

The potentials and challenges of heritage interpretation at the Hortobágy National Park - the Puszta World Heritage Site

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Abstract

The Hortobágy National Park – the Puszta World Heritage Site is a cultural landscape, but for its diverse natural assets the area has several other highly prestigious designations making it a high-profile area on international level. Hortobágy is not only special for its natural and cultural values, but has a special connotation for Hungarians, as it is often considered the symbol of the Hungarian psyche and the fate of the people, frequently reflected in works of art, too.

Despite both the objective and subjective values and notions, the Hortobágy is still understood and in many cases interpreted in a skewed fashion. The Hortobágy National Park Directorate, as the assigned World Heritage and also nature conservation managing organization makes efforts to build a thematically balanced, authentic and ethical interpretation system to provide an alternative and hopefully more appealing image of the Hortobágy.

The paper is a snapshot evaluation of these efforts, but also of the wider construct and circumstances. Thus, besides presenting the site itself, the following issues are discussed:

- policy framework
- institutional setup
- values and value judgements
- the role(s) of interpretation in site management
- standards, expectations, and gaps in the interpretation market.

Keywords: *World Heritage, Hortobágy National Park, cultural landscape, interpretation*

1. The Hortobágy – some basic facts

The Hortobágy (as a geographical unit) is situated in Eastern Hungary, forming a sub-region of Great Hungarian Plain. Most of the area is protected (ca. 80k ha), and has various designations with major overlapping boundaries:

- National park (1973)
- Biosphere Reserve (1979)
- Ramsar Site (1979)
- World Heritage Site (1999)
- NATURA 2000 Site (2007)
- Silver Tier Dark Sky Park (2011)

All these (mostly nature conservation related) designations themselves focus on different aspects of the same area.

The most prestigious designation of the Hortobágy National Park is the World Heritage Site as a cultural landscape under two of the WH criteria, i.e. **Criterion (iv)**: The Hungarian *Puszta* is an exceptional surviving example of a cultural landscape constituted by a pastoral society; and **Criterion (v)**: The landscape of the Hortobágy National Park maintains intact and visible traces of its traditional land-use forms over several thousand years, and illustrates the harmonious interaction between people and nature.

2. Notions and value-judgements of the Hortobágy - possible interpretive themes (?)

While the statement of the outstanding universal value captures important features of the site and implies some underlying notions, it still does not include all (sometimes overlapping) attributes and experiences of the area, and interpretation planning and practices should take these into consideration to stay balanced and objective.

Very similar notions are present in fine art as well as in literary masterpieces, and in folk art and folk music, particularly in folk songs. The Hortobágy is frequently identified with the Hungarian psyche, often quoted as gloomy but proud.

The most common notions and connotations are detailed below.

Romantic notion

This notion reflect on the Hortobágy as the place where souls and thoughts roam freely. It is the land of herdsmen who are the real lords (even if not the owners) of the *Puszta*. The “*csárda*”-s (roadside inns) are for earthly joy, where the innkeeper’s beautiful wife take care of the guests. Legendary “*betyár*”-s (highwaymen) are some kind of Robin Hood figures.

This notion was particularly promoted in the 1960-80's period in tourism to attract western visitors, particularly Germans. The "Pusta, Gulasch and Tsikosch" became the key marketing message and image for all of the country.

The dark realistic notion

It is the antidote of the previous notion. The Puszta is a poor land, so are its people, their fate is doomed. The herdsmen are hard working, and still live a miserable life. The betyárs are far from being heroes, they are the outcasts of society.

The Puszta is the symbol of human struggle and suffering.

This notion is in line with a more recent historic heritage of the so-called expatriation of the early 1950's, a very dark communist era. This was the Hungarian version of the soviet gulags.

The notion of emptiness

The vast expanses and open vistas coupled with the wide-spread value judgement of "diversity is beautiful" - in this aspect of landscape elements - make most people feel that there is "nothing" to see and enjoy here, as this landscape lacks this kind of diversity.

The historic approach

Since the Hortobágy is considered the westernmost stretch of the Eurasian steppe, Hungarians find a link to their roots, i.e. the several thousands of years of their migration from Western Asia all the way to the Carpathian Basin. The nomadic herding-grazing lifestyle and the landscape characteristics form the historic link between the Prehistoric Homeland and the Carpathian Basin.

Indeed, the statement of the outstanding universal value captures another aspect of the historic approach, i.e. the Hortobágy as the landscape constituted by pastoral societies in a course of some 5000 years.

The naturalist and/or scientific approach

Being the very first national park in Hungary, the Hortobágy has always been in the forefront of ecologists' interest. The Hortobágy is, in fact, recognized for its ecological assets, on international level it is best known for its birdlife. As for its ethnographic assets, both the tangible and intangible heritage connected with the pastoral lifestyle is rich and well documented.

