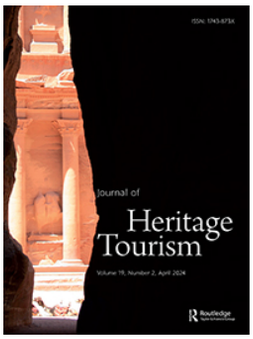

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How authenticity is negotiated and experienced by clergy and tourists at religious World Heritage sites: taking a closer look into the 'preserve as found' strategy

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How authenticity is negotiated and experienced by clergy and tourists at religious World Heritage sites: taking a closer look into the 'preserve as found' strategy

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on an existing debate regarding the conservation of living heritage, this paper delves into the dissonance and contestation that emerges during the aesthetic treatment of religious wall paintings. The Cypriot UNESCO painted churches open a window for the examination of how policy makers, clergy and visitors negotiate the materiality of religion. This multi-method qualitative comparative case study aims to understand how the 'material-focused' Authorised Heritage Discourse retains its hegemony during the conservation of living heritage and how AHD-led practices ('preserve as found' strategy) impact visitors' perceived authenticity and experience. The findings demonstrate that over the years, a centralised decision-making system has been maintained in Cyprus that limits polyvocality, perpetuating AHD-led practices. However, evidence of reconciliation between AHD and living tradition was found, challenging the current assumption that considers anti-restoration (objective authenticity) and living religious tradition as antithetic practices. Interviews showcased that for most social agents, deliberate damage, patina, and graffiti triggered an immersive and highly reflective experience while the prospect of restoration provoked 'pre-nostalgia,' a self-awareness that restoration may result in significant cultural loss. The paper concludes that, in future conservation and interpretation strategies, 'evidence of time' should be considered a salient quality of 'heritaged' churches.

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Religious tourism; authorised heritage discourse; objective authenticity; conservation; nostalgia; critical realism

Introduction

Authenticity is an essential factor in shaping conservation and restoration planning and it provides an avenue into understanding how certain discourses gain more authority than others (Gao & Jones, 2021). Discussions around the appropriate conservation and treatment of religious sites are marked by a debate between two seemingly irreconcilable worldviews: a professional discourse tied to materiality and often dismissive of traditional practices, and the (living) religious discourse (Fong et al., 2012; Galla, 2008). Living heritage is a term that has been linked with local communities (Wijesuriya, 2018) and their rights to shape and modify their cultural heritage based on their evolving beliefs and practices (Chapagain, 2017). The key attribute of living heritage is the notion of 'continuity' manifested through the ongoing physical presence of a community associated with a site, the continuity of the activities (i.e. practices, rituals), and the traditional methods of

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maintenance (Poulios, 2010). Seven decades since it was first mentioned in modern Western cultural history (Venice Charter, 1964 & World Heritage Convention 1972), and despite efforts to expand this concept (Narra Document 1992), authenticity remains a highly malleable and debated concept intertwined with notions of truthfulness, originality, and tradition. Thus, the authenticity of 'professionals' (preservation of physical remains), 'religious groups' (referring to the living teaching and practices), and 'tourists' (viewing experience) is not necessarily the same thing (Poulios, 2019).

In many parts of the world, particularly in Europe, the painted interiors of churches are subject to fragmented maintenance due to the prevalent 'preserve (or conserved) as found' conservation strategy. Criticised for ossifying heritage development (Di Giovine, 2008), this strategy is rooted in objectivism, which considers authenticity as inherent to the originality of toured objects and measured with objective criteria (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) and ideas of immutable heritage value (Smith, 2006). Decisions regarding the treatment of wall paintings are particularly difficult since they are subject to many factors, including authorship, age, the degree of deterioration, and the values (i.e. symbolic) attributed to them (Brajer, 2008; 2015) and can shed light on power relations and (shifting) ideologies embedded in the conservation of living heritage (Spaarschuh & Kempton, 2020). This paper builds on DeSilvey and Harrison's (2020) thesis, which urged future research to understand how communities deal with the inevitability of cultural loss and how this becomes a creative opportunity to generate new meaningful relationships with material heritage. The neglected Eastern Orthodox churches of Cyprus, where an ongoing debate exists regarding the treatment of wall paintings, broaden current knowledge regarding the 'conservation' and 'consumption' of religious sites. Acknowledging the various conceptualisations of authenticity (objective, constructivist, postmodern) that expand the ways in which individuals perceive heritage conservation (Xu et al., 2022), the aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it investigates why hegemonic discourses, such as AHD, retain their supremacy during the conservation of living heritage. Secondly, it explores how the AHD-led 'preserve as found' practice, which seemingly 'freezes' religious sites to a single perspective, impacts visitors' perceived authenticity and experience at religious sites.

The paper draws on Smith's theory of Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), providing a lens to understand how hegemonic discourses are reproduced and challenged by heritage users (Di Giovine, 2008). To overcome issues of nominalisation (Skrede & Hølleland, 2018) and reductionism (Pendlebury, 2013) associated with AHD, the paper draws on (critical) realist social ontology (Elder-Vass, 2010; Fairclough, 2005). The originality of this study is that it provides the empirical framework to examine the dialectic relationship between the discursive (AHD) and the extra-discursive conditions that constitute AHD-led practices, the dominant form of conservation in Cyprus. This research inquiry emerges from the premise that the historic environment is a shared resource encompassing various often contradicting values. In line with Critical Heritage Theory, which considers heritage as an ongoing process (Harvey, 2001) fuelled by power-laden discourses (Smith, 2006), this study embraces the view that realistic conservation strategies can be achieved by understanding a place's shifting cultural significance, such as the needs, values, and expectations of those who protect, use, and visit it (Historic England, 2008). This paper broadens current knowledge regarding the conservation of living heritage and the tensions arise as religious sites also gain heritage designations. This angle provides a useful entry point for further discussing and nuancing on-going critique of the AHD.

Literature review

Conservation of (living) built religious heritage

Regarding conservation, the emphasis is given to what is considered authentic, what people value most, and what meanings the heritage environment should communicate (Vinas, 2002). The conservation of 'living heritage' surfaces the difficulty in balancing contradicting values and vested interests, especially when they play a significant role in people's well-being, social relations, and

their collective vision of the future (Jokilehto, 1999; Miura, 2005). Contemporary conservation theory is based on a 'communicative turn in conservation,' also known as 'value-based conservation,' in which objectivism is replaced by intersubjectivity (Vinas 2002). Thus, the value of the object or place does not rest on its physical or material attributes,' but rather authenticity can be found in a broader sense, including values of an intangible nature, such as function and spirit, that require a balanced judgment between conflicting values (Araoz, 2013). However, critics (Konsa, 2015; Munasinghe, 2005; Orbasli & Woodward, 2009; Poulios, 2010; Stovel, 2007; Winter, 2014b) have questioned the feasibility of value-based conservation due to its ambitious scope to protect all values and satisfy all stakeholder groups. This is particularly evident at religious sites where material-driven concerns aim to ensure that authenticity (the ability of a property to convey its significance over time) and integrity (the ability of a property to secure or sustain its significance over time) (Stovel, 2007, p. 21) freeze the organic evolution of historic religious sites into a single perspective (Smith, 2006).

