Activating Templar Heritage: Tourism, Narrative Strategies and Information Technologies

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Abstract. While fairly established in several western countries, military tourism is still in a grey area in Portugal. In order to bolster the notion that this concept can be a major contributor to tourism activation, an Information System is being developed with the Templar Order as basis. This project is a direct result of the work of the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar (Portugal), the Templars Route European Federation and Tomar’s local government. It uses the Rapid Application Development methodology and resorts mostly to a client-server web application, using web standards such as HTML, CSS and JS, and it’s operated by the PHP program language and SGBD Mysql for data persistence. The IS fills a void as far as military tourism heritage platforms are concerned. It’s user friendly design and architecture make for a pleasant research experience while the inclusion of more updated and historical narratives along with storytelling strategies increase its appeal among a non-academic audience. The recent COVID-19 outbreak brought about the need to adapt the original model to an ever-increasing virtual culture trend.

Keywords: Military tourism · Technological interventions · Storytelling

1 Introduction

Nowadays, the intersection of tourism and cultural heritage takes a central role in the creation and promotion of new experiences and in attracting new publics. As a segment of cultural heritage, historical-military heritage tends to follow this trend. A 900-year-old country, in which military and national history tend to blend, Portugal has adopted a clear stance towards military tourism in recent times. Incorporated in the National Tourism Strategic Plan (PENT) since its revision in 2013,
military tourism has, slowly, been gaining momentum in Portugal. This strategy is grounded in the acknowledgement of tourism’s relevance for the country’s GDP growth, especially in the sparsely populated interior, as well as on the abundance of military heritage sites from north to south. A case in point is Portugal’s Templar heritage, the most notorious example being the Castle and the Convent of Christ in Tomar which attract thousands of tourists every year to this medium-sized interior city.

Another rationale behind PENT is the assumption that military history has the potential to trigger tourism and cultural experiences by resorting to narratives and storytelling as pull factors. These can be key tools to secure the quality and memorability of available experiential products in an industry which heavily relies on surpassing tourists’ expectations [1].

Military tourism supply in the shape of historical recreations, pedagogical and scientific events, tourism infrastructure and, mostly, built heritage is quite significant in Portugal. However, due to national resources being scattered, there is a pressing need for a unifying brand or product. Likewise, an inventory is also essential to organize and present those resources as tourism products accessible to all.

Despite the existence of cultural heritage inventory platforms, mostly architectural and religious heritage related, none of them specializes in historical-military heritage nor in the diversity of the existing resources. Likewise, none of these platforms is directed at heritage promotion or at the development of tourism products. Something that is quite true as far as Templar heritage is concerned. In an attempt to fill this void, a more encompassing Templar Route is being designed by the Templars Route European Federation (TREF), a trans-European cultural alliance forged within the matrix of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme [2], which aims at promoting primarily the Templar heritage of the cities of l’Aube (France), Tomar (Portugal), Ponferrada (Spain), Pérouse (Italy) and London (England) by resorting to a combination of cultural heritage enhancement strategies, tourism and academic research [3].

The Knights Templar are a deep-seated identitarian element in the cities which have hosted Templar commanderies. Tomar being no exception, the Templar heritage is one of its major sources of revenue, attracting tourists and connoisseurs from all over the world. In addition, it also features in the city’s branding — the “Templar city” — and event creation strategy [4]. Recently it has drawn additional attention for developing and implementing military tourism activities, for hosting the headquarters of the Portuguese Military Tourism Association and for being one of TREF’s founding members.

Nevertheless, the consolidation of supply and subsequent development of Templar heritage as a tourism product, aims at developing an information system (IS) to list, present and promote Templar heritage, as well as equipment and services that integrate and contribute to product supply. This project is directed at providing indicators regarding the diversity, quality and location of the aforementioned resources, through the activation of a sustainable, innovative and inclusive business management model. Therefore, the European Templar Route project, in partnership with the municipality of Tomar, wishes to develop and provide TREF with a tool that allows for the tourism and cultural optimization of Templar historical-military heritage.

