

Storytelling. Is there a better method of archaeological site interpretation?

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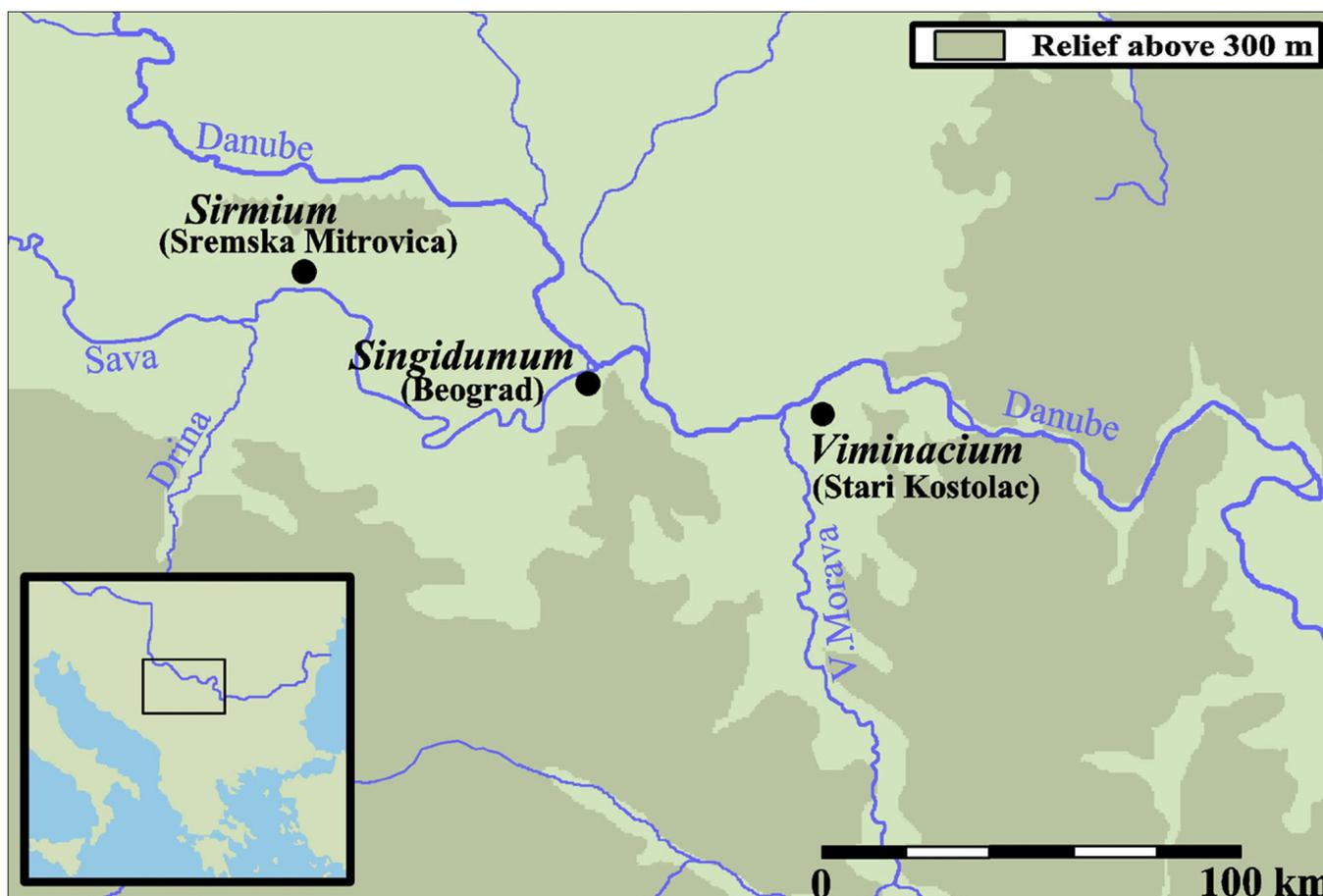
In this paper, the authors present Viminacium, an archaeological site from the Roman Era that was turned into an archaeological open-air museum. Ever since it was opened in 2006, this open-air museum was visited by an always increasing number of guests. Expert guides offer a unique experience of storytelling directly on the site, that contributes to the visitors' overall experience.