The premise that heritage fabric is not a renewable resource creates forms of discontinuity with a site's 'living reality' (Poulios, 2010). However, there is still uncertainty with regard to how much influence 'host communities' (i.e. religious groups) exert on the conservation of their sacred heritage. On the one hand, studies such as those of Karlström (2005) and Byrne (2008, 2011) in Thailand demonstrate how the popular Buddhist religion, shaped by animistic beliefs around the notions of decay, rebirth, and ceremonial destruction, clashes with Western authenticity criteria, emphasising the protection of the material fabric (Byrne, 2008; Peleggi, 2012). Equally, Ieronymidou and Rickerby (2010) showcase how local authorities in Cyprus prohibit the restoration of wall paintings as they consider such actions to be intrusive practices that would conceal local cultural history, including iconoclasm and talismanic practices. Similar findings were reported by Winter (2007) and Di Giovine and Garcia-Fuentes (2016), who highlighted how conservation strategies in Sudan and the Angkor Wat temple complex make spiritual monuments susceptible to modernisation, while Su et al. (2019) reported how China adopted and developed its own AHD, that favours the religious life of the Shaolin monks over the local community whose experience and emotions are neglected. In this context, many (Araoz, 2013; Byrne, 2004; Saengphueng, 2011; Skeates, 2004) have noted that professionals rarely discuss and cite the Nara Document on Authenticity. One the other hand, a different picture is provided by other scholars who reported how expert-led conservation practices that in the past ignored embodied and intangible aspects of the religious environment to enforce preservation agendas (Miura, 2005; Quang, 2022), over time become more dialectic, allowing intangible ideas to coexist with professional aspirations (Miura, 2005). Such cases include the conservation of the monasteries of Mount Athos in Greece (Alexopoulos, 2013) and the Holy Tomb in Jerusalem (Poulios, 2019). This controversy raises the question of why AHD retains its hegemony in certain cultural contexts while other assemblages appear more inclusive, allowing traditional methods to influence conservation.

The difficulty in answering this question lies, to an extent, in the reductionist approach taken by certain studies that reduce the complexity of heritage conservation to two competing discourses, the professional discourse concerned with the authenticity of the original material and the religious discourse favouring religious beliefs and traditional practices of maintenance. The 'clash of discourses' treats policymakers, host communities (see monks), and, in general, heritage users as a grey mass, concealing disagreements, hindering a clear understanding of the extra-discursive conditions responsible for enduring AHD-led practices. As noted by others (Olsen & Esplin, 2020; Thouki, 2022; Ly & Tan, 2023), the role of the producer in heritage-making and destination image of religious sites remains conceptually underdeveloped, primarily in how traditional clergy understand and negotiate objective authenticity.

Authenticity is also central to tourism studies as it is considered a driver of the tourist experience (Smith, 2006). While there is a growing literature regarding the different conceptualisations (or types) of authenticity as defined in the works of Cohen (1995), Wang (1999), and Reisinger and Steiner (2006) (Table 1), there is still considerable controversy over whether objective

authenticity remains a relevant concept in the study of tourism and a motivation for tourists to travel to distance places (Chhabra, 2012). Or, as Reisinger and Steiner (2006) argued, object authenticity should be made redundant due to the failure to reach a consensus as a result of multiple personally constructed realities (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). MacCannell's (1973) 'static' position over authenticity that deems tourists' search for originality as contaminated has sparked considerable debate over the years (Dai et al., 2021). More recent empirical studies have found that authenticity is a creative, contextual, personal, negotiable, embodied, and flexible notion (Park et al., 2019). To date, the conclusions reached by scholars about objective authenticity have been inconsistent (Rickly, 2022). Mkono (2013) and Rickly-Boyd (2012) found that materiality, such as the artistic beauty of cultural performances and their original place, is an essential component of perceived authenticity. Scholars take a critical stance towards the postmodern theory that has 'dismissed object authenticity prematurely' (Mkono, 2013, p. 211). To this end, Belhassen et al. (2008) and Moufahima and Lichrou (2019) maintained that authenticity is manifested in a hybrid manner, a reciprocal relationship between objects and perceptions, underscoring the embodied and two-way interaction between physical settings and human experience. For Chhabra (2010), objective authenticity is in demand within heritage tourism, and a large group of people are captivated by frozen and static cultures; whereas reflecting on Spanish abandoned industrial heritage, Arboleda and Rosa (2023) maintained that 'ruins' can trigger a highly immersive, sensory, and reflective experience.

Critique of AHD and the critical realist stance on 'discourse'

Smith's theory of AHD centred the investigation around dissonance and dialectics (Di Giovine, 2008) and is a valuable aid in the study into how the 'preserve as found' strategy prevails in certain contexts and how it impacts experiences. The contribution of Smith's seminal work is summarised in two areas. Firstly, it draws our attention towards a professional discourse (Smith, 2006) manifested through international conservation conventions, bequeathing to professionals a set of 'validated' conservation values, narratives, and meanings about heritage (Waterton et al., 2006). These narratives, such as the adherence to a 'modernist' conservation dogma that considers value as innate (rather than associative) tied to materiality, are institutionalised in heritage practices (Parkinson et al., 2016). Secondly, it draws attention to the unequal power relationships sustained between 'authoriers' (Feintuch, 2007), perpetuating discriminatory heritage policies and those 'outsiders' that are not legitimised as 'experts' (Pendlebury, 2013). More recent developments in the field have heightened the need to overcome issues of reductionism associated with AHD. Drawing on the concept of 'nominalisation,' a process that erases agency and obscures underlying processes and competing voices (Billig, 2008), such as 'who the agents are' and 'who did what to whom' (Fairclough, 2008, p. 813), Skrede and Hølleland (2018) maintained that a 'nominalised entity,' such as AHD, obscures the picture, making it difficult to unpack the motivations, interests, and agendas of social actors involved during conservation and treating them as a grey mass. A similar critique was made by Di Giovine (2008), Pendlebury (2013), and Harrison (2013), who questioned Smith for not exploring what lies beyond AHD, urging

Table 1. Three ideologies of authenticity in the tourist experience.

Objective Authenticity	It assumes that authenticity in inherent in the originality of toured objects and attractions and can be measured with objective criteria. The criterion is whether the objects or practices were made or enacted by local people according to their traditions.
Constructivist Authenticity	Authenticity is a socially constructed and contextually determined notion projected on a toured object and not an objective measurable quality. Objects are constructed as authentic in terms of points of view, beliefs, and perspectives.
Postmodern Authenticity	Tourists are less concerned with the authenticity of the toured object as long as the latter brings the enjoyment they are looking for or will satisfy other concerns such as the protection of fragile cultures. Tourists are more concerned with how well the toured object is staged (looking authentic). Postmodern authenticity paves the way for existential authenticity.

scholars to unpack the riddle of contested heritage by further exploring the entities involved in the conservation of heritage resource and flesh out their agency.