The IS is based on an inventorying matrix that compiles existing historical and military heritage resources, tangible and intangible, with Templar pertinence. The said matrix is being developed so as to suppress the gaps found in similar platforms, thus
incorporating a diversity of regional interest points and attractions, namely: mobile, built, archaeological and integrated heritage; cultural tourism equipment and services; activities and events; landscapes and green areas; food and wine.

This IS displays geolocation information related to resources available in the country, allowing for the structuring of existing supply in partnership with several institutions and for communicating with other national and international platforms.

Considering the current challenges posed by COVID-19 to the tourism and culture sectors, the IS uses technologies with a set of functions and services capable of developing military tourism products and activities, such as routes, didactic and pedagogical content, while involving different national regions. The system is a free-access tool that contributes to the safeguarding of heritage, to tourism promotion on a national and international level, to cultural heritage pedagogy and to research practices conducted within several project-related domains.

2 Background

2.1 Defining Military Tourism

As far as Portugal is concerned, the link between tourism and military heritage is key for the creation of a national tourism destination identity and brand. Still, the concept of “military tourism” was not recognized by the Portuguese academia until 2008. Similar concepts were already being used in countries such as France and England, under the labels of Tourisme de Mémoire and Battlefield Tourism. Despite differing in name, these products are akin to those now classified as military tourism in Portugal.

The concept was officially recognized in PENT (2013), as a tourist destination enabler. This validation at governmental and business levels led to the consolidation and further implementation of military tourism in Portugal. As a result, the Decree Law nr. 146/2015 of August 3rd asserted that military tourism could be a source of revenue as well as a means to maximise optimal usage of military heritage and infrastructures, such as military units, military museums, battlefields, documental assets, necropolises, monuments and other built heritage under the custody of the Ministry of Defence. Also, in 2015, the Portuguese Military Tourism Association (ATMP) was established and a number of products, courses and research initiatives emerged.

This relation between tourism and heritage must also be regarded as a survival and development solution for interior regions, as acknowledged in the Military Tourism National Charter [5]. With this in mind, memory becomes key in the use of tangible and intangible heritage for tourism intents seeing that it is an indivisible element in the tourism appropriation process [6]. This mindset has led to the assumption that the conversion of national historical-military heritage into military tourism assets can be a solution for tourism activation as it can boost the development of new activities and products to complement the already existing territorial dynamics [5].

A case in point is Tomar, which has been testing many of these postulations for a number of years. This is why this city has seized the opportunity to join TREF and is now developing an IS to document the country’s Templar heritage. A logical choice since the Templars present themselves as highly valuable ambassadors to the military
tourism cause. On the one hand, they represent the quintessential military order and, on the other hand, they embody a proto-tourism consortium, along with the Hospitallars, given their role in “offering security, shelter, and safety”, not to mention valuables protection, to pilgrims travelling to the “Holy Lands” [7]. Since no similar project exists, this IS presents itself as a major opportunity within the military tourism domain.

2.2 State of the Art

There is a pressing need to document and list existing historical and cultural heritage resources on a regional level. In Europe there is a number of IS, targeted at different user bases which document, list, safekeep and preserve cultural heritage. Over the last few years some studies have emerged regarding information systems but, often, the diversity and complexity of the existing heritage presents management difficulties. As such, it is vital to understand how, why and who uses these systems.

Examples include a study regarding a cultural heritage IS – the Cultural Heritage Information System (CHIS) –, which was conceived for the Italian region of Campania, with the aim of developing a technological infrastructure to support cultural heritage activities in a dynamic, flexible and sustainable way. This system allows for the insertion of data by project members and uses a context and region-oriented approach. Likewise, it favours the reuse of existing digitized contents and the use of new data collection technologies. On a different note, CHIS also allows for its replication in different regions and for the tracking of tourist fluxes through data analysis. Moreover, it enables the interoperability and scalability of the platform, making it possible for the collected data to be used by other platforms [8].