Keywords: *storytelling, Viminacium, archaeological open-air museum, visitor, guide*

Viminacium is a well-known Roman site in eastern Serbia, positioned on the right Danube bank. (Map 1) During Roman times, it was the capital of the Roman province Moesia Superior. Its wider area includes almost 450 hectares and it has been excavated for more than a century. The latest excavation phase was initiated at the beginning of the 21st century. Several archaeological complexes were unearthed and also covered with protective constructions. (Fig. 1) They include remains of a Roman bath (*thermae*), an amphitheater, parts of city walls with towers, the northern gate of the legionary fort, the Roman mausoleum and several dozens of graves in the eastern Viminacium cemetery, three fresco painted tombs beneath the mausoleum, several Roman

tombs (*memoriae*) in the southern Viminacium cemetery and some other structures. All of them are designed to host large numbers of visitors at any time of the year.

However, for a long time, the site was systematically destroyed. It was a victim of looting done by professional treasure-hunters who looked for gold and other precious items. (Fig. 2) On the other hand, it was a victim of local farmers, who systematically destroyed architectural remains and tombstones, taking useful materials home and re-using them. Finally, on the eastern end of the site, there is a strip mine that represented a permanent threat to the site. (Fig. 3)



MAP 1. Position of the site Viminacium (map by V. Ilić)

At this crucial point, an idea was born to establish an archaeological park, actually an open-air museum that would bring visitors to the site. It took several years and finally, in 2006, it was officially opened.

Interpretations of archaeological finds and structures were offered to the public. In order to make these easily understandable, a narrative based on storytelling was designed. The authentic location surely offered a good basis that could easily help the narrative develop and grow. Eventually, the always growing number of visitors and their presence at the site lead to a reduction of looters and treasure hunters. Soon enough, they stopped looting. And soon enough, it was possible to evaluate the results of storytelling and visitors' impressions.

According to research in 2006, the profile of Viminacium visitors was one-third children's excursions, followed by different group visitors (one-quarter of the total number of 50.000), individual visitors and approximately the same number of visitors coming on cruises (about 20% each). The study was based not on questionnaires (like those conducted in 2012 and 2013), but on data from the

accounting, indicating to whom the tickets were sold. In other words, in 2006, one-third of the total number of tickets was sold to school children (from both primary and high schools).

Five years later, in 2011, Viminacium was visited by 75.000 tourists and one-fifth of them (15.000) were those arriving on cruise ships (Maksin et al. 2009: 144). Due to this rather big number of visitors from cruisers, there was an initiative to design questionnaires aiming to reveal what were the most impressive parts of their visit to Viminacium. This research was conducted mainly during 2012 and 2013. The main helping factor was that all of the cruisers stop at the port in Novi Kostolac, some 5 km from the site itself, thus requiring a twenty-minute bus drive to the site. The same route was taken during return and enough time was left for visitors to fill in the questionnaires. This kind of research would not have been possible among other Viminacium visitors since e.g. children or adults on an excursion (group visitors) leave directly from the site.



FIGURE 1. Aerial view of the site Viminacium and its tents (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

A screenshot of an eBay listing for an ancient Roman coin. The listing includes a search bar, navigation links, and a promotional banner for a taxi service. The main listing features a photograph of the coin, which is dark and heavily worn, with the inscription "HOSTILIANVS" visible. The listing text reads: "HOSTILIAN Authentic Ancient 251AD Viminacium RARE Ancient Roman Coin NGC i69336". The condition is listed as "--". The price is US \$678.80, with a "You save" of \$1,018.20 (60% off) from a "Was" price of US \$1,697.00. The listing includes buttons for "Buy It Now", "Add to cart", and "Make Offer". The seller is a "Longtime Member" with "30-day Returns" and "60% Savings". Shipping is \$14.00 Standard International Shipping. The item location is Rego Park, New York, United States, and it ships worldwide.

FIGURE 2. Screenshot of an ebay offer from Viminacium (accessed Feb. 26th 2019).



FIGURE 3. Aerial view of the strip mine close to Viminacium (Documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

The data given below and illustrated in the charts were gained exclusively from the questionnaires and research conducted during 2012 and 2013 among Viminacium visitors arriving to the site on cruisers. These visitors were mostly foreign.