The assets are many-fold, but can be described by the attributes of the outstanding universal value. These are (HNPI 2016):

- Alkaline soil microforms
- Alkaline soil vegetation
- Open vistas
- Natural phenomena (e.g. mirage, starry night sky)
- Traditional grazing breeds, like the Grey Hungarian cattle and the Racka sheep
- Traditional animal husbandry practices
- Archaeological remains, e.g. Ancient burial mounds – kurgans (dating 5,000-3,000 B.C.)
- Vernacular structures connected to pastoral activities
- Listed monuments – csárda's, bridges
- Tangible and intangible folk heritage (objects of everyday use, their decoration from carvings and leatherworks to embroidery, music and songs, tales and beliefs, etc.)

While the World Heritage title is based mostly on the scientific approach, site managers cannot miss all other notions to be able to address the widest possible audience.

3. Challenges for the HNP WH site management

The managing organization for the World Heritage site is the Hortobágy National Park Directorate, and it has to face several challenges in terms of WHAT and HOW to interpret the site. Basically two main fields can be identified:

Physical characteristics:

- A large area (ca. 80k ha + suggested buffer zone) – how to avoid repetition, how to best “scatter” interpretive sites, and how to assign individual function and theme/message to each of them.
- Infrastructure – question of carrying capacity and accessibility

Mental characteristics:

- There are long-standing notions of the land, and a diversity of interests, thus it is difficult to avoid a loaded interpretation and skewed understanding of the place.
- There is a plethora of assets, thus their balanced representation and forming the message of any interpretive programme is a great challenge, conveying the sense of the place to the audience, particularly considering visitors' limited span of attention.

Physical and mental characteristics combined:

Scale: The aesthetic appeal of this land lies either in the small or quite the opposite, large scale, but definitely requires a fresh eye (Sárosi 2008). It is more difficult to make people see the land's beauty and assets from their usual (everyday) perspective.

4. But why is interpretation important and how can the activity of the HNP WH management be evaluated?

Immediate management challenges are often too demanding for heritage site managers to allow much thought and time for planning management for the future (Tolnay 2009). And interpretation is exactly the tool for the latter – managing for the future. Theoretically, its overall aim is to induce appreciation to a site through knowledge and to channel this state of mind to a 'cause no harm' attitude and even active participation (Moscardo & Woods & Saltzer 2004).

While the HNP management does provide interpretive programmes, the construct cannot be considered a best practice case. The hub of the interpretation activities is at the village of Hortobágy, where most of the interpretive sites are situated (visitor centre, exhibitions, major events), and smaller scale interpretive sites are accessible from the Route 33 (connecting Debrecen and Tiszafüred, and forming an east-west axis).

The problem in the case of the HNP WH is two-fold:

- On the one hand, there is no dedicated interpretation plan that would tackle the above challenges. What more, those responsible for interpretation have no training background on the principles of interpretation.
- The other problem is that no research has ever been conducted on interpretation, therefore very limited feedback is available on the current practices, in terms of efficacy on reaching the audience and transmitting the intended message.

However, this is not a criticism for the HNP management, as this situation is "normal" at heritage sites in all Hungary. Since interpretation takes place in the tourism context, policy makers understand it less as an educational, but rather as an economic activity. This principle is missing from national policy documents (the only exceptions are the Ecotourism Strategy of 2008 compiled by the Pannon University and Aquaprofit Co., and the Youth Tourism Strategy of 2010 also elaborated by the Pannon University). The professional literature in Hungarian language is also very scarce. But most of all, professional heritage interpretation training of any form is non-existent, let alone one targeted at and dealing with the specialties of cultural landscapes. As a result, no efficient guiding tools are available for heritage site managers on how to improve their practices with the best possible management outcomes, in terms of providing true experience while conveying the sense of the place in an authentic and ethical manner. What makes the

situation worse is that managers cannot really rely on their business partners implementing interpretive sites or programmes, as with very few exceptions, businesses are even more ignorant of the principles and potentials of interpretation.

5. Summary and suggested measures for the future

The HNP WH management can definitely take responsibility for a range of issues and improve its interpretation practices, and find its tone of voice amid the various living notions and the diversity of assets. However, without the development of interpretation as a profession in the whole of the country, it will be always a lopsided effort. For that reason all segments of the market need to develop, so academics, field practitioners and businesses equally understand and utilize the principles of interpretation. Fortunately, the international arena sets us good examples. There are already some initiatives to establish interpretation as a profession, however, we are still to wait for the breakthrough moment.

There are at least two steps that are necessary to achieve a major step forward, and trigger further actions:

- It is urgent to launch (a) heritage interpretation training programme(s) with proper institutional and professional background.
- All levels of planning documents that are fully or partially targeted at heritage sites should embrace the idea and acknowledge the potentials of interpretation.

Pinpointing some of the deficiencies, I do hope that this paper will encourage future conversations among academics, policy makers, managers and businesses, from which Hungarian heritage sites, like the HNP WH will benefit in the long run.

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