyrus's Mausoleum by archaeologists who wished to return the site to a simple synchrony, inevitably to the time of the glory of the Achaemenids.

Looking at the italicised definition of ruins used by Hetzler (1982: 108): a "*disjunctive product of the intrusion of nature without loss of the unity that man produced*", highlights the imperative for heritage interpretation to move beyond limited historical engagement. For Ginsburg (2004), ruins contain even more than this unique combination, he describes them as active and creating an intense relationship with a visitor which results in "something substantial" (Ginsburg, 2004: 1) happening to the visitor. Interpretation based on poetics at Pasargadae taps into this strong force.

Key Issues for Poetics and Heritage Sites

Two fundamental issues arise from the prioritisation of poetics: first, the status of poetics in terms of representation and secondly, the place of history. Are heritage poetics to be considered a form of representation at a site? Intellectually, where might poetics lead the visitor? What happens to history? After all, history is the usual focus at a heritage site. In thinking through answers to these questions one discovers that poetics can assist in dealing with the usual problems posed by history. History is necessarily selective, in choosing what is to be known at a site there is also, of course, a fundamental process of erasure. Related to erasure is the often dominant status of the curator who chooses to erase or not. Related also is the textually subservient position of the visitor who may not detect the erasures, the gaps. Unwitting perpetuation of visitor ignorance is fundamental to the current powerful curatorial role despite contemporary heritage ideals of dialogism.

Bate's work on poetry and biodiversity is useful in thinking through heritage site poetics. He draws on Heidegger who suggests that poetry is not a form of representation or of mapping, but of "presencing", that is, it causes one to be in the present. Bate describes "dwelling" in the natural environment, a key term for Heidegger,

that authentic form of Being which he set against what he took to be the false ontologies of Cartesian dualism and subjective idealism. We achieve Being not when we represent the world... but when we stand in a site, open to its Being, when we are thrown or called; the site is then gathered into a whole for which we take on an insistent care. (Bate, 1998: 55)

This deep ecology style of relating or being in a place opens up rich possibilities for heritage interpretations for all sites, not just those that are very tense such as Pasargadae.

Derrida identifies the vulnerable quality of the "poematic" (Clark, 2005: 141).

Thus the dream of *learning by heart* arises in you. Of letting your heart be traversed by the dictated dictation. In a single trait — and that's the impossible, that's the poematic experience. (Derrida, quoted in Clark, 2005: 141)

The visitor, therefore, necessarily is heavily engaged in a site of poetics. McCorkle describes the force of this engagement.

... the necessity of a poetics of identity: to examine one's condition, one's difference; to name and offer a voice to those names or one's own name; all this is not only a marking of histories but also a re-examination of history and a re-visioning of the self. (McCorkle, 1992: 187)

Firuz offers a moving approach to tackling the relationship between poetry and history. The writer insists on making present the problems of erasure and the need to create an active reader of history by playing with the history of Turkey in World War One. It is necessary to emphasise that s/he brings the problems into being through a poetic approach by making present the jumble of facts rather than reflecting dispassionately on existing documents. S/he creates an assemblage of fragments, facts, key dates and received wisdom leading to "things that are lost between definitions" (Firuz, 2007: 219). S/he tries to express the massive complexity of the birth of modern Turkey in the context of the European war and the rupture of the Armenian genocide.

Because history, I think should move us.
The stuff about poetry is a longstanding thing.
Historians are plagued by arrogance. Like poets. Maybe it's only me. But I think there exists a certain legitimacy which surrounds history and historians, and it needs to be questioned.
What if a historian's truth were no more than a poet's truth? Now wouldn't that be interesting? (Firuz, 2007: 223)

By asking the reader to consider the strange power accrued to contemporary historical writing Firuz reveals the unsteady base of its legitimacy. S/he offers poetic power in its place. McCorkle grapples with the same problems.

Had history been different, had it been less certain, had it been reversed... absence would be overturned. History, in a tragic sense, is the making of absences. If that is the violence of history, then the force of poetry would be the making of presence. (McCorkle: 1992: 178-179)

Drawing on the work of Jerome Rothenberg, McCorkle concludes

Poetry offers, perhaps, the only access for us to hear the voices of the dead. In this autonomous space of dialogues are offered accounts of what has transpired... [It is] the poem's ability to create the space in which we become haunted by others. (McCorkle, 1992: 187)

In being haunted by others, we transcend the detached historian's view of the past. Poetics, therefore, enable us to be present at a site. The apparent binary of history as absence/erasure while poetry is presence is a key to the presentation of Pasargadae as a site of poetics. Attempts must be made to break rigid binaries. Poetics is not about representation, it is a stand alone life experience that demands visitor involvement. Imagine how the poppies at Pasargadae quiver in the warm stony cracks of the great site in a different way each spring day; the clouds, hour by hour, making unique patterns as they pass over the dramatic verticals of the pillars on the great terrace of Tall-e Takht. There is great force in the immediacy of the

poetic engagement, Ginsberg's (2004: 1) "something substantial" happens. Clark (2005) tries to pin down the poetic experience.

To read a text solely as itself and on its own terms, in its singularity: no idea might seem simpler — not to make the text an example of some social or cultural point, nor a facet of some theory of poetics, but merely to *affirm it in itself and as it is*. The point is not to interpret the singularity of the text but to move towards a point, never finally attainable, at which the text is being understood only on its own singular terms. (Clark, 2005: 9)

A first possible perception, therefore, that a turn to poetics is a way of reducing the problems of history and interpretation is very wrong. Foregrounding heritage site poetics is not concerned with calming down the tensions at a site, by stark contrast, it is concerned with moving the naming of historical and political problems away from the curatorial role. Most interpretation relies on the curator alerting the visitor to the chief problematics of the site. Through poetics, the naming of those problematics is placed back on the visitor. The visitor, therefore, names the tensions of the site for her or himself.

There could be a creative and productive blurring of poetics, history and politics at heritage sites which would transcend binaries. Many writers tackle aspects of the apparent poetics/aesthetics and politics binary. Eagleton (1988), for example, demonstrates that the political is embedded in aesthetics; Hutcheon (1988: 106) describes the porosity of fiction and history; Kumar (1999: 6–7) states the "barrenness of the binary opposition between poetics and politics while McCann argues that the debate about politicising or depoliticising art is a displaced debate that is really about the necessity of ethical character. The arguments he says

are concerned less with realizable ends than with the kinds of people we are, and their underlying demand is that we be the kind of people who care about ends that seem both enormously significant and, at bottom, all but unrealizable. (McCann, 1999: 44)

Conclusion

Interpretation based on poetics at Pasargadae could forcefully demand a visitor's engagement with the historical and political difficulties of a site while at the same time respecting Iranian government sensibilities. It could pull past and present together. If heritage interpretation could achieve a visitor experience which insisted on the singular poetics of a site, then the problems of the repetition of the World Heritage criteria, noted at the beginning of this paper, would be greatly reduced.

The development of poetics would address also the current western situation which faces a serious problem as heritage controls become steadily bureaucratized, resulting in implied insistence on the similarities between sites. This is readily evident in the development of historic themes for heritage workers and the linking of the themes to tourism and branding. The themes-tourism-branding triumvirate operates fatally against the ideal of the singularity of site poetics. Many sites are subsumed into regions which are branded with particular looks and historic emphases which produce historic places as little more than part of a wider region experience. This is one of the reasons why there has been so little work done on the poetics

of heritage places; heritage homogenisation is a looming danger. To develop poetics and singularity of site would be to undermine a vast heritage and tourism bureaucracy which is working in the opposite direction and steadily undermining the unique quality of heritage sites.

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