



# World Heritage Discourses and the Potential of Conceptualizing Water

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*Conceptualizing water and heritage together is a key challenge. Only in recent years has heritage management started to embrace sustainable development in the context of heritage preservation. The UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach and policy recommendations for sustainable development integration exemplify this recent development. This contribution examines World Heritage discourses through the lenses of water and heritage as a system. It specifically explores the relation between World Heritage management and water management of World Heritage sites. In doing so, it aims to reinforce the role of water and water management in the World Heritage framework, both in terms of theory and process. It concludes with a call for a stronger acknowledgment of water management as part of good practices for World Heritage sites and their management.*



## KEY THEMES



## Introduction

In the last 15 years, new approaches have emerged in the field of World Heritage management that aim to integrate the World Heritage conservation framework with economic, environmental and socially grounded approaches and actions. This is a key change in discourse and practice aimed toward more comprehensive World Heritage management.

The 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO 2011) notably aims at managing change at World Heritage Sites and preserving their Outstanding Universal Values (OUV), while contributing to sustainable development and promoting social awareness of the role of heritage for local communities. Moreover, new UNESCO policy documents are promoting the integration of sustainable development into the processes of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2015). Open-source online platforms such as the UNESCO World Heritage Canopy present good practices and promote the role of World Heritage as a tool for sustainable development and monitoring systems such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These platforms include innovative processes, projects and tools aimed at bridging the gap between World Heritage management and sustainable practices, between theory and practice of World Heritage management and sustainable development. Yet, when considering the crucial role of water in sustainable development, these platforms struggle to address the transversal role of water for World Heritage sites and to include nature-culture relationships.

When exploring the opportunities and challenges of conceptualizing water and World Heritage together, it is necessary to first understand how World Heritage sites interact with water systems and how water is taken into account

when dealing with World Heritage discourses. Water can be at the core of a World Heritage site even if water is not directly mentioned in the statement of Outstanding Universal Value. In this regard, it is necessary to understand the systems and practices related to water and their relationships with World Heritage, such as agriculture, irrigation, gardening and defense as well as the environmental landscape characteristics such features as rivers, coastlines and deltas. In addition, inquiring about historic water systems may be key to understanding current landscape characteristics and hidden historical traces, or comprehending how former forms of water management are attached to the local context and to local communities. Such an approach allows water to emerge as a shared theme for World Heritage. Secondly, it is crucial to critically reflect on how water is acknowledged on the World Heritage List, and by the practices dealing with World Heritage, such as the ones considered as good practices connecting World Heritage management and sustainability. Taking into account water allows further inclusion of SDGs in the discussion of the role of World Heritage for sustainable development, especially when considering issues such as water for consumption, climate change and rising water levels. Finally, bringing water into the discussion on World Heritage management invites additional management challenges as water systems reach beyond the limits of World Heritage sites and require multi-scalar planning.

## Issues Preventing Water And World Heritage from Being Conceptualized Together

### *Heritage, and the “Culture”–“Nature” Divide*

A first challenge toward conceptualizing water and World Heritage together is the culture-na-

ture divide. As critical heritage studies researcher Harrison (2015) observes, the division between culture and natural heritage is at the base of developing a systemic thought that provides a “new notion of heritage after nature/culture” (2015, 33) and broadens the role of heritage in twenty-first century challenges. In this regard, World Heritage as a framework is known for its separate institutional frameworks of “Culture” and “Nature.” World Heritage categories, discourses and procedures follow this division. Overcoming such considerations relates directly to how water is framed as an ecological concept and heritage as pertaining to what is of human manufacture. By framing water and heritage relationships as a system, it is possible to bridge the “culture” and “nature” divide.

#### *Silo Thinking, Zoning and Administrative Constraints*

Understanding the ways in which silo thinking, procedures and administrative divisions affect the understanding and management of World Heritage can facilitate a re-conceptualization of water and heritage. This requires reconciling existing categorizations, procedures, institutional dynamics, zoning and administrative constraints that are both anchored in international practices unique to each policy and governance context. Using a transversal concept, such as water systems, can provide a connecting theme for diverse stakeholders. It can also provide a foundation for negotiations among diverse actors, disciplines, sectors and technical aspects each with their own water-related needs and interests, to eventually help World Heritage management and water management interactions beyond the institutional, administrative and nature-culture divide.

#### *Plans and Concepts*

The role of World Heritage is broadly overlooked

by water management and policies beyond the protection and musealization of water infrastructures and/or transformation of water basins into protected areas. Moreover, the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2021) defines World Heritage management systems or plans as one of the main instruments for managing World Heritage. Yet, the lack of alignment between various local and regional policies and World Heritage management hinders more comprehensive World Heritage integration with sustainable development. In this regard, it is vital to conceptualize World Heritage management as a tool for fostering the integration of planning processes and better interactions between World Heritage and water management. This also requires better integration between water management plans and ecological studies in the development of World Heritage management plans, especially concerning cultural World Heritage properties. The integration of World Heritage management in local and regional policies and more inclusive decision making processes can be key for stronger connections between World Heritage management and the life of the local communities.

#### *Institutions, Politics and Local Contexts*

Exploring how and to what extent current water management is related to historic water systems and local communities’ water narratives is crucial for understanding how water institutions, World Heritage management and local contexts interact and might interact more fruitfully. For instance, the ICOMOS Statement of Significance for Water as Cultural Heritage (2019) calls for connecting water to tangible and intangible aspects such as infrastructures, buildings and public spaces as places of practices, memories and stories of local communities.



^ Fig. 2 The water management system of Augsburg, Germany (Source: Z. Thomas, CC BY 4.0 International).

However, the processes of World Heritage inscriptions are anchored in institutional and governance frameworks defined by state parties. World Heritage is thus closely linked to national political agendas and to the particular context-based dynamics. At the 50th anniversary of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, we still needed to embrace World Heritage as a process influenced by social, environmental and economic dynamics, rather than mobilized by national power interests and international agendas. In this regard, considering the larger system of water, nature and culture as a system may set forth institutional and governance frameworks to integrate local contexts and local communities into World Heritage management.

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### **Final Remarks**

Approaching World Heritage from a comprehensive multi-scalar perspective through the lens of water may help overcome monumental World Heritage discourses and facilitate the implementation of landscape-based discourses and approaches such as HUL, as well as more ontological perceptions and nature-culture mindsets.

To conclude, inquiring into how water and heritage is conceptualized makes it possible to give World Heritage's role a new meaning for and in twenty-first century challenges.

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