

Babel Tower

Museum People in Dialogue

**Manuelina Maria Duarte Cândido
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Part 2 - Beyond the Museum: Emerging territorial practices

Chapter 6

Mértola Museum Town: An archaeological project of integrated development

Cláudio Torres, Lígia Rafael, Susana Gómez Martínez³⁰

Abstract

Mértola Museum Town is a heritage management strategy dedicated to the study, safeguarding, enhancement and dissemination of this small village in southern Portugal. Here historical and archaeological research is the basis of a development project based on a museographic program, currently with 11 nuclei to be visited, spread throughout the historic centre. The museum is the village itself, as the heritage circuit favours wandering through streets and alleys, showing the organizational structure and its surrounding landscape. From its origin in the late seventies of the last century, the project was developed through a complex process of interaction between public and private institutions guided to follow a common objective: to use heritage to promote local development, to involve the population and to transform it into an instrument to consolidate local identity.

Keywords: Heritage, archaeology, development, citizenship, identity

Résumé

Mértola Village Musée correspond à une stratégie de gestion du patrimoine dédiée à l'étude, la sauvegarde, la mise en valeur et la diffusion de ce petit village du sud du Portugal. Ici, la recherche historique et archéologique est à la base d'un projet de développement basé sur un

³⁰ Adaptation to English by Maria João Rafael Martins e Fernando Martins, from Mértola Vila Museu. «Um projecto arqueológico de desenvolvimento integrado», *Revista Arqueologia Pública*, [on line], Vol.10, n^o3 (2016) p. 55-80, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20396/rap.v10i3.8645842>. The translation was financed by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the scope of the CEAACP Project (Reference No. UIDB/00281/2020).

programme muséographique, actuellement avec 11 noyaux à visiter dans le centre historique. Le Musée est le village lui-même. Dès 1978, le projet développe un processus complexe d'interaction entre des institutions publiques et privées guidées par un objectif commun : utiliser le patrimoine pour promouvoir le développement local, impliquer la population et la transformer en un instrument de consolidation de l'identité locale.

Mots-clés : Patrimoine, développement, identité

Mértola Museum Town: Project, strategy and philosophy

Mértola Museum Town is one of the designations used to identify a pioneering experience in the field of archaeological heritage that has been growing in a small countryside village in southern Portugal since the late 1970s.

At that time, its goals were not very different from what is now becoming the widespread philosophy in broad sectors of archaeology: to involve the local population with the aim of consolidating its identity and contributing to local development. However, what may seem an unquestionable programmatic postulate emerged in a concrete context and only took hold thanks to the persistence of a group of individual and collective agents who see themselves as part of the local population.



Figure 1 - The Location of Mértola. Source: CAM.

Mértola is located in a transition region between the plain of Alentejo and the Serra do Algarve, a territory with a strong rural character, far from the country's major economic development centres. Currently, this small village has just over 1.000 inhabitants, and it is home to a vast territory, with about 2,279 km² sprinkled with small villages. However, for centuries, this village had a great importance as a commercial trading post, due to its location at the end of the navigation of the Guadiana River (fig. 1 & 2). It is located on a steep peninsula formed by the confluence of the Guadiana River and the Oeiras stream, with exceptional defensive conditions, which have made it an important urban nucleus since at least the Iron Age.



Figure 2 - Mértola and the Guadiana River. Photo of Virgílio Lopes

Due to the abandonment of river navigation as a means of transport and the importance of Mértola as a trading post, together with the decay and stagnation of its main economic activities (agriculture and mining extraction), Mértola did not follow the economic and urban development of other locations.

On the other hand, its historic centre, practically intact, has preserved a rich and important heritage and extraordinarily fertile subsoil in archaeological remains.

It was the socio-political context of the Revolution of 25th of April 1974 which allowed the development of a project based on the study and esteem of cultural heritage. In fact, it was

the first democratically elected mayor, Serrão Martins, who saw that one of Mértola's greatest potentials was its cultural and natural heritage and who, courageously, assumed a balanced management of heritage resources. At that time, it would have been easier to bet exclusively on the modernization of urban infrastructure and on industrial development, a model unquestionably acclaimed in the 1970s. Contrary to this trend, Serrão Martins knew how to ally himself with his professors at the University of Lisbon, to build a project of a scientific and political nature. One of these professors, Cláudio Torres, took over the project's leadership, mainly after the premature death of Serrão Martins in 1982, having resigned in 1986 from his university career to lead a multidisciplinary team of researchers and technicians who would develop their professional careers in Mértola, imbued with a strong sense of team, responsibility and citizenship.

