My historic environment

Tom King's definition of the historic environment is all-encompassing. He summarizes that "the historic environment is everything that has influenced, or reflects, our cultures and those of our progenitors".¹ I broadly agree, though I wish to discuss in more detail two aspects of this definition qualifying how the historic environment reflects the cultures of our progenitors and influences our own. As I see it, both are highly significant for the significance of heritage and the historic environment in our age.

Firstly, for something to reflect past cultures it does not have to be of great age and can in fact be rather new. Instead of focussing on age, we ought to focus on the quality of being of the past, as it is this quality that actually matters about age. A useful term denoting that quality of being of the past is pastness.² Pastness is the result of a particular perception or experience, and thus not immanent in any material element of the environment. Although pastness may result from a credible determination of the age of a site's physical construction or of an artefact's manufacture, it may also derive from other perceptions or experiences. For example, an object on display in a museum may be considered of the past because a label or museum guide is saying so. A church may acquire pastness because its architectural style matches what we expect of a Romanesque or Gothic ecclesiastic building, irrespective of when it was built. A ruin may possess pastness because its walls are in an obvious state of decay, irrespective whether or not it possessed the same feature already as new. If we want to understand and manage the historic environment with regard to the important role it fulfils in contemporary society, we thus need to investigate under which conditions human beings experience 'pastness' in relation to a given place and precisely what that means. This focus on pastness extends the scope of the historic environment considerably. The same is true for my second point.

Secondly, for something to reflect past cultures and influence our own it does not necessarily have to possess pastness and may thus lack the quality of being of the past. Arguably, the historic environment is best defined not as being made up of survivals from the past or simulated replacements that in certain circumstances can fool audiences about their actual age, but it can more broadly be conceived as the accumulated body of everything that reminds contemporary society of the past. Both definitions overlap but they are not identical. Even historically themed hotel/casinos in Las Vegas like the Luxor or Caesars Palace remind us of the ancient past – far earlier than the 20th century when they were built, quite obviously without surviving from that time. A similar emphasis on remembrance has been brought to bear on heritage by the French intellectual Pierre Nora. His highly influential book series presenting "Les lieux de mémoire" (1984–92) explored all those realms of memory in France "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself".³ These include not only historic sites but also memorials, commemorative rituals and imaginary representations of the past, all of which help us recall the past (rightly or wrongly but that is not the point). Not all of Nora's memory sites are physical but those that have a physical dimension ought to be considered a natural part of the historic environment. They evoke the past in the present, just like an ancient monument that has survived until our day.

In short, my historic environment consists of those parts of our surroundings that either possess the quality of being of the past (pastness) or that remind us of the past in some other way. Many different policies and practices inform the historic environment defined in that way, and I hope that the present journal will reflect and discuss many of them.

Figure 1: Jakriborg, a historic environment evoking the Middle Ages, located near Lund in southern Sweden. This Medieval town is brand-new but clearly it possesses pastness and reminds inhabitants and visitors alike of a local past that might indeed have occurred although sadly it did not. Much like a historical simulacrum, the past Jakriborg represents was never realized until today. Photograph: Cornelius Holtorf 2010.

Note on Contributor

Cornelius Holtorf is Professor in Archaeology and Head of Heritage Studies at Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden. His research interests include the meaning of cultural heritage and the past in the present, an excavation project investigating the life-history of a prehistoric monument in southern Portugal, and the archaeology of zoos. Recent publications are *Contemporary Archaeologies* (co-edited with A. Piccini, 2nd ed., Peter Lang 2011), “Search the past – find the present” (Erfgoed Nederland, 2010), and “From Stonehenge to Las Vegas. Archaeology as Popular Culture” (Altamira, 2005).

Correspondence: Cornelius Holtorf, Heritage Studies, Linnaeus University, 391 82 Kalmar, Sweden, cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se

¹ Thomas King, 'My historic environment', *The Historic Environment*, 1 (2010), pp. 103-104, quotation on p. 104.

² Cornelius Holtorf, 'The Presence of Pastness: Themed Environments and Beyond' in *Staging the Past. Themed Environments in Transcultural Perspective* ed. by Judith Schlehe, Michiko Uike-Bormann, Carolyn Oesterle and Wolfgang Hochbruck (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), pp. 23-40.

³ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-25, quotation on p. 7