Methodological Considerations of Written Heritage Interpretation

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Abstract: Cultural heritage can be viewed as a cultural process that reflects contemporary cultural and social values, and is subject to the process of management, legislative frameworks, financial resources, education, the process of preservation, and research. Cultural heritage research that is conducted on all phenomena of cultural heritage includes various methods used to achieve knowledge of heritage and its values, as well as its preservation and long-term accessibility. It is important to look at heritage from as many aspects as possible so that the information obtained from the research can be disseminated to users of heritage institutions and the public. Researching some of these aspects includes analysis of text, research of users, and research of the object or material aspect of cultural heritage. Research also has to include a cultural and social component because heritage is linked to people (heritage community and general public) precisely through social processes and experiences by which people add value and significance to heritage and thus collectively care for it to ensure its continuity, authenticity, and identity. Written heritage on various media is one of the most numerous types of cultural heritage stored and preserved in heritage institutions. It is necessary to preserve it in a way that ensures its availability, 'readability' and ability to be reused which, in turn, can be achieved by preserving its material and informational aspect. Written heritage is also specific because of the values which are inherent to it, especially the informational value. Its preservation has a cultural and social value for the heritage community. The aforementioned values can be used for organizing activities that raise public awareness and understanding of written heritage. The organization of such activities should be based on an impartial analysis, which should as a result have an objective description of the material and informational aspect of written heritage. Understanding all of the specific factors of written heritage and methodology used in the research of cultural heritage in general, it should be considered in which way it is possible to answer research questions which concern the goal of objective description of written heritage and planning interpretation activities. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the methodological limitations and possibilities concerning the specific field of written heritage interpretation and methods applied in the research of cultural heritage in general.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage interpretation can be viewed as an educational activity but also as process of communicating cultural heritage importance and values to the public. In the process of cultural heritage interpretation, the interpreter, i.e., the person who performs the activity of interpretation, interacts with the public to convey the knowledge about a particular object and / or event. Since interpretation can be viewed as an approach to communication it can also be an important part in raising awareness and understanding of the importance of cultural heritage, so it is possible to conclude that interpretation is an integral part of cultural heritage preservation and its management because only properly preserved and accessible cultural heritage can be the basis of interpretive activities which can in turn lead to better and clearer understanding of the importance that cultural heritage has for the heritage community on a local and global scale. Heritage interpretation in such broader sense is applicable to the diverse phenomena of cultural heritage, given that each of them, movable or immovable, has values that need to be preserved and interpreted, and showcased to the public.

One of the aspects of cultural heritage interpretation is the written heritage interpretation, which poses new challenges to libraries, archives, and museums i.e., LAM institutions, especially in terms of viewing the written heritage interpretation from a holistic point of view which will enable numerous research with a goal to achieve results gained in an objective way which in turn need to be the basis for services and products with added values in a particular community. Written heritage, as any other occurrence of cultural heritage, was created in the past with a specific purpose, and in the present, it is becoming an object of preservation. The specificity of written heritage is in the fact that it has a dual character because it consists of the material carrier of information and information recorded on that material carrier. Preserving both components ensures availability, 'readability' and reusability of written heritage, and interpretation can also be viewed as an activity which re-uses written heritage, its values and information gained from research. The services based on this information can be useful in the cultural and social development of the community or society and looking at the specifics of written heritage as a basis on which to carry out activities of interpretation. The question that remains, and the question this paper will try to answer is how a purposeful written heritage interpretation can be achieved. Research of written heritage can be achieved through numerous methods and the results of written heritage research need to provide information which can subsequently be used in forming interpretation activities. The methods used can stem from both scientific and professional work or research which is carried out in a particular scientific field or an area of a particular human activity. The methods can be applied to a specific area of research interest, as well as to issues that arise in practice, but also to different areas of research interest or methods that are used at a general level. It is necessary to observe written heritage interpretation as a complex field that

includes understanding of the term interpretation and its principles as well as the specifics of written heritage.