The first part of the questionnaire was optional and it aimed to provide basic information about the visitors. There were an almost equal number of men and women in the tours, over 80% were retired and older than the age of 60, while more than 85% held a university or a college degree. (Fig. 4, after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014: 192, Charts 1-4). Almost all of them have been to Europe before and have visited ancient sites. Among the most commonly mentioned ones were Pompeii, Ephesus and Hadrian's Wall. This indicated that they had something to compare Viminacium to.

The second part addressed specific parts of the site, like the Roman baths, the Mausoleum and the so-called Underworld, positioned under the Mausoleum. In all of the cases, visitors claimed that they have understood the concept of these specific site parts (Fig. 5, after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014: Charts 10, 12 and 14). and even more important, they claimed that this was due to expert guides' explanations (Fig. 6, after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014: 195-198, Charts 11, 13 and 15).

Finally, an overall impression of the site and the guided tours reflected pretty much the same impression as those stated about each specific part of the site (Fig. 7, after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014: 202, Chart 25). Two basic motivators were the site itself and the expert guides, showing that they are equally important for a good site interpretation.

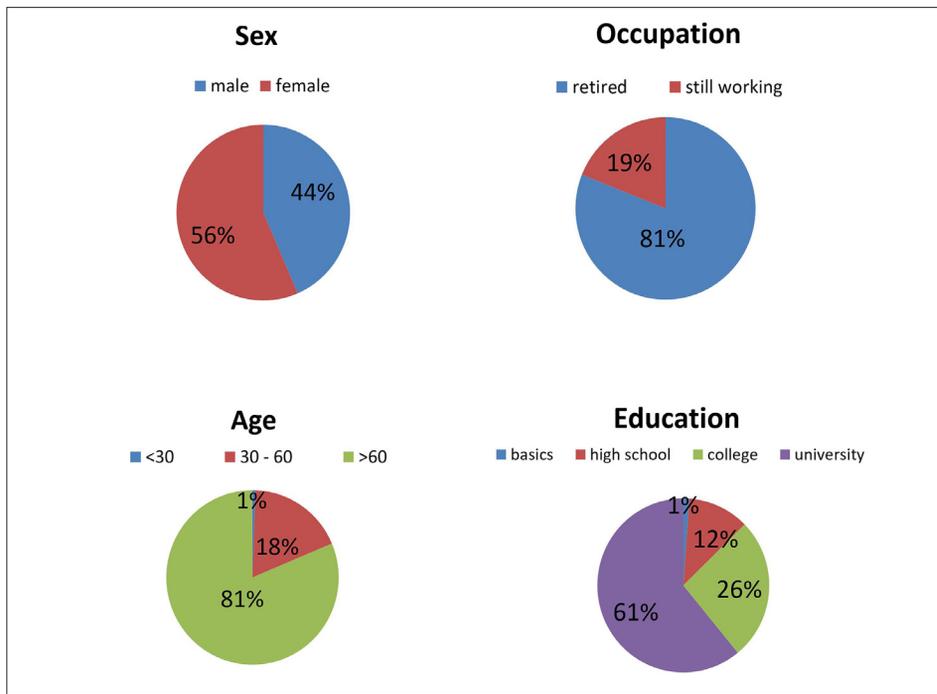


FIGURE 4. Basic information about Viminacium visitors: sex, occupation, age and education (after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014, Diagrams 1-4)

