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Living amid the ruins: archaeological sites as hubs of sustainable development for local communities in southwestern Turkey

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Since 2013, the BIAA has created and implemented a number of projects within its cultural heritage management strategic research initiative. One of these projects, titled Living Amid the Ruins: archaeological sites as hubs of sustainable development for local communities in southwestern Turkey (LAR), was completed in March 2018. It was funded by the British Academy's Sustainable Development Programme. Building on the Institute's earlier Pisidia Heritage Trail Project, which involved the development of a 350km-long trekking route connecting ten archaeological sites, LAR adopted a public archaeology theoretical framework.

Setting the scene

The BIAA's previous research in the field of cultural heritage management indicated that one of the drawbacks of policies and recommendations related to heritage issues has been an overemphasis on 'creating socio-economic benefits for the local communities through archaeology'. The number of policy papers that require these benefits to be considered by archaeologists or heritage planners is on the rise. However, none of these publications seems to consider what these benefits actually are, who should define them or how.

LAR took the long route in order to identify these benefits, namely by asking the opinions of the people who are considered the main recipients of them. For the purposes of understanding the dynamics of country-to-city migration at a micro scale and creating strategies to incentivise younger generations to stay in or return to their home towns and

villages, the researchers of the LAR team have interviewed villagers living along the Pisidia Heritage Trail, in the vicinity of the archaeological sites.

Two types of questionnaires were employed for this research. The first, the standard form that was applied to every respondent, is composed of nine themes: household demographics; settlement; migration history; economy; agriculture; animal husbandry; forestry; spatial imagination, memory and experiences; and, lastly, ancient ruins, ecology and sustainable development. The second questionnaire was prepared to facilitate the gathering of information on oral history and aimed to compile an intangible cultural heritage inventory as well as to build an understanding of how each settlement has changed over the years.

Summary of the results of the anthropological fieldwork

Although the villages are very close to one other, the fieldwork has shown that they are very different in terms of their migration stories. For every single village, there seems to have been a turning point. From that point onward, migration accelerated. In the case of Kovanlık, for instance, host to the ancient site of Döşemeboğazı, the failure to meet irrigation demands for a newly established cotton industry was the game changer. The decreasing demand for hand-made Döşemealtı carpets played another significant role in the decline of the village.

From the point of view of a public archaeology project, the number of features shared by these villages seemed greater than their differences, since they are all mountain



The landscape along the Pisidia Heritage Trail.

villages located by or amid the ancient ruins of Pisidia. However, a closer look proved otherwise. In summary, these differences tend to stem mainly from the age of the population, a relatively younger versus older population; whether there has been any reverse migration (even if this is in its initial stages); whether the ruins are seen as an economic resource for touristic activities by the local community; whether the settlement is connected to employment opportunities – which is, in turn, connected to the issue of transportation; and whether farming, husbandry and/or forestry still represent a source of income.

Nonetheless, common features were not non-existent. A sense of attachment to the ruins, a use of natural resources, and ideas and plans for migration, for instance, all showed considerable similarities.

This fieldwork-based component of our research enabled us to identify ‘key people’, in terms of capacity and their willingness to get involved in entrepreneurship, as well as key products that could be marketed. In addition, the individuals within the communities who still possess the necessary skills to produce these products and to teach them to others were identified. Furthermore, we collected many migration stories, listing the main reasons for migration as well as ideas to reverse it. This relates to issues such as nationwide policies about the use of land, continuously



The research team walk past an abandoned village house.

decreasing incentives for farming and the restriction of land-use due to the creation of national parks and archaeological conservation zones.

Experts in Turkey often complain that the people living by ancient ruins do not see them as part of their heritage. Although the relationship is not seamless, the findings of LAR indicate the opposite. As such, when asked directly about whether they see the ruins as part of their heritage, 65% answered ‘yes’. However, this does not guarantee a level of knowledge about the sites. Only 20% of the respondents felt content with the amount of knowledge they had about the ruins. Interestingly, this does not reflect a desire to have these ruins removed or destroyed. Even in cases like Selge, where most of the respondents complain about the difficulties of living in an archaeological conservation zone, when asked whether the ruins should be protected, only one respondent said no, and this response was based on a desire to see a lifting of the construction restrictions related to the conservation zone. Thus, nearly all (98%) of the respondents thought that the ruins should be protected, including those who do not see them as part of their heritage.

The data also reveal that a high percentage of villagers (81%) spend time around the ruins for various reasons, the most common being ‘for exploring’ (35.1%). They also commented that when they have visitors from out of town, the ancient site is one of the places that they take them to. These data could indicate that any kind of visitor facility and interpretation will be of interest to those living by the ruins.

For this reason, all outputs of the BIAA’s research related to heritage management (website, guidebook, 3D reconstructions of the monuments – all of which are about to be realised) will be produced in Turkish as well as English and will be made available to our respondents. We have also borrowed some ideas from visual anthropology in order to create a final output of the LAR project. A short documentary addressing many of the points raised in the course of our research can be viewed on the BIAA’s YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PykH0Dc-ytE>.



Village women making scarves to sell to tourists.