To overcome issues of 'nominalisation' (Skrede & Hølleland, 2018), and 'reductionism' (Pendlebury, 2013) associated with AHD, the paper draws on Critical Realism philosophy. Critical Realists distinguish semiosis as a discursive structure – a relatively stable way of representing the world' – from semiosis as activity, the everyday intersubjective production of meaning (Newman, 2020, p. 445). From a Critical Realist point of view, there are material and ideational (or discursive) structures, and both influence agency by constraining and enabling individuals in different ways, such as through physical penalties and mental guilt (McAnulla, 2006). Thus, an investigation of the extra-discursive conditions/entities responsible for the operationalisation of certain discourse leads us to the ways in which social agents select strategies that privilege certain discourses (Fairclough et al., 2002) and the relationship between discourse and other contingent entities (i.e. nation-states) and their mechanisms (Flatschart, 2016). Within the margins of 'analytical dualism,' the role of social scientists is to explore the dialectical interaction between the causally related but ontologically different structure (including discourse) and agency (Archer, 2010; Elder-Vass, 2011). By investigating the ways agents interact with the context in which they find themselves, researchers can understand social change (Porpora, 2013). This non-reductionist/non-conflationist approach could further clarify how institutions and social agents internalise discourses without being reducible to them (Fairclough et al., 2002), how agents (see traditional clergy) are constrained by the structural arrangement, how they reflect on the influence of discourses (Elder-Vass, 2011), and even recognise new opportunities for action (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013, p. 936).

Study methods

Study background

To protect the Cypriot cultural patrimony, the British colonial government in Cyprus established the Department of Antiquities, simultaneously introducing the notion of 'listed monuments' in the 1930s. Cyprus has two categories of listed monuments (Figure 1). The first consists predominantly of archaeological sites, which are considered state property. The second comprises monuments with owners, such as churches. The Department of Antiquities and the owner (regional bishoprics) share the cost of conservation projects evenly (fifty-fifty). Meanwhile, any alteration to the character of the ancient monuments without explicit consent from the Department of Antiquities is prohibited. Alongside the Church and the Department of Antiquities, ICOMOS Cyprus[1] and the Cyprus National Commission for UNESCO[2], the 'national arms' of UNESCO in Cyprus, feature as the 'guardians' of the painted churches.

Ten painted churches in the Troodos Mountains were inscribed as UNESCO sites in 1985. This cluster demonstrates the remnants of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine artistic and cultural traditions on the island between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries (UNESCO, 2024a). Two cases have been selected in this case study. The first is the Monastery of St. John (Figure 2), located at the heart of Kalopanagiotis village under the Diocese of Morphou. The second is the Church of St. Nicholas (Figure 3), located a few miles outside the nearby village of Kakopetria (Diocese of Nicosia). The two churches fall within different dioceses with different agendas and visions on religious and cultural heritage. A comparative analysis that examines the differences and similarities between the two churches (Goodrick, 2014) is a suitable approach to explaining how local bishoprics influence policies and conservation strategies.

Research philosophy and strategies

Critical Realism (as a research philosophy) provides a non-deterministic qualitative theory of causality (Maxwell, 2012). Ontologically, Critical Realism embraces a stratified/layered

Figure 1. St. John Monastery Interior. Source: Photo by CC Zairon (2017).

reality, considering social realities as external and independent (Saunders et al., 2012). Embracing realist ontology, postulating that an objective reality exists outside of human conception, Critical Realism asserts that unobservable natural and social structures, mechanisms, and powers exist and act independently of the researcher, whose aim is to uncover them (Brown, 2014). Bhaskar developed an ontological map, distinguishing the social world into three ontological domains. These include the 'empirical' comprising our experiences of the world and the things we experience directly or indirectly, the actual, where events take place whether we observe them or not, and the domain of the real, where the power of the objects, including the causal powers of discourses (see AHD) exist (Elger, 2010). Causal powers are inherent in social and cultural structures (entities), enabling and limiting what can happen in a context (Sayer, 1992; Wyn & Williams, 2012). Mechanisms, on the other hand, are processes that depend on the structure/composition of entities and activate those causal powers (Elder Vas, 2015). The role of the social scientist is to unravel the laminated nature of social phenomena (i.e. see conservation of living heritage) and to identify and understand the various ways in which underlying mechanisms are triggered or remain unexercised (or actualised) due to intervening conditions and contextual factors (Elger, 2010; Fletcher, 2020; Kempster & Parry, 2014).

This multi-method, comparative qualitative study collects contemporary (semi-structured interviews) and historic (archival research on minutes, reports, and letters) primary data. The benefit of this approach is that it captures social agents' lived experiences and reflections towards the heritagisation of religious sites, as well as shifting discourses regarding the conservation of religious heritage.

Figure 2. Monastery of St. John. Source: Photo by Alexis Thouki (2022).

- **Comparative Case Study**

Comparative case study design and retroduction (a vertical backward movement through Critical Realist stratified ontology) (Jagosh, 2020, p. 121), are compatible in explaining the causes of events (Easton, 2010) insofar as the former establishes the research boundary of a phenomenon, while the latter uncovers the causal mechanisms and contextual factors that generate it. The comparative element provides an empirical foundation for retroduction (analysis of the forces underlying conservation decisions), since comparison provides the framework to distinguish the mechanisms involved (Danermark et al., 2002).

- **Archival Research**

Historical data, including conservation reports, notes, minutes of meetings, and letters exchanged between stakeholders, were examined during archival research (at the Department of Antiquities in Nicosia after permission was granted). Archival research is a strategy that analyses administrative records and documents (Saunders et al., 2012) and provides a longitudinal perspective of long-term mechanisms (Mutch, 2014) of current institutional policies and indications of where the interviews should focus (Bowen, 2009). To overcome the limitations of the archives, including omissions, biases, and breaks/silences, the researcher cross-referenced information with former retired employees (Decker, 2013). This approach opened a historical window to examine how policies developed over time and helped the researcher to understand how conflict and power imbalances have influenced past and present decisions. According to Chhabra (2012) historical sources can help decipher the complex path of objective authenticity and the evolution of

Figure 3. Church of St. Nicholas. Source: Photo by Alexis Thouki (2022).

conservation decisions shaped through multiple realities, dissonance, and compromises. The first entry in the archives of St. John's Monastery was in 1936, and the last in 2006, while for St. Nicholas' Church, the first was in 1943, and the latest was in 2018.

Data collection methods and sampling

- **Interviews with Institutional Actors**

Snowball sampling was implemented to identify and strategically interview policymakers and practitioners (Table 2) responsible for decision-making and implementation of policies. Participants were interviewed in their offices and places of work, as well as virtually. Semi-structured interviews helped the researcher to focus the interview on the debate regarding the conservation of living heritage, the difficulty to balance conflicting heritage values and how the co-ownership of the churches impacts traditional custodianship. Thus, the interview guide was informed by the existing literature, the researcher's field knowledge and experience, and informal preliminary discussions with stakeholders (King, 2004). By exploring policymakers' and practitioners' descriptions and interpretations that were not readily observable, the study envisaged surface tensions and conflicts pertaining to the conservation of wall paintings in Cyprus. The aim was to 'humanize' the conservation of Cypriot churches, investigating this phenomenon through the eyes and reflections of those

Table 2. Policy makers and practitioners (DoA: Department of Antiquities).