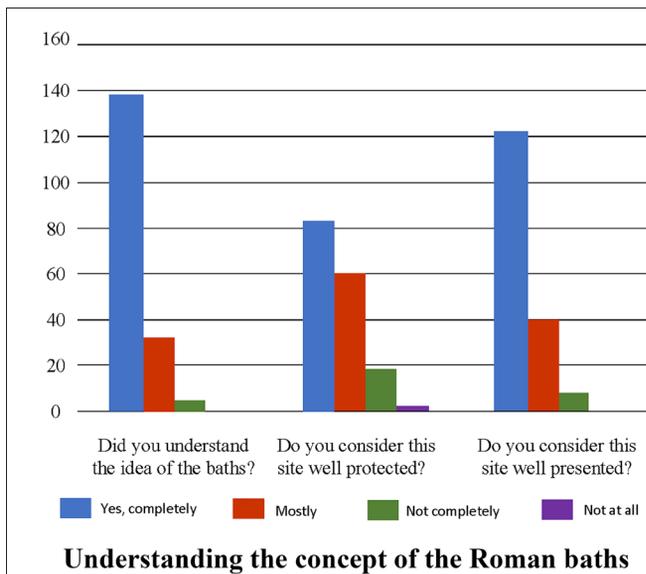
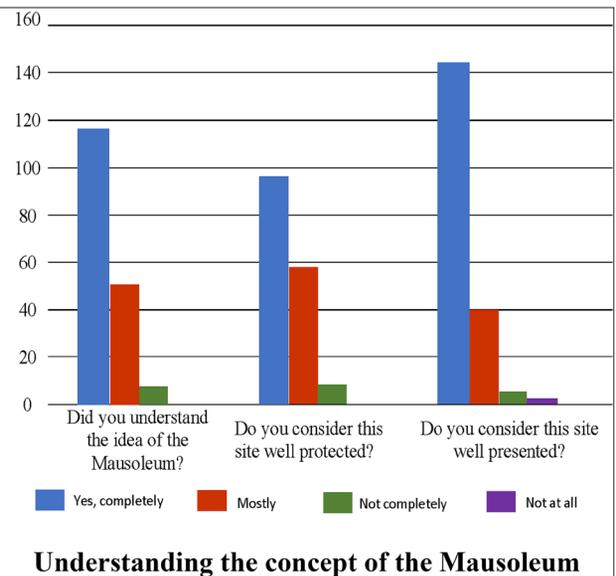
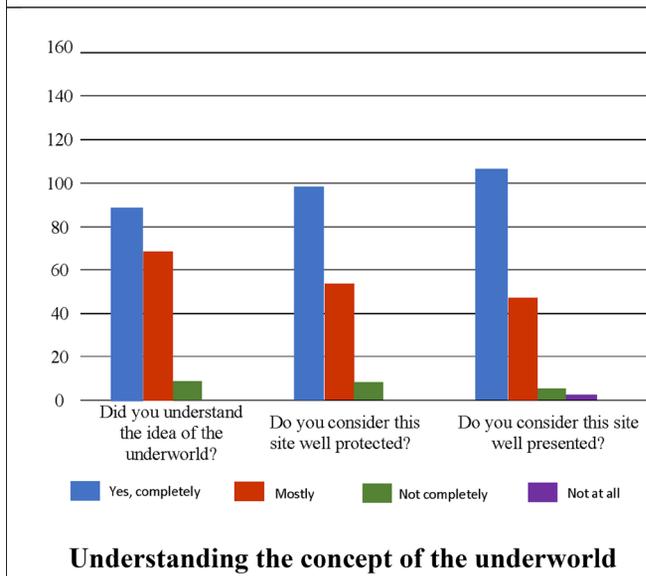


FIGURE 5. Understanding the concept of specific site parts: the Roman baths, the Mausoleum and the Underworld (after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014, Charts 10, 12 and 14)



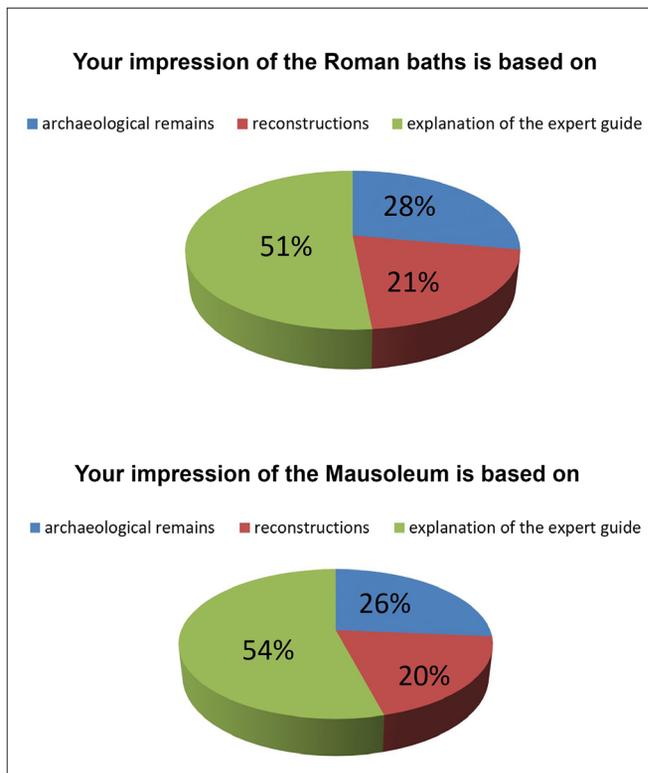
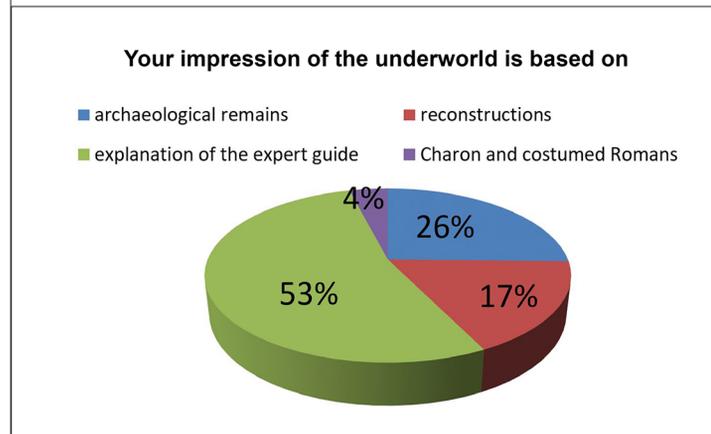


