

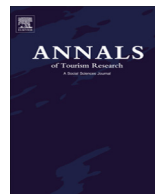


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# World heritage and the contradictions of ‘universal value’



Hazel Tucker<sup>a,\*</sup>, Elizabeth Carnegie<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Otago, New Zealand

<sup>b</sup> University of Sheffield, UK

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically appraises the notion of ‘universal value’ as a core principle underpinning World Heritage Sites. It does so through examination of Göreme Open-Air Museum, a cultural tourism site of cave Byzantine churches in central Turkey. Focusing on the contestation surrounding the frescoes within the Byzantine churches, the article discusses tensions relating to the non-iconographic nature of Islam and to the ways that deliberate damage to the frescoes is interpreted to tourists. We conclude that these tensions emphasise the singularity of the concept of universal value, and argue that it is only by embracing pluralism and being open to alternative narratives and debate that World Heritage Sites, as international tourism sites, might be able to achieve UNESCO’s unifying ideals.

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## Introduction

A place’s World Heritage Site (WHS) inscription is understood to be an acknowledgement of its outstanding ‘universal value’, in which, theoretically, all the peoples of the world are equal stakeholders. As such, UNESCO’s World Heritage project is a global endeavour which is arguably highly ambitious in that it is intended to induce a sense of community ‘in the minds of men’ (Di Giovine, 2009, p. 33). Simultaneously, however, UNESCO’s World Heritage project has been viewed as an example of

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Tourism, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand. Tel.: +64 3 479 7671.

E-mail addresses: [hazel.tucker@otago.ac.nz](mailto:hazel.tucker@otago.ac.nz) (H. Tucker), [e.carnegie@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.carnegie@sheffield.ac.uk) (E. Carnegie).

<sup>1</sup> Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield S10 1FL, UK.

international domination, or more precisely, a Western colonial project (De Cesari, 2010; Meskell, 2002; Rowlands & Butler, 2007). In particular, the emphasis placed on 'monumentality' which arises from UNESCO's 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, has been criticised for having considerable Eurocentric bias (Alivizatou, 2012). Whilst there have been various efforts to revise the Convention in response to these criticisms (De Cesari, 2010; Labadi, 2013), this noting of bias in the context of supposed 'universal value' raises ongoing questions. These questions particularly pertain to World Heritage sites in non-European settings, regarding the effects that World Heritage inscription has in and around the WHSs themselves, and whether or not it achieves its aim of inducing a sense of community in the minds of all humanity.

This article considers these questions through examination of Göreme Open-Air Museum in central Turkey which has been inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985. The Museum is a site of cave Byzantine churches and monasteries dating back to between the 9th and 13th Century, and iconographic art on the walls of the churches is a key focus of WHS inscription (UNESCO, 2014). The discussion here examines the contestation surrounding the iconographic frescoes within the Byzantine churches and the key tensions relating both to the non-iconographic nature of Islam and also to how damage that has been inflicted on the frescoes is interpreted to tourists. We critically appraise the formal narratives of World Heritage which are based on certain supposed intrinsic, scientific and objective notions of universal value, and examine the ways in which these narratives are challenged and subverted by the fluid and emotional 'live' interpretative performances for tourists. By considering the multiple ways in which the formal narratives of the site are negotiated, challenged and subverted in and through the varying mythologies of place and prejudices of guides, the discussion highlights the contradictions in and problematic manifestations of the notion of 'universal value' as a core principle underpinning World Heritage Sites and their presentation to an international tourist audience.

While World Heritage fosters a form of inclusiveness through its seemingly scientific and therefore impartial approach to heritage presentation and interpretation, our study highlights the ambivalence or even resistance with which the underlying assumptions of 'universal value' are met within specific localities. In Göreme Open-Air Museum the sparse fixed interpretation focuses entirely on the Byzantine Christian history and biblical depictions of the site, and excludes any information on local cultural values pertaining to the site. Borne of religious difference, therefore, local cultural values are subjugated to the 'universal values'. This lack of engagement with the values attributed to the site by local communities, which are at variance with the designated 'universal value', creates tensions through the inability, or unwillingness, of World Heritage's principles of 'universal value' to allow the designated space to engage with multiple voices. Furthermore, where local people's religious and cultural values outside and around a WHS are given no value within it, there will inevitably be tensions, potentially resulting in both real and symbolic violence to that which is 'differently valued', as is the case in the Göreme Open-Air Museum.

### **World heritage, universal value and tourism**

Outstanding universal value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity (UNESCO, 2013, p. 24).

Through the concept of 'outstanding universal value', World Heritage discourse expounds the notion of heritage of and for all humanity, with individual sites selected for World Heritage listing based on 'their merits as the best possible examples of the [world's] cultural and natural heritage' (UNESCO, 2005). UNESCO's World Heritage project is hence the epitome of what Di Giovine refers to as the global 'heritage-scape', 'the social space of an imagined community linked together by their common appreciation and identification with cultural diversity' (2009, p. 36). Moreover, a discourse of heritage as having a cultural tourism purpose is integral to UNESCO's ideal of a global 'imagined community', and in order for UNESCO to succeed in the production of the heritage-scape, it 'must harness the global flows of international travellers to interact with the authentic monuments *in situ*' (Di Giovine, 2009, p. 42).

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