No	Organisation	Position
S1	Church of Cyprus	Clergy – Officeholder
S2	Cultural Foundation	Historian – Curator
S3	Church of Cyprus	Visitor Engagement and Facilities Assistant
S4	Church of Cyprus	Director of Ecclesiastical Museum
S5	DoA	Conservation Practitioner
S6	Church of Cyprus	Clergy – Priest
S7	Church of Cyprus	Clergy – Officeholder
S8	Kalopanagiotis Community Council	Member
S9	Church of Cyprus	Visitor Engagement and Facilities Assistant
S10	DoA	Archaeologist – (Retired) Officeholder
S11	Cyprus ICOMOS	Officeholder
S12	Church of Cyprus	Clergy – Priest
S13	Church of Cyprus	Clergy – Officeholder
S14	Foreign Conservation Institute	Conservator
S15	DoA	Conservator – Officeholder
S16	DoA	Archaeologist – Officeholder

involved in the process. Questions were subject to constant revisions as data analysis went hand in hand with data collection. As the research proceeded and relevant structures and mechanisms emerged, new questions were evoked to establish the validity of the emerging causal relationships (Easton, 2010). A reflective diary was kept, helping the researcher reflect on the analysis and assumptions in light of new findings (Haynes, 2012). The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted between June 2021 and August 2022.

- **Interviews with Visitors**

Regarding visitors, a heterogenous purposive sampling was implemented (Saunders et al., 2012). During data collection, the researcher used his judgment to select individuals processing diverse characteristics (Table 3) to achieve maximum variation, allowing unique cases and key themes that might not have occurred in random sampling to emerge (Weiss & Connelly, 2013). Demographic and behavioural (religious activities) criteria were considered to achieve a reasonable cross-section of local (including villagers and expatriates) and foreign visitors visiting the churches. The semi-structured format helped the researcher to focus the questions on how the current treatment of murals impacts their experience and elucidate information on how they understand and define authenticity, while allowing participants to talk openly and share their experiences and reflections on the topic (J. Mason, 2002). This was achieved by encouraging visitors to make judgments and reflect on the 'preserve as found' strategy and potential restoration of the murals.

Visitors were asked to self-identify whether they were tourists, pilgrims, or driven by 'mixed motives'. This question was included to provoke visitors to reflect and share their motivation for visiting the site while it helped the researcher to understand the different attachments styles they developed with the sites and its material fabric (i.e. whether they considered the murals miraculous). For this study, a 'tourist' is considered to be someone who wants to experience a sense of identity about the cultural meaning of the place (Smith, 1992) and 'pilgrim' is someone who undertakes a visit for future *spiritual* betterment, they acknowledge the supernatural presence and undertake ritual activity (i.e. veneration) (Singh, 2009). Lastly, the 'mixed motives' group acknowledges that the boundaries between tourists and pilgrims are fuzzy, and visitors can switch between the two 'identities' depending on personal needs (Smith, 1992). The interviews lasted 10–40 minutes, and they took place in the church's courtyards in August and September 2021 from 9.00 am to 4.00 pm. The interviews were conducted in English and Greek. Following a data protection protocol, they were recorded with the participants' consent.

Table 3. Visitors' responses.

Area	Demographics	Freq
St. Nicholas 20 Visitors	**Gender**	
	Female	12
	Male	8
	Education	
	Primary	2
	Vocational	3
	University	15
	Pilgrim / Tourist	
	Pilgrim	3
	Tourists	14
	Mixed Motives	3
	Age	
	20s-30s	7
	40s-50s	8
	60s-70s	5
St. John 20 Visitors	**Gender**	
	Female	12
	Male	8
	Education	
	Primary	1
	Vocational	5
	University	14
	Pilgrim / Tourist	
	Pilgrim	3
	Tourists	6
	Mixed Motives	11
	Age	
	20s–30s	13
	40s–50s	2
	60s–70s	5

Data analysis

The analysis utilised the conditional matrix of Grounded Theory (open and axial coding) to reach the deeper stratum of social stratification (empirical, actual, and natural) (Hoddy, 2019). During the first cycle of coding (open coding), 'In Vivo' and 'Versus' coding was adopted to 'capture the actual and conceptual conflicts between participants' (Saldaña, 2013, p. 61) that derived from the interviews with institutional actors and the document analysis. While data from documents help make inferences about events and people's values (Stake, 2010), these documents do not represent reality (what happens). Still, they are part of the evidence base that helps uncover deeper generative mechanisms (Zachariadis et al., 2013). During this phase, the codes were allocated in initial categories (i.e. policies/planning, conservation) and their sub-categories (i.e. legal responsibilities, preventive conservation) that further specify the initial categories. The next step refines these sub-categories, searching for properties and dimensions. Properties refer to the characteristics or attributes of a category, while dimensions show how the range of the properties of a category varies by asking 'how much' and 'how often' questions (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The second phase (axial coding) aimed to reorganise and reanalyse the data strategically by linking sub-categories to the underlying practices (and their causal powers) and mechanisms (Figure 4). The study recruits the notion of 'social practices' (as those entities mediating the relationship between structures, including discourse, and events) (Fairclough, 2005) to portray a clearer empirical picture of how the powers of macro-level entities (Church, Department of Antiquities, UNESCO) are actualised in the specific context of Cyprus.

Once the causal powers of the 'practices' were abstracted, the study examined visitors' responses to them. This sequence is essential as understanding 'conditional action' (that shapes agential action) requires an understanding of the structural conditioning (preserve as found strategy) that

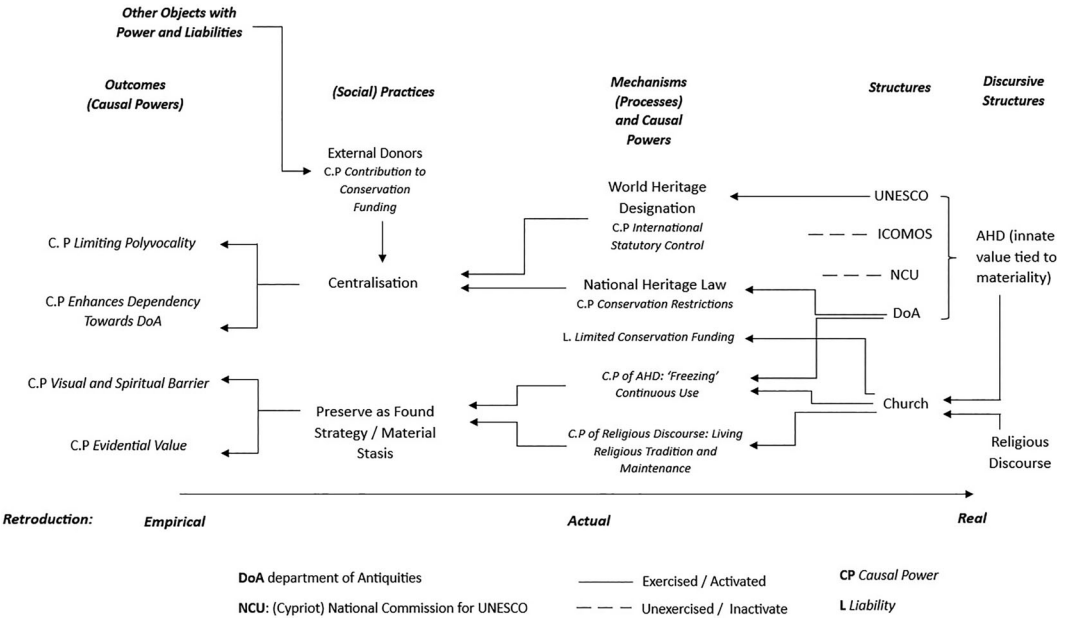

Figure 4. Retroductive analysis.

constrains and enables interaction between individuals (Elder-Vass, 2022). Drawing on thematic analysis, the coding proceeded in two stages. Initially, visitors concerns and motivations were identified using In Vivo and Theoretical coding (Figure 5). Subsequently, the researcher coded the visitors' responses toward the particular strategy and the powers activated in each case. According to Archer (2003), different people activate different causal powers based on their concerns. Three stances (themes) emerged inductively from the data that showcase how visitors are aligned or in discord with the particular strategy: '*compliant*,' indicating an alignment between visitors and existing strategies, '*antagonistic*,' when people expressed their discontent with the existing system, and lastly, '*ambivalent*,' demonstrating peoples' uncertainty. These stances are discussed vis-à-vis with the three conceptualisations of perceived authenticity, as discussed in Table 1. *Compliant* and *ambivalent* stances embrace objective authenticity while an *antagonistic* stance is related to constructivist and postmodern authenticity.