This team was initially organized within the "Associação de Defesa do Património de Mértola" (ADPM), which later was divided into two distinct entities: the "Campo Arqueológico de Mértola" (CAM), centred on subjects around history and archaeology, and the ADPM, focused on issues related to natural resources, rural and ethnographic heritage and sustainable development. In 1986, together with the Municipality of Mértola, they promoted the creation of the "Parque Natural do Vale do Guadiana (Guadiana Valley Natural Park), with the aim of defining and consolidating a balanced management strategy for both natural and cultural heritage.

The central pillar that supports this work resides in solid bases of scientific investigation and technical preparation, with the particularity of being developed exclusively at local level. The difference from other teams lies in the fact that the overwhelming majority of project collaborators live in the municipality. They are from Mértola and have supplemented their training, received locally, with specialized studies carried out in teaching units in Portugal or abroad or, on the other hand, there are researchers from other sources allured by the strength of the project.

From the beginning, the project sought to develop a balanced asset management strategy based on the balance of four fundamental pillars: study, safeguarding, enhancement and disclosure. Pure scientific investigation was not enough; research would be useless if it were not accompanied by the preservation of heritage values and the presentation of its results to the community. In fact, the core of the project lies in dissemination, which cannot be limited to scientific divulgation in specialized journals and meetings, only accessible to a restricted

audience. It is essential to return the investment made in research to the community and justify the inconveniences caused by archaeological activity, especially the ones that occur in an urban context. In this case, to make scientific research accessible to the mainstream audience, it is necessary to translate its contents into a language understandable to everyone. Museography is the most accessible format, which does not invalidate the publishing of results for specialized audiences which could assume the form of museum catalogues.

In addition to scientific dissemination, codified in its own language and directed to a specialized audience, clear and accessible language is the only way to justify locally the on-going work, capable of identifying the strongest cultural references and, therefore, consolidating endogenous potentialities. In the museographic dynamics, the results are not only disseminated in a more efficient and intuitive way to the general public, especially the local public, but it is also possible to attract other types of visitors, as long as this offer is properly publicized. This strategy has proven to be effective, since Mértola is currently a well-known cultural tourism destination. These visitors do not seek exotism or monumental spaces, they seek to know about a dynamic and ambitious project that, in an isolated area far from big cities, managed to include the local population and develop high quality scientific and museological proposals.

At CAM we argue that any research project or preservation excavation should aim, first, to understand and preserve, even if only through the archaeological registration as proposed by current legislation, but whenever possible it should also conserve and musealize. It is the conciliation between conservation of archaeological remains, as well as the development of projects and economic activities, which will allow us to take advantage of the one and the other. However, it is not always easy and, at times, conflicts of interest require concessions from both sides. Moreover, the management of available resources in an imaginative and flexible way will enable us to avoid consequences in the delicate balance of forces between heritage resources and the fragile local economy.

In Mértola, the heritage values to be disclosed are not just the remains found in archaeological excavations. Early on in the project, there was a clear awareness that the greater good is the historic centre as a whole: the urban structure, the layout of the streets, the traditional forms and techniques of construction, the traditional knowledge and the experiences of its people. Following this line, urban regulation mechanisms were created to prevent the “old town” from being distorted and the new urban areas from developing

architectural programs that violently collided with the landscape surroundings and that contrasted sharply with the old part of the village.

On the other hand, it would be useless to keep an historic centre empty of life unscathed, a theatrical setting of more or less cultural tourism. Undoubtedly, these objectives became more complex with the need to keep the “old town” alive, an area that, due to its own characteristics, is not very attractive for any type of economic activity, and even for residential purposes. Even more complicated is keeping alive some of the traditional activities (currently understood as intangible heritage) of difficult economic viability. Taking into account the conditions and aims of the project, we understand that combining traditional activities and dynamic museography is one of the possible ways of preserving and enhancing this secular knowledge.

The Museum of Mértola is under municipal supervision, open to partnership and collaboration with other local, national and international institutions. This is another aspect of the Mértola Museum Town project. In the construction of the various nuclei that currently comprise the Museum, various public and private institutions participated generously and, in many cases, spontaneously and tacitly, without resorting to formal agreements. The Municipality of Mértola is the public institution that legally supports the museum, with CAM, a non-profit cultural and scientific association that assumes the scientific and technical responsibility. In the development of actions and projects, this museological unit has partnered with other local institutions such as ADPM, the Cooperativa Oficina de Tecelagem (The Weaving Workshop), the Professional School ALSUD, the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Mértola and the Parish of Mértola. On the other hand, institutional collaboration is also strong with the relevant authorities, both regional and national. Some of the monuments where the museums are located are dependent on these authorities, and the museum is also part of the “Rede Portuguesa de Museus” (Portuguese Network of Museums), supervised by the Ministry of Culture.