2. Interpretation

The field of heritage interpretation stems from the long-standing practice of interpreting nature, and cultural landscapes in the *National Park Service* in the United States of America and has been evolving ever since. One of the first books on interpretation was written by Enos Mills and it was intended for nature guides. In 1957 Freeman Tilden, who studied interpretation for the *National Park Service*, wrote a book titled *Interpreting our Heritage* and defined the interpretation as an educational activity that has a result of discovering meaning and different relationships with the use of cultural heritage objects, experiences, and various media (Tilden 1977). He stated that it is not simply enough to communicate known facts about cultural heritage as it is important to try to raise awareness and understanding of cultural heritage, its specificities, and values. Tilden also distinguishes concepts and principles of interpretation which detail the complexity of the term *interpretation* because it includes not only the interpreters but also the public for which the interpreted content is intended. Concepts refer to the persons who interpret i.e., *interpreters* as well as the contact they make with the public. It is necessary to make a connection between the public, the subject of interpretation and the need to preserve the cultural heritage. Further clarification of the concepts of interpretation is provided in Tilden's six principles that lay the foundations of interpretive activities for purposeful interpretation. Interpretation needs to relate to the subject of interpretation so that it retains the interest of the public which in turn needs to be able to understand the knowledge that is being disseminated through interpretation. It is necessary to educate the public so that something new could be learned, but also because education raises awareness and understanding of heritage values of the cultural heritage being interpreted. Interpretation must be related to, and based on, the results arising from the research of the subject and content of the interpretation while avoiding merely stating the facts. Using various skills, including the art of interpretation, a story intended for the education of the target user group is created. Such interpretation will be fruitful if it leads directly to the preservation of the object of interpretation, stimulates the user to understand the truth behind the information and the object of interpretation. An interpreter, following the stated principles, ensures that the interpretation conveys the meaning and significance of heritage and its values, and at the same time adapts it to the target group of users while raising awareness of importance of cultural heritage and its preservation (Tilden 1957). Interpretation as a field, and its definition, constantly evolve, and in the literature multiple important authors and organizations expanded and modified the definition of the term *interpretation*. For example, Ham (2013) defines interpretation as a communication process or rather as an approach to communication which attempts to engage the public. ICOMOS Ename Charter (2008) lists principles of presentation and interpretation of cultural heritage and defines interpretation as a range of potential activities that have the intention of

raising awareness and better understanding of cultural heritage that can include various ways of disseminating knowledge about objects of cultural heritage, e.g., lectures, educational activities, research, activities in the heritage community as well as public. All these definitions have some elements in common:

- interpretation is a process,
- interpretation is a form of communication (connects public to e.g., object of cultural heritage), and
- interpretation includes more than pure information (Ham 2013; Smaldone 2003, ICOMOS 2008).

These determinants allow us to perceive interpretation of cultural heritage as a complex research field that can use multiple methods to obtain information about an object of cultural heritage, about the targeted public, and ways in which such interpretation can be facilitated. It is presumed that a fruitful and purposeful interpretation can be primarily achieved if there is information about a certain cultural heritage object. Aforementioned principles (ICOMOS' and Tilden's) perceive interpretation as a part of the preservation process, i.e., added value to successfully preserved object of cultural heritage. Thus, it is necessary to ponder how one can interpret cultural heritage, including its values while also caring for, and preserving that same object so that it can be a source of information for cultural heritage interpretation.

Cultural heritage research can also be viewed as a complex field that uses different methods to research and learn about cultural heritage, its management, and preservation and long-term accessibility. These methods can be divided into three broad categories - text analysis, user research and object research. These categories include predominantly qualitative methods (interviews, surveys, text analysis, ethnographic studies etc.) that are adapted to a specific research field since there is no single approach to researching cultural heritage phenomena. Thus, it is also possible to consider the field of cultural heritage as an interdisciplinary field (Stig Sørensen, M. L. and Carman, L. 2009). Written heritage, as one of the occurrences of cultural heritage and its values, especially the informational value, has the potential for numerous interpretation activities and it is necessary to consider how the approach to research of cultural heritage, interpretation of cultural heritage and written heritage preservation management influence the way in which various methods can be used in obtaining the objective information that can become the basis for the purposeful written heritage interpretation.

3. Written Heritage

Written heritage is a part of the overall corpus of cultural heritage and is most often classified as tangible, movable heritage and considering its number (quantity) in that form, it is its predominant part. However, in some of its occurrences it is possible to classify it as immovable heritage (e.g., tombstones, written monumental traces, etc.) or (in a certain physical sense) as intangible heritage (e.g., digital, and digitized material). Further considering all aspects