Visitors	*First Cycle of Coding*	*Second Cycle of Coding*	*Emerged Themes / Responses*	*Second Cycle of Coding*	
	Codes (Concerns)	Codes (Responses)	**Stance**	Causal Powers (activated)	
V1	Escape from city Rural chapels more spiritual	Expected Restrictions Apprehension for Gentrification Not Beauty Contestation	**Compliant**	Evidential Value	
V6	Historic Interest Churches have a special energy Medieval churches are portals to the past	Message that Nothing Last Forever Restricted Restoration Damaged Eyes Part of History	**Ambivalent**	Evidential Value and Visual and Spiritual Barrier	**Practice** 'Preserve as Found' Strategy
V30	Recreation Spiritual and cultural Connection Familiar with converted churches	Restore areas of Spiritual Importance Restoration Brings Icons Back to Life Feeling of Discussed Erase 'Negative' History	**Antagonistic**	Visual and Spiritual Barrier	

Figure 5. Coding of visitors' responses.

Study findings

Dialectics of conservation in Cyprus

The conservation of Cypriot churches is the result of overlapping discourses, sub-level mechanisms, and contingent conditions:

'*Conservation restrictions*' is a powerful causal power linked to (activated by) the mechanism of national heritage (preservation) law that dates back to colonial times (the 1930s). Since 1936 and throughout the 20th century, the Department of Antiquities raised particular concerns about projects initiated by the local administration and Church, such as refusing to refund unauthorized conservation projects and prohibiting activities that raise safety concerns. According to a former Department of Antiquities officer (S10), such restrictions are essential as people usually lack the necessary sensitivity to protect historic monuments.

> Our churches, due to the peculiarity of having owners, remain functional. Some have been convinced to hold liturgies once or twice per year […] Very few churches listed as WHS are in daily use. (S10)

The result is a hybrid operational management where candles are either lit outside or reduced to the minimum (S6) within the church, while liturgies occur occasionally or once a year (S3, S7, S13). Such 'museum' oriented practices (S7) raise various degrees of resistance, subject to the location, capacity, intended use, and theological concerns of local bishoprics:

> Functional monuments are conserved better than closed buildings … churches require cleaning and ventilation. Also, the place is conserved through the liturgy, although it sounds very theological. Liturgies revitalise everything, even the air we breathe. (S13)

The second causal power abstracted is that of 'international statutory control' and is activated by the designation of the churches as World Heritage Sites. The analysis revealed that the 'alliance' between the Department of Antiquities and UNESCO resulted in the two causal powers: 'statutory control' and 'conservation restrictions,' enhancing each other. Officer S10 referred to UNESCO's involvement as a 'legal protection,' highlighting how nonadherence could trigger penalties and eventually withdrawal. The officer explained that statutory control facilitates a stricter conservation policy that bypasses concerns raised by bishoprics. As the ICOMOS officer (S11) admitted, this strategy helps the Department of Antiquities to enhance its position against bishoprics.

> Yes, this can happen. They may say that arbitrary interventions will jeopardise the monuments status, so UNESCO will report us. It is a strong card … because they [churches] are under the spotlight. (S11)

The following experience from a local parishioner undertaking conservation projects at a non-WHS proves that when the two powers (conservation restriction and statutory control) are not mutually enforced, locals are more likely to find ways to bypass specific policies.

> We battled hard to restore our local church. Problems arise when the Department of Antiquities treats churches as monuments that are not alive. Saints are alive. Eventually, the parish executed the project. However, the Department of Antiquities was not very happy about this. (S12)

An important finding of the study is that 'statutory control' (a power of the overseeing bodies) is not always actualised. This is partially due to ICOMOS's preference to adopt a 'tempered' and 'prudent' stance towards the decisions of the Department of Antiquities, aiming at fostering a collaborative spirit that downplays confrontation and its preference to work within the margins of the Venice Charter (1964) known for its adherence to material-based authenticity. Equally, the focus of the Cyprus National Commission in administrative duties and its staffing with officers of the Department of Antiquities (S16) constitutes this institution as a mediatory body between the Department of Antiquities and UNESCO.

> … that project was poorly conceptualised; the [Department of Antiquities] makes mistakes sometimes. As ICOMOS Cyprus, although we highlighted the problem, we did not want to escalate it further … the

> international charters may exist [Narra Document etc.), but member states are not obliged to follow them. Very few charters from those published after the Venice charter have been applied. There is a discussion around them, but they are not mandatory decisions. (S11)

The last causal power discussed here is 'limited conservation funding,' which takes the form of liability for local bishoprics, making local bishoprics susceptible to external pressure. Funding is a diachronic problem in the ranks of the Church, something that has been exaggerated in the last few decades by urban deprivation and, more recently, the pandemic (S1, S13). An interesting research finding is that the Department of Antiquities appears to have taken advantage of this liability. In the early 2000s, an unofficial institutional change occurred. Under the new status, external donors have occasionally covered 50% of the Church's expected expenses. Hence, the Department of Antiquities implemented its conservation projects, bypassing confrontation and disputes (S1, S10). It must also be highlighted that funding difficulties also deter public consultation as co-management raises spending expectations that local councils are unwilling to fulfill:

> My personal view is that we are very busy with the village … It is possibly even illegal for us to spend money from the village's budget on the monastery. (S8)

The current decision-making system sustains an inward-looking centralised system. The over-reliance of church and locals on the Department of Antiquities resulted in 'limiting polyvocality' and it 'enhances' dependency on the latter. This is evident through the lack of holistic heritage management plans and the perpetuation of micromanagement problems related to security (lack of training) (S3, S6), delays in conservation works (S5, S9), and customer-oriented practices including occasional unavailability of core facilities and services (relevant publications) (S2, S4).

Reflections on the 'preserve as found' strategy

The solid adherence to material stasis (Figure 6) is an important source of contestation between bishoprics and the Department of Antiquities. For the Department of Antiquities, deliberate damage resulting from iconoclasm (vandalism due to religious reasons) or from devotion and talismanic beliefs (Ieronymidou & Rickerby, 2010) represent critical moments in the Church's history. Under further investigation, it was revealed that the Department of Antiquities and ICOMOS, using a 'cherry-picking' tactic, have internalised primarily the Venice Charter (S10) that has been most related to AHD (Smith, 2006), considering the Nara Document simultaneously as vague and open to 'whatever interpretation,' underscoring its non-mandatory nature. By 'sticking to what they know and can do' (S11), the Department of Antiquities avoids introducing new practices and other novelties that inhibit risks and potential mistakes (S15). Thus, while 'in the spirit' they try to abide by all charters, minimal intervention is considered the most ethical and prudent strategy (S14).