The Museum of Mértola

As already mentioned, the urban structure of the historic centre of Mértola presents itself as a place of high value in heritage, historical, plastic and experiential terms. From the beginning it was understood that the intervention philosophy would always mean a social and

patrimonial recovery of the “old town”. Although the most important vectors of expansion of the village are today outside the walls, the primitive nuclei remained the hallmark of past records and, in a way, continues to be the symbol and engine of its own touristic development. This idea helps to understand how the village is the museum itself.

In fact, historically as important as the archaeological finds that fill the exhibits are the streets, the organization of public spaces, the structuring and use of façades, the architectural volumes, the construction materials and techniques, as well as a sustained housing upgrade. In this context, the local museology project is part of a philosophy which aims, above all, to project the social and heritage recovery of the historic centre, known as the “old village”. Here museology could not distance itself from urban rehabilitation. Thus, it is easy to perceive the principle that has presided over the Mértola Museum Town project: poly-nuclearization, which means to organize or to install museographic nuclei in different points of the historic centre and, whenever possible, in the place of the archaeological finds.

Another fundamental principle is to understand the museum not as a finite project but as a dynamic process that interacts with the population and their cultural needs, taking advantage of specific circumstances to expand and better serve the community, which is why it's a continuously growing project of cultural tourism. Therefore, the configuration of the museum (the nuclei and its contents) changes frequently, undergoing expansions and updating at the pace of advances in scientific research. However, it is also necessary to build tools which enable us to unite the pieces of the puzzle that represent the Mértola Museum Town. For this purpose, guides, itineraries and brochures were edited (Torres et al. 2008a and 2008b) and a General Catalogue was published (Gómez, 2014a and 2014b).

Currently these are the nuclei of the Museum of Mértola:

- *Castle* – Occupying the site of ancient Roman buildings and a small, fortified neighbourhood from the Islamic Period, the Castle of Mértola dominates the entire village and serves as a reference to the noise of ancient battles and to the memory of other feats. The keep, still imposing in its formidable volume, marks the time when Mértola was, for a century, the national headquarters of the Order of Saint James. In the main room, covered by a vault with a cross with warheads, the evolution of the castle is narrated and, in the exhibition, there are objects found there; the room of the

upper floor is dedicated to the Saint James Order and its relation with the fortress itself (Boiça & Barros, 2013).

- *Alcáçova* – Interrupting the northern slope of the castle, the possible forum of the Roman city creates an artificial platform, supporting the most imposing monumental ensemble of old Myrtilis. All this artificially flattened space was supported by an underground gallery – the cryptoporticus – about 30 meters long and 6 meters high, which served as a cistern. In the Islamic period during the 12th century and part of the 13th century AD, this entire area was occupied by a neighbourhood that, after the Christian conquest of 1238, was completely razed to be adapted as a cemetery. This site can be visited by walking along a metallic walkway which takes the visitor to the places of greatest interest. Among these are the ruins of a 6th century AD baptistry, at the time surrounded by a beautiful set of polychrome mosaics of which some significant fragments remain (Gómez, 2008).



Figure 3 - Alcáçova and Parish Church/old Mosque seen from the Castle.
Photo of Susana Gómez Martínez

- *Parish Church/Old Mosque* – Directly inserted into the acropolis's enclosure and integrating itself into its monumental circuit stands the parish church, a former

mosque. In the place where a Roman and later an early Christian temple once stood and where, at the end of the 12th century AD, a mosque was rebuilt from scratch, stands today the Parish Church of Mértola. From the old Almohad Mosque remain four arched doors and the mihrab, the niche where Muslims head for prayers. Soon after the conquest the mosque was Christianized and the Order of Saint James imposed its symbol on the façade. In the middle of the 16th century AD the church's roof was completely rebuilt, with its 5 naves, initially covered by polychrome woodwork, replaced by a beautiful set of vaults with an emphasis on the polynervated section of the main altar. Unlike the vaulting and the exterior spires in the Mudejar style of the late Gothic, the church's main door follows the models of the Italian Renaissance. In an adjacent space, currently musealized, archaeology has discovered the foundations of the ancient early Christian temple on which the current building stands (Macias et al. 2011).