FIGURE 6. Influence of expert guides' explanations on visitors regarding the Roman baths, the Mausoleum and the underworld (after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014, Charts 11, 13 and 15)



By looking at the charts shown before, it can be concluded that explanations of expert guides, or shortly - storytelling, was the greatest factor which influenced visitors' good impression and acceptance of the Archaeological Park of Viminacium. It seems that guides were ambassadors or direct reflections of the Archaeological Park. A site might speak for itself, but it is a language not many people would be able to understand. If one is just a curious or interested layman, the message might flow just past him.

In Viminacium, a concept was designed that includes main features of the site, fascinations and narratives (Đošević 2009: 23). The concept was designed primarily by archaeologists but in close cooperation with guides. Sometimes, archaeologists themselves acted as guides.

Main features of the site describe the time and place in which the legionary fort and the city of Viminacium were established. They also include basic facts about the imperial city (from which emperor Hostilian reigned) and the imperial mausoleum (in which emperor Hostilian was buried). Further on, it always needs to be mentioned that Viminacium is among the very rare archaeological sites with no modern settlement upon it (Fig. 8, after Đošević 2009: 23, Table 1).

The imperial mausoleum also belongs to the main fascinations of Viminacium. Within the same structure, another fascination includes fresco painted tombs from the 3rd century A.D. The frescos belong to the most beautiful pieces of Roman art throughout the Empire. However, they do not impress visitors only with their beauty and uniqueness, but also with their specific position within the structure, since they are displayed in the so-called Underworld, several meters below the ground. Visitors need to descend do the Underworld and enter each of the three tombs from below, observing the frescos from the perspective of the deceased.

Finally, Viminacium narratives include stories of emperor Hostilian's death, of the Mona Lisa from Viminacium and of the transition of the Roman Empire towards the east. Since it was not yet determined what emperor Hostilian died of, there are several possibilities, all wrapped up in an exciting and tempting narrative. Further on, political and military turbulences of the late 3rd and early 4th century caused the Roman Empire to incline towards the east, adding more excitement to Hostilian's story.

Despite all the turmoil, Viminacium artist created fascinating frescos and among them, there is the beautiful "Viminacium Mona Lisa". Her story, sad, yet eternal in its inspiration, is always very well accepted by visitors.

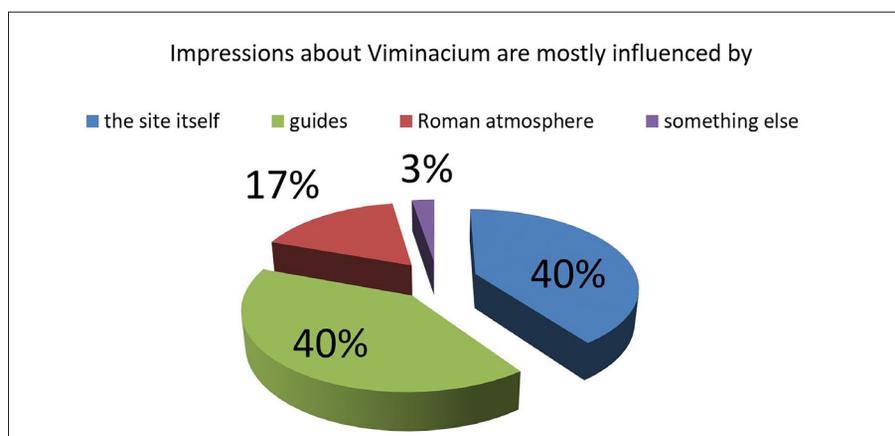


FIGURE 7. Overall impression of the site and the guided tours (after Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2014, Chart 25)