> The bishop was desperate to get the Virgin Mary and Christ paintings cleaned near the templon because they were essential, but it was impossible from a practical perspective. We could have ruined them. (S14)

On the contrary, the clergy in Cyprus hold conflicting views towards material stasis. The first group (Figure 8, 1st narrative) appears fully aligned with 'freezing continuous use,' as a causal power of AHD. What is of interest is that concerns of materiality are mingled with 'living religious tradition' that consider sacred sites as holy and spiritually efficacious even in a state of ruin (S1). At the same time, material stasis provokes 'evidential value' that underscores the historicity of Orthodox Churches, creating new layers of meaning and cultural attachment.

> … there are special lambs that do not emit harmful lighting … everyone should adhere to the ecumenical [conservation] policies and approved measures. (S1)

> [murals] are original … The palimpsest should be visible. The monastery is eleven centuries old. History is displayed here. The eyes are damaged. This should be visible. Despite the profanity, it is part of the monument's history. (S6)

Figure 6. Monastery of St. John Narthex. Source: Photo by CC Zairon (2017).

The monks like the patination of age. Some people consider dirt as the accumulation of spiritual activity. (S14)

On the contrary, the second group (Figure 8, 2nd narrative) demonstrates a mild criticism of material stasis. According to this view, conservation does not stop at the time of the creation; it is an ongoing

Figure 7. 'Damaged' eyes at St. John Monastery. Source: Photo by CC Zairon (2017).

process, a continuation that brings the monument back to life (S7, S13). Thus, the current state is considered an impediment to spiritual connection and atheistic (visual) appreciation.

> [Restoration] gives you a sense of coming back to life. The meaning and the content of a mural remain the same. (S7) … Having the eyes taken out does not help the historicity either. Because the first thing someone sees is the face. We are missing ears and fingers that suggest that there were some superstitions the church of the 18th century supported for healing reasons. [In the past] we were a bit shamed to tell the truth because priests were involved too [in talismanic beliefs].

> It is like leaving someone with half a leg and telling him I will not help you because I knew you as a legged man for so many years. [Restoration] allows him to add an artificial leg; we know it is fake, and we can remove it whenever we want. (S12)

However, for those espousing this view, interventions should be targeted, meticulously executed, and reversible in areas of high spiritual importance, especially in the face and other small body parts like ears and fingers (Figure 7) (S7, S12, S13).

Visitor responses to the 'preserve as found' strategy

At this stage, the research envisaged an understanding of how the 'preserve as found' strategy constrains and enables the visitor experience. While 'exploration,' 'historical interest,' and 'escapism' were featured as the primary motivations for all three groups (pilgrims, 'mixed motives,' and tourists), for those who self-identified as pilgrims and as driven by 'mixed motives,' the 'need to pray for their loved ones' and 'show devotion' also featured in the answers. At St. Nicholas's church, fourteen visitors were identified as 'compliant' towards the particular strategy, four as 'antagonistic,' and two as 'ambivalent.' In contrast, at the Monastery of St John, eighteen were identified as 'compliant' and two as 'antagonistic.'

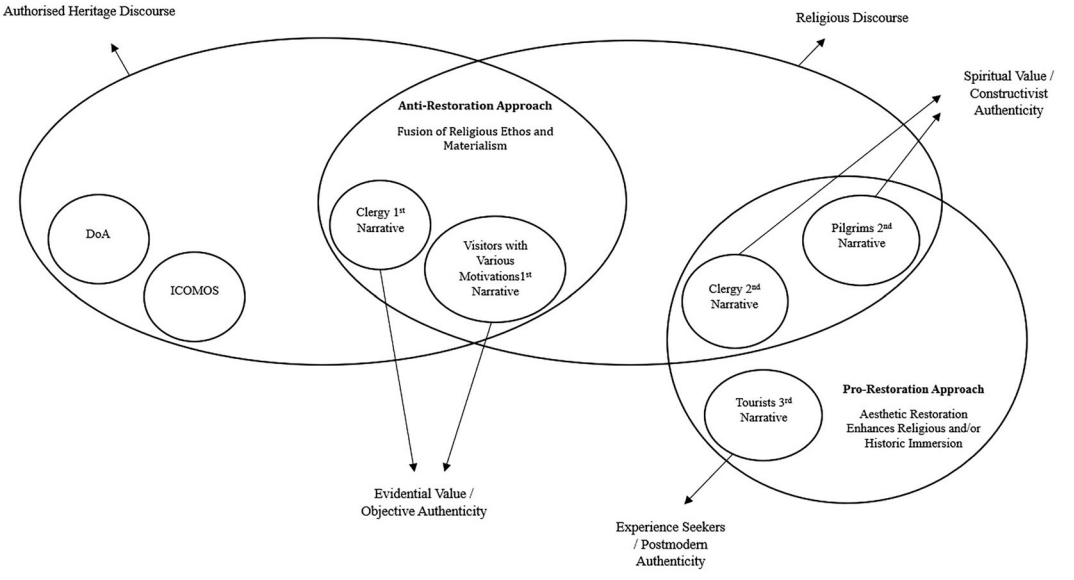

Figure 8. Responses towards the conservation of religious murals.

Compliant stance

For those expressing a 'compliant stance' (comprising visitors from all three groups), the incompleteness of the murals does not appear to undermine their experience (*1st narrative,* Figure 8). On the contrary, evidence of time, in the form of patina, decay, and damage, increases the appreciation, serving as measurable qualities of authenticity that stimulate historical immersion. Codes such as 'it is normal,' 'nowhere is completed,' and 'modern mix' demonstrate familiarity with this strategy. Others have shown deeper reflection, considering alternative conservation strategies as 'distracting' and 'devaluing,' and were apprehensive towards gentrification, claiming that 'it is not beauty contestation.' For these visitors, all interventions are considered intrusive, unacceptable practices that spoil the medieval character of the church and inhibit their capacity to spot artistic changes. If anything, a new restoration program following religious practices would hide the accumulated meanings to form a 'made-up' present that reflects the taste and spiritual concerns of the twenty-first century.

> They would not look real [referring to potential restoration]. I do not think it is needed. I have been to places where they have renovated the masonry using different colours … and it is very distracting. (V20, male tourist, 20s)

It must be highlighted that for some visitors driven by religious motivations, the original state of the murals, even in fragmented form, is considered a source of authenticity and historical accuracy. At the same time, pictorial fragmentation does not inhibit the devotional power of the scenes and their inherent spirituality. On the contrary, aesthetic restoration and possibly overshadowing the historic palimpsest sparked unease among this group. For these visitors, the 'freezing' of the material fabric triggered 'pre-nostalgia,' a feeling that restoration may result in significant cultural loss.

> We, Christians, can visualise how the icon continues. We guess what murals represent … we think how the hands and the legs of the saints continue … It does not affect the spirituality of the church. (V18, male mixed, 50s).