- *Blacksmith's Forge* – This workshop, now deactivated, intends to keep the memory of one of the many professions from our past that could not resist the new technologies. In addition to the anvil and the forge with its bellows, all the tools necessary for working iron are exposed and an explanatory panel describes the location and the main operations developed by the artisan.
- *Centre for Islamic and Mediterranean Studies* – Opposite the Islamic Art Museum, in a beautiful building partially recovered, is the headquarters of CAM. This Centre has a specialized library in Islamic civilization, and a double space for temporary exhibitions; it is an important Centre for Higher Education dedicated to teaching masters and Ph.D. students studying the Islamic culture and civilization of the Mediterranean. In the part of the building that has not yet been restored, another nucleus of the Museum of Mértola is projected, that is the Memory of the Flavours of the Mediterranean.
- *Jewelry workshop* – Renewing old traditions and taking advantage of old artistic motifs, the jewelry workshop produces replicas of some archaeological materials from excavations. Archaeological memories are also the starting point for the creation of pieces where the creative imagination opens up new horizons for contemporary aesthetics. The same craft techniques and gestures shape silver and gold in a profusion of shapes and motifs inscribed in the Islamic and Mediterranean tradition.

- *Islamic Art* – Taking advantage of the spaces and volumes of the former granaries, the Casa de Bragança, a modern architectural and museographic project houses, in two floors, the most important collection of Islamic art in Portugal. Noteworthy is the ceramic collection that includes an exceptional set of artefacts decorated with “cuerda seca” glaze. The animal and plant decorative motifs became geometric or epigraphic, achieving a strong ornamental baroque style. The art of metals specializes in the casting of bronzes and perfects its technology in the manufacture of weapons. The monetary system is mainly in silver, although for reasons of prestige some small local kings mint gold coins. Gold, silver or bronze jewelry, in its drawing, cast and chiseled techniques, seem to have also come from local workshops which used metals extracted in the surroundings. All these techniques and decorative forms are represented in the museum’s exhibits. In addition to the catalogue (Torres & Macias, 2001) there is a small guide translated into English and German (Torres & Macias, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c).



Figura 4 - Museum of Mértola – Islamic Art. Photo of Susana Gómez Martínez

- *Sacred Art* – Porta da Ribeira – Built in the 16th century AD over the access door to the old port, the Misericórdia Church, today partially unaffected by worship, houses an interesting collection of Christian sacred art. The church, the sacristy and other

annexes currently serve as an exhibition space. The collection of statuary, painting and religious objects was, for the last forty years, collected from some churches in the Municipality of Mértola, given the lack of security and abandonment to which they had been subjected. Among a set of three dozen pieces carved in polychrome wood, some belong to the European schools of the 16th century and the vast majority were worked in regional workshops. The first part of the exhibition allows a virtual visit to all the parish churches, as well as a vision of the annual procession of “Senhor dos Passos”. Also on display are some pieces from old “Misericórdia” and three monumental tablets that belonged to the 16th century altars of the parish church. Among the liturgical implements on display, three important pieces in chiselled silver from the 16th century stand out: an arche/ostiary, a processional cross and a “custódia”. From the 18th century, a set of chalices and other small liturgical implements stand out (Boiça, 2001).

- *River Tower* – Leaving through the “Porta da Ribeira” towards the river and starting from the old Roman walls, there are still imposing remains of a pier which gave access to the River Tower in late Roman times. In addition to allowing access to water without leaving the walls, this construction was an important support point in the defense of the port, not only because it could house a military garrison, but also because it controlled an iron chain that, from one bank to the other, prevented enemy boats from going upriver. Powerful skimmers resisted the violence of the winter waters. Due to its construction technique and functions, it is a unique monument in our country. A cobbled path takes the visitor to a system of tunnels and wells that in ancient times took the water from the river inside the walls of the town.

- *Roman House* – Under the Town Hall building is located the museum dedicated to the Roman period. Preceding underground works, an archaeological intervention uncovered the ruins of a Roman domus. The musealization of the site allowed the installation of a set of architectural fragments suggesting forms and functions from the time when the house was inhabited. Objects found on site are also exhibited and some others associated with the same cultural context (Lopes, 2012).

- *Weaving Workshop* – One of the oldest traditional arts in the region is certainly the weaving of wool blankets. In this workshop, where ongoing training is provided, a cooperative of weavers is responsible for keeping this tradition alive. The decorative

motifs of these blankets resemble an ornamental grammar affiliated with ancient Berber traditions, which we also find printed on archaeological materials. In the space of the workshop itself, an exhibition of old instruments related to the activity of wool and linen is organized, as well as an exhibition of fabrics made in the workshop and in the mountain villages of the county (Luzia, Magalhães e Torres, 1984).

