Bianca Carpeneti: Investigating the Visitor Experience at the Great Tumulus Museum of Vergina

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Vergina is a small town in northern Greece that hosts a rich archeological site. In the nineteen-seventies, the archeologist Manolis Andronikos excavated the site. He argued that it was the tomb of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. The riches of Vergina transformed into a lodestone for Greek national pride. Architects later constructed the “Great Tumulus” Museum uniquely in situ or upon the original tomb of Philip II. It intimately presents the archeological finds. Last summer, Senior Bianca Carpeneti visited the site and explored the museum design.

Bianca is a Classics major interested in Archeology and Museum Studies. In my interview with her, she explained: “I took a lot of courses specifically on ancient Greece and Egypt.” She is also “very interested in working with museums.” When designing her senior Honors thesis, she wanted to explore an archeological site “in the context of museum studies.” Bianca chose to visit the unique Vergina museum.

She wanted to know what goals the architects had in mind when designing the museum. After research she hypothesized that they organized the site to reflect the “personage and personality of Philip II.” Philip II was a “very impressive leader” who “pulled together the Macedonian State which enabled Alexander the Great to conquer all of Persia and dominate the Classical world in the late fourth century [BC].” Looking at the historical Philip, Bianca envisioned him as “ruthless,…shrewd … strong,…[and] powerful.” She expected the architects to have incorporated “who he was as a King and how his reign was conducted and how it ended…into the exhibition.”

To develop the necessary skills to test her hypothesis, she independently researched ethnography methods with help from Lynn Meskell, Professor of Anthropology. She planned out her research objectives, including contacting local experts, under the guidance of her advisor Ian Hodder, Professor of Anthropology.

When Bianca arrived in Vergina, she first independently observed the site. She wanted an unbiased vision: “I first visited the site without talking...or meeting with anybody. I just went out there and I spent the morning wandering around and taking notes and sketches.” She used her observations to “contextualize” the information gleaned from her later interviews.

Bianca then interviewed local experts. She consulted Kostas Kotsakis, a well-known Greek archeologist at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He explained the history and background of the site. She met archeologist Chrysoula Paliadeli, who “did her Doctoral thesis in the late 70s when she was excavating [the original finds].” Dr. Paliadeli “was still in charge of excavations at Vergina in the palace complex and the theater,” and so Bianca learned about past and present excavations. She met with Eva Kontogoulidou,
a museum-affiliated archeologist and Nikos Soulakis, the museum’s interior architect. They explained the theoretical objectives behind the museum design.

Bianca discovered that her hypothesis was false. Philip’s “personage” was not the prominent focus of the exhibitions. In one exhibit that showed the riches buried with Philip, “instead of focusing on Philip and why as a leader he merited such an ostentatious display of wealth, they focused on Alexander’s grief and his tribute to his father.”

From the interviews and site observations, Bianca discovered that the architects’ objective was to appeal to the audience by increasing their emotional participation with the exhibition. Bianca learned that “the physical design of the space, the exhibit…and the materials,” were organized to inspire “sentimental [visitor] participation.” For the previous example of the Alexander’s grief overshadowing Philip’s wealth, she reasoned that because Alexander the Great is more famous, the exhibit’s focus on him would better connect to the viewer.

Bianca argued that the exhibition simulated the experience of being present at the ancient burial of Philip II. She describes the ancient event: “There was a ceremony… and everybody was distraught that their leader has died. However, by burying him, [they] experienced this communal grief and [were able to] move beyond it in a ceremonial process.”

Bianca observed that the “process” of the viewer through the museum matches the emotional “process” of the ancient mourner. To describe the visitor’s museum experience, she said: “It is dark and you don’t know what is going on…you are sort of scared, and there are imposing sights.” Upon arriving at the end, “you know Philip’s buried and you see all these goods and its sort of, Woah. This is the explanation of what we’ve gone through,… to commemorate this phenomenal leader.” The audience of the museum feels as if they attended Philip’s burial, and feels apprehension and excitement. The exhibit causes a “Woah” effect.

For her senior Honors thesis she has continued to study the objectives of museum designers. In her Vergina study, she learned that the designers prioritized appealing to the audience. She agrees with the importance of engaging visitors. She stated: “museums are intellectual institutions; their purpose is to preserve, protect and present intellectual and material culture.” At the same time, she is wary about over-prioritizing entertainment: “If we focus on drawing people in and keeping their interest, what’s to stop us from becoming theme parks?” She sees the need to strike a balance in museum design between providing information and entertaining the public.

Working with Stanford Professor of Classical Archeology Michael Shanks, Bianca also investigates new ways to approach museum design. The recent collaboration between the Stanford Design Center and the design firm IDEO, which developed new “human-centered design methods,” has influenced Bianca. This is an “entire new way of looking at a design problem and trying to solve it.” She gave an example method of a “fifty-one card deck of ways to interview people.”

Bianca appreciates all that her research taught her. It shaped her career plans: “initially I thought I wanted to be a curator in a museum, but my recent research has gotten me really excited about the design process.” She adds: “I don’t know exactly where this is going to take me, but it has given me a more nuanced perspective in terms of what’s possible in a museum setting.”

**Bianca Carpeneti** is a Senior who will graduate with a double major in Classics and Archeology. She will be applying to graduate programs in Museum studies in the UK. Born and raised in Juneau, Alaska, she enjoys anything outdoors and getting muddy, “which is why archeology is such a perfect fit!”