that could be understood by the term written heritage, we come to a kind of general (but perhaps still insufficient, i.e. insufficiently comprehensive) definition of what this term represents, and that is that written heritage can be viewed as a culture recorded in writing and appears in many forms, and most often as movable cultural heritage - handwritten, printed, digital, digitized, represents human achievement and has a purpose to inform. At first glance, it is obvious that this is a complex and abstract concept that is difficult, if not impossible, to define unambiguously. Therefore, when studying (researching) information phenomena in which the term written heritage is included, it is necessary to define more specific phenomena and concepts to which the research and application of research methods refers to. In this concretization, one should certainly consider the specificity of written heritage, which is manifested in the fact that it consists of two components, information or content, and the material carrier of information. Here, the term material carrier of information can also be understood as media for storing digital information (e.g., optical, and magnetic media), although in the case of storing and using information in digital form, the focus should be on the process of reading information and not on the physical appearance of the carrier. Thus, the ambiguity of this concept primarily stems from the nature of written communication, which on the one hand necessarily has a specific informational (informative) dimension, and on the other hand its realization is possible in various forms. By focusing on the written heritage preservation management and its interpretation as a part of a comprehensive approach to that management, it is reasonable to consider the occurrence of written heritage as heritage stored in information institutions within the LAM community, i.e., to consider written heritage stored in libraries, archives, and museums. This approach to the concretization of the concept of written heritage directs and facilitates methodological considerations in terms of the application of specific methods used in the written heritage interpretation. Namely, one of the important determinants in the mission and one of the basic roles of the above-mentioned LAM institutions is the interpretation of the written heritage entrusted to its preservation. In this sense, LAM institutions are faced with demanding tasks in fulfilling their mission and role as interpreters because they often direct their business in the operational direction by considering the improvement of existing, and introduction of new customer services, monitoring intensive information technology progress, investment in infrastructure, etc. The main challenges should be sought in finding appropriate methodological frameworks for the written heritage interpretation as a kind of a tool available to institutions. In this consideration, we should go a step further and state that the comprehensive written heritage preservation management precisely results in its quality and appropriate interpretation (Picture 1). A more detailed insight into the preservation management shows that it has its roots in management as a kind of economic concept and in essence has the same purpose as the management of any other procedures, facilities, finances, etc. In short, management is the most efficient use of funds to achieve the goals and improved excellence. In the light of the foregoing, it can be argued that the written heritage preservation

management is a systematic and planned organization of staff and financial resources and the necessary activities to ensure the durability, availability, and interpretation of materials in accordance with the mission of a particular institution.
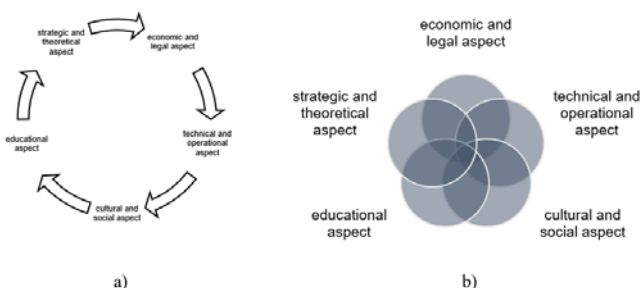
Picture 1. Written heritage preservation management is a process a) in which the aspects complement each other, and it results in b) an efficient preservation management because of the convergence of all aspects – this is the place where the basis for written heritage interpretation can be found.

In the literature (Krtalic, Hasenay 2012) it is possible to find numerous theoretical and practical models of written heritage management, and for the purpose of consideration in this paper we will use a model that includes several different aspects, which can be studied and analyzed as separate units because they contribute to the written heritage preservation, but only together can they "manage" the written heritage preservation (Picture 1).

## 4. Methodological considerations of written heritage interpretation

The approach chosen in this paper is based on the framework within which the preservation, and consequently the interpretation, is carried out in the information institutions of the LAM community. Within the applied model of written heritage preservation management, it is assumed that the preservation must be harmonized with the economic and legal framework within which an institution operates. Human resources that need to implement concrete solutions should also be considered, and in addition to their motivation, their education and possession of specific knowledge necessary for the preservation and interpretation of written heritage is crucial. Since the material that makes up the written heritage is the foundation of all preservation activities, its handling in the (broadest) sense of this term is the center of preservation management and refers to several activities carried out on specific units of material and collections. Finally, what is also crucial for the written heritage interpretation, is that the output of successful preservation is the preservation of information that should be relevant and applicable in different areas of the cultural and social environment. Having in mind (focus) the stated assumptions, the preservation management model should be viewed through five key aspects (Picture 1): *strategic and theoretical aspect* which includes planning and development of preservation programs, plans and policies at the national and institutional level

including modern theoretical knowledge about preservation and interpretation of written heritage following examples of good practice; *economic and legal aspect* that includes managing available financial resources and finding additional resources for conducting regular and extraordinary preservation and interpretation activities, monitoring, amending and implementing laws, regulations, standards etc., *educational aspect* which includes training of staff for the implementation of regular preservation activities and, if necessary, training for specific preservation activities, as well as the inclusion of knowledge on the preservation of materials in the curricula of education of information professionals; *technical and operational aspect* which includes examination of the collection condition, assessment of material storage conditions, assessment of material deterioration rate, material manipulation, application of material preservation methods and techniques, etc., and *cultural and social aspect* which is the most important in the written heritage interpretation, and it includes applying criteria for evaluation and selection of materials for storage and preservation, creation of new services, i.e. services with added values as a contribution to social development, etc.