- *House of Mértola* – Located next to the Tourism Office of Mértola, this small house is part of the most popular urban tangle which survives to this day. Two small compartments were, until a little over thirty years ago, the place where a family with five children lived. In the kitchen everyone gathered to eat and in the bedroom on the two beds everyone huddled together to sleep. Not counting some older palaces and the house of rich merchants, that was life for the approximately two thousand inhabitants squeezed in by the walls of the medieval city.
- *Paleo-Christian Basílica* – Under a bare shell of a modern building are hidden the ruins of a great paleo-Christian basilica, open to worship from the 5th to the 8th century AD. With three naves and opposing apses, what remains of this funerary temple is today enhanced by a museography that only suggests the main architectural lines. Most important in this museum is the paleo-Christian lapidary collection, consisting of six dozen inscribed tombstones, thirty of which are on display at the site. Antonia, Festelus and Amanda were inhabitants of the town of Myrtilis and contemporaries of Andreas, conductor of the church choir. This funerary basilica was built over a Roman necropolis, where there had already been burials from the Iron Age (6th century BC) and, in later period, it was also used as a settlement for a vast Muslim cemetery (Torres, 1993).



Figure 5 - Riverside Suburb. Photo of Câmara Municipal de Mértola

- *Riverside Suburb* – During the construction of a modern hotel, the discovery of several houses on the outskirts of the river led to the integration, inside the hotel, of one of the 12th century AD houses marked by signs of Christianization in a clearly Islamic context of Almoravid and Almohad times. A wide range of objects found during the excavations are displayed alongside the archaeological structures. In a first stage the owners looked with reluctance at the inconveniences of the integrations of the archaeological remains; however, they quickly realized the advantages of this project and adopted the name Hotel Museu (Museum Hotel) (Lopes et al., 2012).
- *Hermitage and Necropolis of Saint Sebastian* – In the courtyard of EB 2,3 ES School of Mértola, where a small hermitage dedicated to Saint Sebastian was built in the 16th century, the most significant part of a large Roman and late-Roman necropolis was excavated and turned into a museum. The cemetery carved into the rock can be visited through a metal walkway; the hermitage, completely rebuilt in a pedagogical operation with students from the Professional School Bento de Jesus Caraça, is a small museum where, among other artefacts, a gold crismom medal from the 5th century AD, found in a child's grave, can be admired (Boiça & Lopes, 1999).

- *Watermills of Guadiana* – In the vicinity of the school complex the Guadiana River is crossed by a weir where five water mills are located. Two of them, solidly vaulted to withstand the river's great floods, were adapted to the frequency of the tides. Without any musealization and far from the village, the seasonal rhythms and the floods of the Guadiana mark the rhythms of the visit.

The projection on the territory

Although the greatest efforts made have focused mainly on the urban centre of Mértola, the extraordinarily large municipality has other places and archaeological sites that are worthy of attention. From the research point of view, a first survey, necessarily incomplete, was published in the form of an Archaeological Chart (Palma, 2012) and is an important instrument for the scientific management and preservation of the municipality's archaeological heritage.

Some areas of intervention were identified as priorities, both from a scientific point of view and because of the importance of preservation and enhancement. Two places are of particular interest: the São Domingos Mine and the surrounding area of Pulo do Lobo.

The São Domingos Mine was an important mining project in the Roman period. Its use was discontinued in the medieval and modern periods and, finally, it was intensively explored by English companies between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century. In the 1960s the company ceased activity, leaving a desolate landscape with the open-air "corta" and a group of industrial facilities in ruins.

Despite the feeling of desolation it produces, the set is extremely attractive and masterfully exemplifies the aggressiveness of the exploitation mechanisms of the Industrial Revolution. In addition to the exceptional conditions for an industrial archaeology research project, initiated by specialists in the area, the City Council is investing in the creation of cultural infrastructures that include a small museum – the Miner House –the recovering of the mining archives and other buildings like the cine-theater, transformed into a gallery for temporary exhibitions. All this, in addition to the attractiveness of a fluvial beach and quality hotel facilities, turn São Domingos into an emerging tourist destination.

