

ARCHEOLOGY, CULTURE AND HERITAGE AT PONT DU GARD

The importance of temporal establishment

When cultural politics ensures the conservation of the archeological site

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ABSTRACT

History:
The **pont du Gard** is the most monumental aqueduct bridge of the **Nîmes aqueduct**. Built in the **1st century CE**, the aqueduct carried water from the Eure and Plantéry springs to the Gallo-Roman city of *Nemausus* until around the **5th century**. Thereafter, the Pont du Gard continued to **fascinate** people through the centuries, not for its function as a water-carrying structure, but rather for its grandeur and architectural magnificence, until it became a **heritage monument** in the **19th century**, when the **notion of heritage** was developed in France. As a **cultural** and **tourist site**, the Pont du Gard and its surrounding environment were inscribed on the **UNESCO World Heritage List** in **1985**. Because of this new status the site was able to **reorganize** the previously **unregulated touristic services and amenities**.

Organisation:
Thanks to UNESCO recognition, supported by local politics, a **dedicated structure** was created to manage the site. This is how the Pont du Gard Site was established. Subsequently, several entities and development projects existed, and in 2002, the **“Établissement Public de Coopération Culturelle (EPCC)”** (Public Establishment for Cultural Cooperation) was created. It continues to manage the site to this day.

Management:
Since then, **three periods** can be identified, each led by a different director with their own **choices** and **strategies**. **Looking** at these periods **critically** can help make better **decisions** for the future and can contribute to building a **sustainable future** for **archaeological heritage** by keeping it **alive** and **connected** to current **societal issues**.



Fig. 1: The site before landscaping project, 1990's © Pont du Gard



Fig. 2: Temporary exhibition with architecture school, 1st period, 2000's © Pont du Gard



Fig. 3: Big summer show, 2nd period, 2010's © Nicolas Chavance

CHALLENGES

Preservation Challenges:
The conservation of the Pont du Gard, along with its **ecosystem**, seems **too demanding** to be managed by **local authorities** alone. In the face of tense **socio-economic contexts**, **climate crisis**, and **security emergencies**, archaeological sites must be prepared to **operate with** a certain level of **economic restraint**.

Objectives:
In this context, it is essential that local political actors understand the **importance of heritage conservation**. Indeed, heritage can be a **useful tool** for addressing **social** and **economic challenges**. It may therefore be valuable to use archaeological sites as places for **experimentation** and **multidisciplinary studies**. This would make it possible to apply the **knowledge** gained **from** the **historical legacy** of archaeological sites to address current issues.

Evolution of Heritage Practices:
At the dawn of heritage recognition, the **beauty** of the monument was considered very important. Today, we can no longer focus on this alone. **Scientific value** also plays a **key role**. As a result, heritage promotion has been developed. Today, cultural professionals work to **share scientific knowledge** with the public through **outreach programs**. **Mediation** can be used both for **education** and for **funding**. It can provide a useful **balance** between **tourism** management and **cultural conservation**. This balance is crucial in contemporary heritage policy.



Fig. 4: Family focused tourism, 3rd period, 2020's © Aurelio Rodríguez

CONCLUSION

Three Visions, Three Approaches:
Having a dedicated structure to manage an archaeological site with such **diverse heritage** is essential. This structure can develop the capacity to **carry out** the **best methods** for protecting the site. However, it is crucial to **identify current challenges** and how to address them. Over the three periods experienced by the Pont du Gard, we have seen approaches with varying degrees of effectiveness. During the **first era**, significant **funds** were **invested** in **development**, and **good ideas** for **promoting** the site were introduced, but it did not generate satisfactory **financial returns**. The **second era** achieved **better economic results**, but the archaeological content was not necessarily central: the site functioned more as a **cultural performance venue** than as a scientific heritage site. The **third era** aims to **learn from previous experiences**: **scientific** heritage occupies a **central role**, and the site's **economic health** is **acceptable**.

One Common Goal:
The three eras shared similar goals: to combine **heritage recognition and conservation**. To achieve this today, the approach emphasizes **research** and **analysis**, drawing on lessons learned locally and from other sites, both nationally and internationally. As a result, it is possible to maintain a satisfactory **balance** between **tourism**, **research**, and **cultural conservation**. It is important to **promote** the site in a **way** that **supports** the **conservation** of **all** its **heritage**—not just the pont du Gard itself, but also the other **remains**, and, by extension, the **aqueduct of Nîmes**, the surrounding **landscape**, and **local cultural heritage**.

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