Other visitors at St. John's Monastery stressed ethical concerns regarding aesthetic restoration, highlighting its subjective and intrusive character and the danger of generating a 'contrived' experience.

> I prefer more humble and simple places like this. [Regarding potential restoration] No, because that is part of nature, time, and history. It is like an antique car with all new parts. Is it a new or an old car? (V27, female tourist, 40s)

> We need to conserve it as much as we know it today. It makes a mockery of the past, making it ours and not theirs anymore. (V26, female tourist, 30s).

Revisiting visitors' motivations, however, there appears to be an association between visitors' expectations for escapism and nostalgia for places untouched by modernity and an unspoiled historic environment. This brings to mind Lowenthal's (1985) remark that 'physical residues,' a combination of natural and anthropogenic causes such as patina and deliberate damage, provide unlimited access to the past through empathetic immersion and detailed knowledge (Lowenthal, 1985):

> The monastery can give me the serenity I am looking for. Looking at it, I feel content it is something sentimental and spiritual … The fact that some parts are missing contributes to the experience; it gives you an understanding of what those frescoes have gone through. I think they should stay like this because it conveys a message. For instance, the damaged eyes illustrate a part of the monument history. Preserving them like this passes a message. (V21, female pilgrim, 30s)

> It is a holy place, I am not very religious. It is something about history, the space, the memories, and the fact that people come here and have faith. It is a place where I feel comfortable … Every scratch has a point, and it says how it has survived … it seems that it has attracted the faith of all those people who come here to light a candle and pray. (V22, female mixed, 30s)

Antagonist stance

The 'preserve as found' strategy raises constraints for these visitors, this is happening for two different reasons. For certain pilgrims and 'mixed motives' visitors, aesthetic restoration is an act of piety towards the depicted saints. Often, this stance is coupled with national sentiment, raising reservations about whether such a 'negative history' (referring to damage and vandalism on eyes) should be remembered. Driven by the symbolic attributes of religious scenes (i.e. divine grace), these visitors drifted away from objective qualities, arguing that such negligence disrespects the holiness of depicted saints. Embracing a *constructivist authenticity* (2nd narrative), underscoring the idea that values such as piety and reverence should guide the conservation process, they revised the meaning of authenticity through the lens of religious tradition/values. Nevertheless, for them, restoration should be guided by prudent scientific strategies and 'appropriate techniques' that would protect the historicity of the monuments, showing that they have internalised ideas regarding expert-led conservation.

> I wanted to pray for my children to be well and for all people … They should do something about it and make it beautiful again … where the half painting is missing, they could restore it … with people who know how to do it … For instance, we came, donated today, and would like to light a candle away from the frescos. (V3, female pilgrim, 70s).

> I usually come here for peace, which is why I like monasteries. They are simpler without so much wealth … I would like to see the face of the saint restored, at least …. I believe that holy icons are miraculous. (V23, female pilgrim, 20s).

Two international tourists provided a different perspective. For them, authenticity is not to be found in the originality of materials or the holiness of the place. As 'experience seekers,' they embrace full restoration as a medium to recreate medieval ambiance (*3rd narrative*). The following account emphasises what Rickly (2022) described as a 'cynical stance,' a postmodern perspective that embraces staged authenticity to enhance the experience and aesthetic enjoyment:

> Going in and visiting the bright colours gives you an appreciation of how people experienced these places in the past 1000 years; it is a powerful place. Seeing them faded is interesting from a preservation perspective, but it takes away the experiential part of it. It is interesting to see what impact this has on you today. (V15, male tourist, 70s)

Ambivalent stance

Two visitors expressed an ambivalent stance. Uncertainty characterises these accounts, a back-and-forth reflection on how much restoration is deemed acceptable and how the historical and symbolic meanings of the murals can be best communicated. This group shares many characteristics with what Archer (2003) described as the meta-reflexive stance. They are contextually unsettled individuals who 'dwell in upon contextual critique' (Archer, 2003, p. 273) and remain inactive and passive, reproducing existing schemata (Wimalasena, 2017).

> I think we should keep some places as they are because we should have an opportunity to see that nothing lasts forever … However, we should not repaint all of them because we can lose this historical magic. The damaged eyes are part of the history. (V6, male tourist, 20s)

> I don't think they should repaint everything … but they can repaint or redo something to make it visible to the public where little is. (V9, female tourist, 50s)

Discussion

Considerable insight has been gained from this empirical study into the dissonance and contestation that underlies the conservation of living heritage. The paper provides the framework for our understanding of how certain heritage practices retain their hegemony and how certain conservation decisions impact religious tourism experience and satisfaction. Regarding the first aim of the study, 'how hegemonic discourses, such as AHD, retain their supremacy during the conservation of living heritage,' the findings revealed that AHD-led practices at Cypriot churches have persisted due to meticulously centralised decision-making system orchestrated by the Department of Antiquities. This is maintained through strict national conservation law enforced by international statutory control, the capacity of the Department of Antiquities to capitalise on the liabilities of other parties (lack of funding and expertise), and the timid and distant stance of non-governmental groups (i.e. ICOMOS) towards the department. This delicate process that enforced a 'moralistic framework' indicating the correct actions to be taken (Pendlebury, 2013), demonstrates the resilient character of 'authorisers' to reposition themselves and resist external pressures, such as the growing awareness of local dioceses over heritage and conservation issues. These findings are consistent with other studies (Ludwig, 2016; Mydland & Grahn, 2012; Parkinson et al., 2016) that have reported how governmental bodies raise various obstacles for local stakeholders to perpetuate AHD-led practices and corroborate the position of Waterton et al. (2006) that international bodies and their representatives (see ICOMOS) are co-dependent on state parties to enforce sufficient regulatory and legislative policies.

This study postulates that the infiltration and eventual operationalisation of non-material and other counter-hegemonic discourses (see traditional religious practices) in conservation practice is related to how centralised the decision-making process is in a particular context and how (in)dependent and resilient the institutions carrying certain discourses are. Therefore, small compromises, such as the occasional performance of religious practices, should be seen as a strategy to ease dissonance. These findings bring to mind Poulios (2014) and Winter's (2014a) argument that alternative viewpoints within 'value-based conservation' are considered and often incorporated in the planning as long as they do not challenge or undermine material-based aspirations. In line with Maxwell (2009), future research is encouraged to explore how the causal mechanisms identified in this study manifest (and in what ways) in different settings bearing different contextual influences.