On the other hand, Pulo do Lobo is a unique geological accident, a 15 metre high waterfall from the Guadiana River, with remarkable scenic value. Around this area is organized a circuit that combines environmental and cultural heritage with the visit to two small megalithic monuments, a farm dedicated to biological agriculture and environmental education owned by ADPM, a Nature Interpretation Centre in the village of Amendoeira da Serra, and a recovered and musealized small chapel from the 7th century AD in the village of Mosteiro. The small chapel, designated as Mosteiro, has a singular archaeological importance due to the fact of being a place occupied in the Roman period by a villa, which gave rise to a small monastery from the Visigothic period, transformed into a hermitage in the 16th century and occupied until the 20th century, first as a house for a family and then as support for agricultural activities.

Acquired by the City Council, excavated by the team of Campo Arqueológico de Mértola and recovered by the students of the professional school, it exhibits marble objects for architectural decoration collected in various villages in the municipality (Lopes, 2011).

These two places were considered priorities, but there are other areas of interest that are also being worked on. In addition, the religious architecture and spirituality of the municipality was the object of an in-depth investigation (Boiça, 1998) and is awaiting evaluation processes, especially those centred on a group of chapels (Nossa Senhora da Aracelis, São Barão, Nossa Senhora das Neves e Nossa Senhora do Amparo) which represent both great heritage value and importance in the landscape.

The traditional rural architecture is also being evaluated by multidisciplinary studies (Costa, 2014) and thematic exhibitions.

The recovery of two mills, one for water and other for wind, respectively Moinho do Alferes and Moinho de S. Miguel, deserve a special mention. In the context of ethnography, a small museum was set up in the rural village of Alcaria dos Javazes as a result of the collaboration between the municipality and a private collector (Macias, 2012).

Other activities

Actions to enhance heritage and create exhibition spaces must be complemented with ongoing conservation and restoration activities and monitoring of collections, heritage education and knowledge transfer activities to the community.

CAM also develops an annual program of heritage education activities which find exceptional conditions for development in the museum. That activity resulted in the creation of two teaching cases, one dedicated to Islam and other to the medieval world, and a collection of educational resources for children. Primary schools are the main partners in these actions; the secondary schools are less receptive to any activities outside the classroom due to the need to achieve the curricular goals defined by the Ministry of Education.

One of the current trends in museography is the use of sophisticated and expensive IT and technological resources that become the main attraction of museums. In our case, the scarcity of financial resources means these actions have to be taken with great caution since, normally, these technologies become obsolete rather quickly and we lack the resources for the necessary renewal and even maintenance.

However, we have developed a visit service using audio guides, a new website for the Museum³¹ and an app that helps us define visitation circuits.

However, we conclude that existing resources of this type are less in demand than we expected. We sense a change in trend as the younger generations have always lived with the new information technologies, which hardly manage to impress them. The real experience, the contact with the original, is a more attractive experience than the virtual world. However, new information technologies do allow for more efficient management options, especially for the formulation of reconstructions of the past and for the transfer of information between the public and the museum, aspects on which we want to focus in the future.

In fact, the main wealth of the museums is, without a doubt, the collections they have, in both their quantity and quality. Except for the objects from ethnographic collections, the ones that result from archaeological activity are very fragmented in their origin. To be understood, musealization is more effective, requiring a complex and long restoration process. This task is carried out by the institution's team of conservation and restoration which, in addition to

³¹ www.museudemertola.pt

intervening in the collection and making the objects understandable to the public, monitors their conservation and recovers objects to integrate new permanent or temporary exhibitions organized by national or international institutions.

In this context, CAM regularly promotes temporary and itinerant exhibitions, which are always accompanied by their respective catalogues. The first exhibition of Islamic artefacts in Portugal, *Cerâmica Islâmica Portuguesa*, was exhibited in 1985 at Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon (Torres, 1987), and the broad overview on this theme was shown in 1998 in the exhibition *Portugal Islâmico. Os últimos sinais do Mediterrâneo* (Torres & Macias, 1998a) at Museu Nacional de Arqueologia in Lisbon. Among the travelling exhibitions, it is worth mentioning *O Islão entre Tejo e Odiana* (Torres & Macias, 1998b), which visited more than thirty locations, *Mértola e Niebla. Na confluência de dois territórios* (Gómez & Palma, 2006), *Mértola. O último Porto do Mediterrâneo* (Macias, 2005), *Os Signos do Quotidiano: Gestos, Marcas e Símbolos no al-Ándalus* (Gómez, 2011), *Arquitetura de Mértola entre Roma e o Islão* (Gómez, Lopes & Macias, 2014) and *No Extremo do al-Ándalus. Mértola e o Guadiana* (Gómez, 2014c).

