Review of D. Comer (ed.) Tourism and Archaeological Heritage Management at Petra: Driver to Development or Destruction?

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Book Reviews


Melanie Hall has brought together in this volume an excellent group of scholars, each of whom have contributed purposeful essays on international origins of the theory and practice of heritage conservation. While the literature in heritage studies has proliferated over the last decades, remarkably few publications have investigated the early social and political contexts and conceptual foundations of the discipline. This book substantially addresses this need and will be a useful and stimulating addition to seminar reading lists. It should also find a more general audience among all those practicing in the fields of heritage studies, interpretation, and management. Together with Rodney Harrison’s Heritage: Critical Approaches (2013), Hall’s well-conceived and edited work provides an improved basis for more critically informed understandings of the origins of historic and scenic preservation, generally, and the changing purposes and meanings embedded in these activities.

The volume’s essays were first presented in a 2006 Boston University conference intended to explore the international origins of the concept of world heritage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hall provides an insightful introduction explaining the importance of this avenue of inquiry, noting that the “ascendancy of international cooperation on matters of ‘heritage protection’ occurred in the context of empires and during a period of enormous change” (p. 2). Indeed the origins of heritage, as an implied group inheritance, reinforcing individual and national identities, recurs as a theme throughout the volume’s essays. This is the period identified by Eric Hobsbawm for the intensity of its “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and the authors here provide case studies and analysis on related themes of heritage invention, as it were, by churches, states, and empires. Each essay provides thoughtful analysis of the motivations and means of developing the concept of international heritage primarily through the conservation of buildings and landscapes.

Hall divides the essays into two groups, “Case Studies,” and “Framing the Practice,” with the latter group of essays emphasizing the institutionalization of heritage management under a variety of social and political frameworks. The editor’s own essay on the preservation of Niagara Falls is a fitting point of departure. As the author notes, this was the first true “inter-national, trans-national preservation effort” (p. 3), and its significance in this regard is under appreciated. The restored and preserved landscape became a rich embodiment of a new era of Anglo-American

Among the most iconic archaeological sites in the world, Petra is unexpectedly not well understood. There are very few synthetic treatments of the history and archaeology of the city, with scholars preferring to concentrate on particular monuments, buildings, and areas of the site. Inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985, a cameo appearance in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, and a governmental emphasis on attracting tourists to Jordan have all resulted in Petra becoming a popular destination. Despite this huge potential, the Jordanian tourism industry remained in its infancy until recently. This late blooming interest in the economic possibilities of visitors to the area occasioned an inauspicious situation: an influx of tourist shops, restaurants, and infrastructure, occurring without a single site management plan. The contributions in this edited volume focus on the effects of the disconnect between site management plans and tourism, arguing that Petra requires a comprehensive management plan that balances excavation, preservation, and interpretation of the archaeological heritage resources with the interests of the local communities—those most closely connected to the site and the landscape and who may economically benefit from tourism to the area.

Volumes in this series by the International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management (ICAHM), of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), focus on an analysis of the impact of a dramatic rise in tourism at World Heritage Sites and resultant social and economic effects in the local communities supporting the sites. Other case studies in the series will be carried out at Angkor (Cambodia), Machu Picchu (Peru), and Pompeii (Italy). The emphasis of this review is the volume on Petra, edited by Douglas C. Comer. Together these four examples may provide insights into the local successes and failures in bridging archaeology, tourism, management, competing stakeholders, and international agencies like UNESCO.

The title of the volume, Tourism and Archaeological Heritage Management at Petra: Driver to Development or Destruction? suggests the dichotomous dilemma examined by the six experts (three Jordanians, three foreigners)—can tourism and archaeological heritage management live in harmony at Petra? The contribution “Forty-Four Years of Management Plans in Petra” by Aysar Akrawi, director of the Petra National Trust, provides a fascinating overview of the history of management at the site. This chapter suggests that the problem at Petra is not the lack of a management plan but the overabundance—too many, too varied, and too focused on the scientific and preservation aspects of the site. Akrawi documents at least five management plans since 1968—produced by the US National Park Service, UNESCO, US/ICOMOS, US/NPS (a second plan), and a private consulting agency (ATC Consultants). Akrawi makes a compelling argument regarding the lack of success of any of the plans—none included input from the local community.
She also highlights the lack of comprehension regarding the varied values of the site—something she believes also contributes to the failure of the plans.

The other two chapters by Jordanians (“The Environmental and Cultural Heritage Impact of Tourism Development in Petra Jordan” by Talal S. Akasheh and “The Participation of Local Communities in the Tourism Industry at Petra” by Suleiman Farajat) intimately familiar with the site also make the case for the significance of local communities and their importance in site planning and oversight. These three chapters highlight an additional clash regarding best practices, giving rise to fractured administration—a lack of coordination between the various non-governmental organizations, government agencies, and national and international preservation groups all with a vested interest in Petra.

Many of the chapters are devoted to evaluating conditions (physical and cultural) at the site. The contributions are varied, interesting, and many of them examine the effect of recent events impacting tourism at the site. Events like the 1994 flood of tourists from Israel in the post Oslo Accords period (the set of agreements between the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization), which led to greater regional cooperation. Akasheh and Comer recognize that in the aftermath of the signing of the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, Jordan “was suffering from the lack of an appropriate tourism development plan to meet the rising demand with the sharp increase of tourist arrivals” (Akasheh p. 131). In 2007 a spike in visitors also accompanied the designation of Petra as one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World.” Such fame, in addition to the site’s “rose red” beauty (the product of very fragile geological formations handsomely documented in the chapter by Thomas R. Paradise), attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists a year—both a blessing and a curse.

Chapters on the hydrology of Petra’s landscape (Douglas C. Comer) and issues facing the Bedouin (Christopher C. Angel), who were relocated to newly created towns outside of the site on the recommendation of a UNESCO report, enhance the discussion surrounding the challenges facing those who attempt to produce a comprehensive management plan for the site. Unfortunately the numerous errors of grammar and syntax are distractions and the volume would have benefitted from more thorough copy-editing. The quality and size of many of the images and tables accompanying the chapters are disappointing and in some instances impossible to read.

In this volume the past and current Jordanian tourism management approach is criticized for being insufficiently holistic. The authors also suggest that certain projects and interests are afforded greater preferences according to the whims of the various (and often changing) decision-makers. The frenzy of unchecked tourism development, which resulted in adverse environmental and cultural effects, including unregulated commercial activities and unrestricted construction both inside and outside of the site boundaries, has created an often undesirable visual landscape.

Most of the authors agree that the absence of a coordinating mechanism within the government, a single entity charged with managing the competing aspects and
desires, is perhaps the biggest problem facing Petra. It is clear from the contributions to this volume that there are serious concerns regarding carrying capacity (although the actual number of visitors cited is different in two of the papers), environmental degradation as a result of tourist activities, and cultural insensitivity—the lack of inclusion of local stakeholders. What is most interesting, and a missing element in any of the analyses presented in this volume, is the fact that all of the management plans were produced by Western entities. Conceivably a management plan created by the Jordanian government or a Jordanian NGO might address the failings of the previous, mostly unsuccessful plans?

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