The answer to the question why the cultural and social aspect is the most important in the written heritage interpretation should be sought in recognizing the values integrated into the process of managing of the written heritage preservation. Namely, the value of services is evaluated by performance indicators, while the value of collections is determined according to established criteria of uniqueness, rarity, material value, usability, etc. and what they use it for. The above-mentioned values are the basis for an effective, purposeful, and appropriate written heritage interpretation, with the rapid development of information and communication technology proving to be a key factor and a kind of driver of interpretive activities. Possibilities of attractive and fast results in the sense of interpretation have opened in some way, information institutions to that part of society which was not their active user before. The focus of information institutions has moved from the investments of large funds in good and appropriate spaces, demanding education and long-term conservation and restoration procedures, to tools that allow them to show almost instantly what values they have in their collections, what they can offer and, among other things they can also justify their responsibility for preservation. Thus, the management of the preservation of the material that makes up the written heritage in information institutions becomes inseparable from the access and presentation, which are all elements that make up an effective, purposeful, and appropriate written heritage interpretation.

Thus, it is necessary to further research the elements that are crucial for written heritage interpretation. It is not possible to neglect that besides written heritage preservation management, everything that is applicable to the broader field of cultural heritage, and its interpretation is also applicable to the field of written heritage interpretation. As it was already mentioned, the heritage interpretation can be viewed as an approach to communication and an educational activity, and it is necessary to determine the elements of the processes in which a certain object is interpreted. In the triangle of written heritage interpretation (Picture 2),

which is an adjusted form of an interpretive triangle (Tilkin 2016; Horvat and Hasenay, 2020), the participants of an interpretation activities are in constant interaction. Theme of an interpretive activity is in the middle of this triangle and it denotes the theme of an activity - be it an exhibition, a lecture or an event which is based on the information collected from the results of written heritage research. This information needs to be unbiased, gained through scientific research or practical work in LAM institutions which is performed by various experts. Information professionals are also an integral element of this triangle because they are the ones who interpret this information and design activities for a designated community of users. The connections in the triangle (Picture 2) present an opportunity for the consideration of possible methods which can be used in researching and preparing the theme of the interpretation activities. Information professionals can apply various methods in researching the written heritage and designated communities for which the interpretation activities are planned.
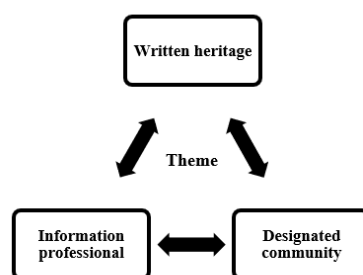
Picture 2. The triangle of written heritage interpretation.

In the relationship "*information professional - written heritage*" there are multiple research issues that can be explored, such as

- issues related to the values of written heritage, and
- issues related to producing the knowledge about written heritage interpretation.

There is a range of research areas and research question that can be answered but it is necessary to understand the way that can lead to these answers, i.e., methods which are used to answer the research questions. Qualitative methods which information professionals use in their everyday work can be used to research written heritage (surveys, interviews) but also for example oral history can be used to gain even further insight into the values of written heritage. People from the heritage community, information professionals who care for written heritage collections, legislators and public can give underlying context to historical, emotional, cultural, social and many more values that can be used for interpretating the collection of written heritage. It is also possible to use quantitative methods or methods used in the conservation of written heritage to concentrate on research of the material carrier of the written heritage which can

also provide better understanding and provide more information that can subsequently be used for interpretation.

In the relationship "*information professional – designated community*" research issues may concern the cultural and social values of written heritage, services with added value but also raising awareness about the importance of written heritage. Some of these research issues can be related to

- understanding the needs of a designated community,
- designing interpretation activities.

These issues can be analysed and researched in depth by trying to gain a better insight in the needs of a designated community which can be achieved through survey, interviews or focus groups. The findings can enable better understanding of the needs and interests of a certain community and improve interpretation activities in the future.

In the relationship "*written heritage – designated community*" research issues can be related to

- the presentation of written heritage, and
- understanding the connection between the designated community and written heritage.

This relationship requires further inquiry in the ways in which a certain community may perceive written heritage and its values. This can be better understood by conducting surveys, interviews and focus groups but also through case studies and comparative studies which could give answers in what way is the written heritage presented.