Internationally we highlight the production of *Mértola Almoravide et Almohade* exhibited in *Galerie des Oudaïas* in Rabat (Marrocos; Torres, 1988), the coordination of the exhibition *Portugal / Marrocos - portas do Mediterrâneo* produced in Tânger and Rabat in 1999, by the Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses (Torres, Zouak & Macias, 1999), the collaboration in the exhibition *Lusa: a matriz portuguesa*, which took place in Brazil (Dantas, 2007), and the collaboration in the exhibition *Le Maroc Médiéval*, organized by the Louvre Museum in Paris in 2014.

Heritage and profitability

When discussing the profitability of heritage, the emphasis is placed only on its touristic use, often ignoring other benefits, most of the times more structuring for the community. First of all, we must not forget that archaeological heritage is a value in itself and does not depend on other added elements such as antiquity or aesthetics. It will not be useless to remind the community that these elements, movable and immovable, are theirs, that they are often the object of theft and illegal trafficking, and that the antique business, in many cases lacking

transparency, involves considerable amounts of money. It is important we make citizens more aware that when an archaeological site is destroyed or archaeological artefacts are sold in the black market, they all have been deprived of their heritage, something that belongs to all. The dubious morality of some art and antiques dealers is now more blatant than ever in light of the sad and appalling cases of Syria and Iraq.

This is not a new situation that only feeds the final buyers, it's a global problem that urges us to isolate, discredit and penalize them.

Locally, it is heritage education and the contact with the population that can contribute the most to safeguarding the elements of the past. However, we can hardly convince the citizens to appropriate this heritage if it remains hidden by complex and encrypted scientific language. It is essential to disseminate it without delay and in clear, accessible and attractive language. The appreciation of local historical heritage is vital to dignify the values of the community, especially in rural areas, which are greatly discredited by the absolute domination of urban culture and the values of consumer individualism. When the community is aware of the value of its cultural legacy, it also becomes an identifying element of the community, increasing its self-esteem and social cohesion.

The inscription of Cante Alentejano in the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List is an excellent example of such a process. The dignifying of rural knowledge and values against the models of the big city, imposed by the media, has a powerful effect on the population's self-esteem, contributing to root individuals in a small village with little expectation of economic and cultural development, according to the points of view of urban models. This process can be part of a desired change in the trend in migratory processes which has led to the desertification of the interior of Portugal.

The different areas of work related to heritage constitute a new employment opportunity for young people, who can stay on their land working in activities other than the traditional ones (agriculture, construction and commerce). Employment in the areas of conservation and restoration, historical, artistic, ethnographic and archaeological research, tourist entertainment, hotels and restaurants or artistic activities – areas that did not exist just 30 years ago or were in imminent threat of extinction, as in the case of craft activities – is currently a perspective for the future.

Heritage also generates directly a considerable and quantifiable economic return. The development of scientific, technological and training activities in Mértola already means a considerable contribution for the local economy. A considerable group of people residing in the municipality carry out scientific and technical activities which, traditionally, were centralized in large cities, meaning the resources that would usually go to the urban areas now can be used in a rural environment. New communication technologies have made it possible to a great extent to decentralize science and technology, reducing the costs of research institutions far from the centres of power. Thus, funding from institutions such as the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) and other central government entities are invested in the local institutions.

We also find cases, increasingly frequent, of public and private entities which come to Mértola seeking the services of specialized technicians from the local team. It is still a small contribution, but it is important from a symbolic point of view in the relations between traditional technical-scientific knowledge centres: instead of going to museums and university centres in big cities to carry out studies, conservation and restoration treatment of pieces or, simply, to carry out formative internships, private and public entities from all over the country request the services of the CAM.

In addition to direct economic profitability, the presence of highly specialized professionals contributes to another type of benefit to the community, mainly by reducing the deficit of qualified human resources, which are so scarce in the rural world. These professionals benefit from a deep knowledge of the local reality, not only from a heritage point of view, but also from a social perspective, which allows them to assess the real possibilities of cultural exploitation and the impact on the community. Even the different processes related to the Mértola Museum Town strategy provide benefits in the acquisition of services in local and regional companies, although some financing is subject to a regulation that favours large companies instead of local suppliers. This also means a significant part of the financing of these projects comes from the central government or from European financing, thus increasing extra-regional investment in the interior territory.