Lokalitet	Viminacium
Ključne karakteristike	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Početak I veka n.e. Glavni grad Gornje Mezije Carski grad (Hostilian) Carski mauzolej Uz Carnuntum, jedini veliki rimski logor/naselje nad kojim nije niklo novo - olakšana istraživanja
Fascinacije	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carski mauzolej Najlepše freske kasne antike na celoj teritoriji Rimskog carstva Prvom polovinom IV veka tačka seljenja (i zadržavanja) Rima u Konstantinopolj
Narativna lema	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tajna imperatorove smrti Mona Liza kasne antike Tranzicija carstva Viminacium, lumen meum

Izvor: www.merr.sr.gov.yu/dokumenti

Site Viminacium

- Main features
- Beginning of the 1st century AD
 - The capital of Moesia Superior
 - Imperial city (Hostilian)
 - Imperial Mausoleum
 - Besides Carnuntum, the only big Roman legionary fort/settlement without any modern structures upon it. Easily accessible for research.
- Fascinations
- Imperial Mausoleum
 - The most beautiful frescos of Late Antiquity in the whole of the Roman Empire
 - During the first half of the 4th century, the capital of the Empire was moved from Rome to Constantinople
- Narratives
- The secret of emperor's death
 - Mona Lisa of Late Antiquity
 - Transition of the Empire
 - Viminacium, lumen meum

Source: www.merr.sr.gov.yu/dokumenti

FIGURE 8. Main features, fascinations and interpretative themes or narratives of Viminacium (with translation, after Došević 2009, Table 1)



Why is storytelling important?

At first glance, archaeology and storytelling seem worlds apart. The first is an academic discipline, concerned with hard fact, rational argument and identifiable sources, while the second is 'mere' fiction and entertainment.

However, storytelling can be a powerful means of communicating all sorts of human truths, social values and community traditions. Archaeology is at its most relevant and interesting when it transcends factual description and engages with the people of the past. Both, after all, are ways of making sense of the world around us. By combining archaeology and storytelling, a new form of communication can be created which brings together academics and audiences in a shared experience of human past (Given 2009: 33).

Storytelling is one tool to make the past accessible to the present. It combines fictional stories with factual archaeological research. Although storytelling involves creating narratives using archaeological information, it is not merely inventing fanciful stories. It is also not a one-way process or something professionals (producers) do for the edification of the public (consumers) (Praetzellis 2014) since e.g. Viminacium guides always expect their public to react and comment. As long as one recognizes what is fact from what is fiction, stories could push archaeologists to ask new questions – questions about the heritage that are important to current residents and not just the researchers (Janesko 2018).

Further on, during storytelling, filtering is necessary for meaning to be possible. It is also part of archaeological conditions. Not only it is not possible to record *everything*, but many things are simply also not recordable, not preserved.

Although many visitors think that a great job is being done at the Viminacium, the work is not yet finished. By spreading the story, this archaeological park would potentially gain more and more visitors, both foreign and domestic. Statistics already show that their number has grown to over 120.000 per year. Analyses based on questionnaires showed that visitors' emotions are one of the most important elements in developing Viminacium as an archaeological park. Its insufficient number of remains is supplemented by successful presentations, lectures and the overall atmosphere. The feeling of having learned something new in such an easy and interesting way is surely nice, as well as the feeling of being ready to share your new knowledge with others. So, storytelling would lead to the spreading of the story, this again leading to making others willing to visit the site.

In addition to that, the more visitors, the less looting can be performed on the site. If there are visitors permanently walking around the archaeological park, it is unlikely for treasure hunters to act.

In 2018, a so-called "Adventure park" was opened in Viminacium, targeting mostly young people, their number as visitors would surely grow. Thus, there will be an opportunity to repeat the study and focus it more on children and adolescents. Hopefully, after a sufficient number of interviews, the authors would be able to compare the impact of storytelling to the older and the younger population.

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