One question that remains unanswered is why certain clergymen considered the conservation strategy 'preserve as found' as an opportunity for change while others do not. This comparative approach revealed that the two bishoprics under investigation have different attachment styles and conservation agendas. According to Fairclough (2005), organisations internalise and appropriate external disclosure in ways that lead to unpredictable transformations and new 'successful'

strategies based on the vested interests of social agents. In Cyprus, the overarching aim of the church is to reintroduce religious sites as focal pilgrimages and cultural centres, which is manifested in two ways. The anti-restoration narrative (*1st narrative*) becomes an opportunity to communicate the ecclesiastical history by blending, as Taylor (2007) put it, 'religious commitment and materialism' (p. 360). Thus, certain clergymen have internalised some of the core values of AHD, including ideas of material authenticity and 'expert-led' conservation. This hybrid narrative aligns with the secular conservation ethos, particularly 'evidential value' that highlights a national discourse on how the Greek Orthodox culture prevailed through centuries of hardships and suppression by Latin and Ottoman rulers. Through calculated thinking and balancing the pros and cons of the 'preserve as found' strategy, they re-negotiate the meaning of historic churches, turning the limitations of secular ethos into new opportunities. This study echoes similar conclusions reported by others (Katapidi, 2021; Maags & Svensson, 2018; Wu, 2023; Xia, 2020) who underscored the creative agency of 'heritage users' to develop flexible relationships with AHD-led practices. The pro-restoration narrative (*2nd narrative),* on the other hand, driven by religious beliefs, teachings, and spiritual aspirations, advocates that restoration is an act of care and attentiveness but equally a 'redeeming' act, as some of this damage was the product of outdated religious superstition (talismanic beliefs) a disconcerting topic for the Church of Cyprus. Thus, clergymen embracing the 2nd narrative appear more constrained than enabled due to their desire to 'maintain continuity rather than seeking opportunity for change' (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013, p. 938).

The second aim of this study was to understand how the 'preserve as found' strategy impacts visitors' experience, demonstrating how visitors build connections with the physicality of religious sites. The three responses demonstrated that the perception of authenticity is a profoundly personal construct that involves self-reflexivity and varies between individuals who prefer different experiences and settings. While a small number of visitors expressed a constructivist and postmodern stance, underscoring the role of piety and historical immersion in shaping perceived authenticity, respectively, the findings showed that a large group of visitors (32 out of 40), comprising pilgrims and secular tourists, reasoned that material stasis contributes to the overall experience and sense of place. The findings show that religion does not have the same effect on all religiously driven (or quasi-religious-driven) visitors. As in the case of clergy, many adopted a hybrid discourse that considers murals as spiritually efficacious in a fragmented form. The anti-restoration strategy has allowed these visitors to establish links with the past and confirmed the continuation of religious and cultural identities.

Whereas restoration may provoke positive emotions and strengthen tourists' sense of place (Hughes et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022), this study demonstrated that the anti-restoration approach can also trigger positive emotions. The study echoes Lowenthal (1985), Boym (2001), and DeSilvey and Harrison's (2020) position that 'physical residues' or 'partial loss' provide unlimited access to the past by triggering both cognitive and emotive sentiments. The interviews showcased that observable elements (i.e. scratches, erosion, patina, decay, graffiti) convey a sense of authenticity and become a stimulus that encourages 'time travellers' to complete the escapist and nostalgic journey they embarked on. The 'material record,' provoked imagination and an empathetic immersion towards the culture that produced them, while the 'fear of loss,' even for a culture that has not been personally experienced (Berliner, 2012), was prominent among this group of visitors and sparked 'pre-nostalgia' – a self-awareness that restoration may result in significant cultural loss (Earl & Hall, 2023).

The evidence of this study supports the idea that the coexistence of objective authenticity (manifested through material stasis) and living tradition should not be considered as exclusively antithetic approaches that seemingly 'freeze religious sites' (see Poulios, 2014). Acknowledging that social agents' understanding and expectations for the historic environment evolve and grow in complexity over time (Harvey, 2001; R. Mason, 2002), this study brought to light a new discourse that combines material and immaterial elements. By embracing forms of discontinuity manifested through the anti-restoration stance, Cypriot churches allow religion to overlap with secular values,

enabling the Church to reintroduce itself into contemporary spiritual and cultural maps. These results challenge the postmodern perspective that 'authenticity is irrelevant to many tourists, who either do not value it, [or] are suspicious of it' (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006, p. 66) and is aligned with Belhassen et al. (2008) and Chhabra's (2010, 2012) position that object-based authenticity remains prominent within (religious) heritage tourism.

Theoretical and practical implications

Building on Skrede and Hølleland's (2018) position to 'unpack what is hiding under the concept of AHD' (p. 91) and the ontological and epistemological assumptions of Critical Realism, this empirical study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of the dialectical relation developed between discourse (i.e. AHD) and extra-discursive entities (i.e. structures/mechanisms and social agents). Within this framework, the study surfaced power relations embedded within Cypriot conservation assemblages and shifting ideological positions among social agents. Drawing on these findings, the paper proposes that the local bishoprics would benefit from institutionalising site managers. The latter could improve the site operation, codify and communicate the Church's overlooked spiritual concerns, participate in lobbies to attract funding, and improve synergetic relationships between stakeholders, thus transforming local bishoprics from 'passive beneficiaries' (Lee & Eversole, 2019) into regional cultural development actors.

Regarding the treatment of murals, drawing on DeSilvey's (2017) concept of 'curated decay,' highlighting how decomposition and decay can provoke a stimulating experience that generates cultural memory, the paper proposes that restoration should be reduced to the minimum to avoid a contrived experience. Simultaneously, any intervention should be targeted, visible, and executed sensitively. Therefore, conservators' decisions, and their inevitable bias are highlighted as part of the object's continuous life, and the viewer can contemplate, reflect, and critique (Sweetnam & Henderson, 2021). The current state of preservation can be complemented by a sophisticated interpretation strategy that facilitates a polyphonic space for critical dialogue (Carbone et al., 2020) that would stimulate broader debates regarding the conservation of living cultural heritage.

Conclusions

These findings add to a growing body of literature addressing the conservation of living religious heritage by drawing on the various conceptualisations of authenticity that provide insight into how social agents build connections with historical sites. The study asserts that the perpetuation of AHD-led practices is a multifaceted phenomenon resulting from two coexisting processes. Firstly, a centralised decision-making process systematically maintained by authorities that capitalise on the liabilities of other institutions, and secondly, a shifting religious discourse that internalises ideas of material authenticity, expert values, and objectivity. The comparative approach revealed that certain bishoprics feel more constrained than others, demonstrating that 'core communities' are not homogenous and social agents internalise external discourses at different speeds. The study also found that for most clergymen and visitors, the current anti-restoration conservation strategy positively impacts their experience as evidence of time adds new layers of meanings, renewing the social agents' relationship with religious and cultural memory. DeSilvey and Harrison (2020) reasoned that loss has a generative and emancipatory power that facilitates the emergence of new values, attachments, and forms of significance. The anti-restoration strategy in Cypriot churches provoked a highly empathetic and reflective experience that aligns with visitors' escapist and nostalgic motivations. Reproaching AHD as a set of beliefs with enabling causal powers instead of a solely restrictive discourse, future research will attain greater insight into how the material and immaterial related values attached to historic churches are negotiated, evolved, and revised in different regional settings.

Notes

1. The *International Council on Monuments and Sites* is a global non-governmental organisation associated with UNESCO. It provides UNESCO with evaluation of properties for inscription on the World Heritage List, technical assistance and reports on the state of conservation of inscribed properties (UNESCO, 2024b). Countries have their own national committees that function as forums where conservation professionals discuss and promote the conservation, protection, rehabilitation, and enhancement of architectural heritage (ICOMOS, 2024).
2. The *Cyprus National Commission for UNESCO* functions under the supervision of the government. The Commission acts as an advisory body to the Government, it encourages public engagement in heritage management, and functions as a point of awareness and information for UNESCO's agenda (UNESCO, 2024c).

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