Training and education is another contribution to the local economy, and in Mértola there are courses in various stages. For more than 20 years the Mértola Professional School has been training specialized technicians in different areas related to heritage (archaeology, conservation and preservation, rural tourism, etc.). The CAM offers open and postgraduate

courses in several areas, in partnership with several universities (Algarve, Évora, Coimbra and Lisbon), which attract students from other regions and even from other countries. There are many young people who choose Mértola to do their internships and research work or simply to consult the bibliography available in the CAM Library.

However, we cannot fall into over-optimism. The funding of museographic structure, both in terms of initial investment and maintenance, is large and requires acrobatic exercises of imagination. Even with considerable funds from tourism, museums cannot be directly self-sustainable and assume the costs of scientific and technical activities. The economic benefits from tourism revert much more to the community than to the agents directly related to the heritage and the museums. We can consider the indices and statistics relating to the tourist activity quite satisfactory. The number of visitors registered in the museum nuclei reached in the last years 50,000; data we should consider slightly lower than the real number, which reaches its maximum peaks at Easter and in the months of July, August and September. These numbers increase in the years of the Islamic Festival of Mértola when, for four days, more than 50,000 people visit the historic centre, which is decorated as an Islamic souk.

The characterization of the public who visits Mértola is not yet systematised; however, we can identify some characteristics. On one hand, groups brought by national and international tour operators with a large number of participants do not, in most cases, take advantage of heritage resources at their disposal due to the orientations of the guides who accompany them. Another identified group is formed by families that stop over in Mértola on the way to the beaches of the Algarve. During the academic year, the number of visits guided by the staff of the museum increases; guided tours are organized in thematic circuits that are related to the contents studied at different levels. On weekends, holidays and short vacation periods, Mértola is sought by groups of families and friends who want to enjoy what there is to offer, not only in terms of heritage and museums but also other touristic and cultural activities.

In general, the individuals who visit Mértola are informed; they prepare their visit in advance, either through contacts with the Tourist Information Office or with other services which provide information, and they also make extensive use of the information available on the internet. In terms of country of origin, the Portuguese represent the majority, but we can also identify visitors from Spain, England, Germany, Holland, France, USA, Canada, Brazil and many others. In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in visitors from eastern Europe and Latin America.

An extraordinarily significant indicator of the evolution of the tourism trend is the number of beds available in Mértola. Twenty years ago there were only 3 rooms with private bathrooms for rent in the entire municipality. Nowadays, there are more than 100 in the village and many more in the small villages of the municipality, and at many times of the year there are no beds available. Even so, most visitors should be considered excursionists or short-day trippers more than those who stay overnight, which decreases the economic income.

However, the benefits for local hotels and restaurants are visible, along with an increasing number of touristic companies specialized in outdoor activities such as canoeing, boat trips, birdwatching, nature trails and hunting. In fact, the private sector has not yet fully realized the potential of this project or the business opportunities it provides.

An activity which should be analysed is the biannual Islamic Festival that attracts, in four days, around 50,000 visitors. The phenomenon of thematic festivals has grown exponentially in Portugal, giving rise to a great trivialization of these events. In the case of Mértola, some originality is maintained, privileging authenticity (bringing, for example, traders from North Africa to the souk, and ethnographic groups instead of professional companies), and cultural and scientific activities of an international level.

Regarding this festival, it is urgent to evaluate issues related to the carrying capacity of Mértola and the strategy regarding its attractiveness, since it appears that due to the high number of visitors the quality of the services offered is undervalued, with repercussions on the image of the Mértola Museum Town.



Figure 6 - 8th Islamic Festival of Mértola. Photo by Susana Gómez Martínez.

Final remarks

We can conclude that all of society and any community seeks to guard and protect its most precious goods, proofs and identity documents, objects and artefacts bearing a mark or sign of collective memory. This place of shelter can and should be the museum, a sacred space capable of concentrating and synthesizing the soul of a site or territory, capable of dignifying the deepest character of the community. The gesture which transforms the insignificant piece of clay or the small buckle into an object of culture, into a sacred piece, is a demiurgic gesture, an act of collective affirmation that reinforces self-esteem and local pride. The local museum becomes more significant when it breaks down into several thematic nuclei and when these gradually include protection areas, access roads, doors and gates, walls, vegetable gardens and orchards. Especially when inside, living their life and benefiting from that past, there is an interested, collaborative and solidary population.

The final question that arises is whether this model will be able to face the challenges of the future and survive possible changes in the tastes of the tourist market or of national European Union development strategies or even of the community who owns this heritage. In any case, for now, it seems possible to build Mértola's future from its past.

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