Considering that the written heritage interpretation can be considered as one the results of successful written heritage preservation and it can be found at the intersection of all aspects of the comprehensive model of written heritage preservation management, it is possible to apply everything inherent to that model to effective written heritage interpretation. Since the field of written heritage preservation management is complex it is possible to use methods common to other fields of science such as economics, law, art history, anthropology chemistry, etc. Since written heritage interpretation is one of the results of successful written heritage preservation management it opens new avenues of researching ways in which a purposeful written heritage interpretation can be achieved. It includes more than the elements of written heritage interpretation triangle. This new perspective allows us to view interpretation through five key aspects of the comprehensive model of written heritage preservation management in a combination with the grouped methods used in researching cultural heritage, i.e., analyzing text, material and people involved in the process. Grouped methods used for research of cultural heritage in general, allow a new point of view that differs areas of research which complement the written heritage interpretation triangle (Figure 2). They encompass all methods that can be used to research text more precisely textual context including legal documents, discourse, and even cultural perception of certain phenomena. They also include all methods that can give further insight

into the material of the object of cultural heritage no matter its occurrence (paper, parchment, digital media), and people which are included as an active or passive participants of interpretation activities (Stig Sørensen and Carman 2009).

Observing written heritage interpretation as a communication process, and as an educational activity in the proposed framework, requires an overview of possible research methods that can be used in building an objective corpus of information that can serve as a basis for organizing various written heritage interpretation activities. Firstly, it is necessary to define what is included under the categories featured in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of methods for written heritage interpretation combining the aspects of comprehensive written heritage management and methods used in research of cultural heritage.

	Text	Material	People
Strategic and theoretical aspect	framework analysis	surveys	surveys interviews observation focus groups case studies
Economic and legal aspect	documentary analysis	case studies	
Educational aspect	text analysis content analysis	case studies	
Technical and operative aspect	framework analysis	national surveys pilot studies experiments	
Cultural and social aspect	historical research	narrative research historical research content analysis text analysis	narrative research historical research content analysis text analysis

In the columns are broad groups of methods divided as following: text, material, and people, and in the rows are aspects of comprehensive written heritage preservation (and interpretation) management model. Different methods can be used in a general sense to enable the framework in which the interpretation is designed, preformed, and evaluated, but they can also be used in a way in which they are targeted for a special area, e.g., educational aspect applicable to people involved in the interpretation process – production and transfer of knowledge about written heritage interpretation, educating the public, etc. Some of the methods can be applied in more than one aspect. Those are usually qualitative methods such as surveys, interviews, observation and focus groups but also text analysis, documentary analysis etc. (Table 1). Considering that various methods can be applied in researching the written heritage, it is necessary to design a framework in which the written heritage interpretation can be observed. The proposed framework combines the written heritage preservation (and interpretation) model, methods used in cultural heritage research and written

heritage interpretation triangle. This encompasses all aspects in which written heritage interpretation can be researched. It is important to emphasize that these are not all possible methods since the field of written heritage interpretation can be viewed as a complex area that can use the variety of methods from various disciplines and in that sense, it can be viewed as multi- and interdisciplinary. More in-depth research into this area can shed light on more methods with a goal to create a methodological framework for written heritage interpretation.

5. Conclusions

Cultural heritage interpretation is an emerging area of interest for information institutions in the LAM community since it allows them to showcase their collections to users by creating new services with added values. Every occurrence of cultural heritage can be interpreted, and this paper delves into the written heritage interpretation through analyzing the components of that process but also achieving a wider understanding of the concept by placing it in the already established areas of heritage interpretation and written heritage preservation management. The organization of interpretation activities should be based on an impartial analysis of written heritage collections which should as a result have an objective description of the material and informational aspect of written heritage. That objective description can be attained by applying various methods that are used to answer research questions in different areas that comprise written heritage interpretation. Considering the ways in which LAM institutions and information professionals can gain insight into economic and legal framework of interpretation activities, designated communities' needs, values of written heritage and written heritage in general, etc. allows one to analyze the written heritage interpretation field through the aspects of written heritage preservation management, elements of interpretation activities and cultural heritage research. All the components should be taken into consideration since that is the only way in which a preserved written heritage collection will become an object of interpretation. There are also some limitations which can concern the way written heritage is perceived in LAM institutions, different levels of knowledge concerning the written heritage and its interpretation and knowledge of different methods and methodology in general. Further inquiry based on the elements proposed in this paper can mitigate existing and possible limitations and create a space for allowing the written heritage interpretation to become a fruitful area which can enable LAM institutions to promote written heritage collections as an extremely important part of cultural heritage in general and raise awareness of its importance.

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