In Portugal there are several ISs focused on cultural heritage, mostly under the management of the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage (DGPC), the national authority in cultural heritage affairs. However, they tend to be aimed at a highly educated public and are case-specific. It is also true that similar projects, in other fields of study, whose development was financed by national and international agencies have failed to succeed once financial support ceased. As for the IS being presented here, it uses the lessons learned from projects like CHIS, as well as less accomplished cases, to respond to the technological-infrastructure void regarding Knights Templar heritage and military tourism in general.

3 Topic Development

3.1 Making a Case for Narrative Renewal

While displaying cultural differences amongst themselves, the cities that comprise the Templar Route consider themselves unmistakably united by the tangible and intangible Templar heritage they share. The cultural value and economic benefits of the Templar label are a reality. That explains the abundance of tourism websites which display mostly fabled tales of Knights Templar’s military prowesses and freemasonry mystic rites. In addition, due to most of them having financial gains in mind, these contents inevitably fall short of historical accuracy.
Despite the fact that the Order of the Temple was extinguished in 1312, it is still very much alive. During its 188-year-old existence [7], the Templars became a “state among states, as they could pass freely through all borders, answering only to the Pope” [9]. Much of their power and financial wealth came from their passive form of proto-banking, in which pilgrims to the Holy Land could safely deposit and withdraw resources according to their needs along the pilgrimage routes the Order secured [7, 10]. Moreover, their hybrid nature as warrior monks and abrupt violent extinction via the heresy Trials of the Templars (1307–1312) [10, 11] made for the maintenance of interest in popular imagination. The martyr/saintly warrior motif they promoted, is still a recurring theme in contemporary cultural production and political life. In addition, an abundance of narratives which emphasize the Order’s mystical and mysterious side have also contributed to the appeal of the Templars. Many of them derive from popular culture channels such as video games, novels and films [12, 13], where fact and fiction overlap leading to the perpetuation of evidenceless conspiracy theories and myths.

Correspondingly, there has been a renewed interest in the Knights Templar within academia, thus leading to the emergence of new and more accurate perspectives on the topic [10]. With this in mind, and in an attempt to debunk fictive interpretations of history and challenge the appropriation and distortion of the Templars’ legacy for the political weaponization of the past [14], the aforementioned platform solely integrates scientific-based contents including, for the most part, the new insights that have been shared by reputed scholars over the last forty years. While doing so, it refrains from using academic jargon in order to be perceptible and appealing to the general public, yet without leading to a wikipediation of knowledge.

Moreover, this also provides the opportunity to go beyond merely belligerent or simplistic depictions of Templar military history and give visitors a more complex picture of the world the Templars inhabited. The rich history of the order and the tangible and intangible heritage these cities inherited goes beyond the clichéd image of an all-male “elite fighting force in Europe” [7]. For instance, cooperation with Muslim forces often proved to be preferable to combat, social relations between members of the order were as complex as any human relation [11] and specific dietary habits were followed [9]. All facts that need to be shared more broadly and that meet the current need for historical-military tourism products to go beyond battle recreations and technically-driven exhibitions, which, although valuable and relevant, are only a fraction of the creative potential that this segment can provide.

The active construction of narratives and storytelling can be useful tools to achieve this potentiation of the historical-military tourism supply, particularly in the context of this platform. Literature abounds on the effects the creation of narratives has on the quality of tourism products [15, 16]. The use of storytelling as a valuable tool is based on the premise that “individuals listen to and create stories in order to understand the meanings of experiences” [16]. This tendency for people to organize information in narrative structures [17] also means that the knowledge produced by academia need not be restricted to the conventions of academic communication circles, but can, if done properly, be transmitted to wider publics without major losses of nuance and historical accuracy. This can be so, as long as it is articulated through the language of narratives and storytelling. A platform as proposed in this project is well suited for this purpose, as it allows for information to be conveyed in this manner to visitors, while
simultaneously providing the tools for local agents to optimise their tourism products by taking advantage of the information and connections that are made readily available.

3.2 Methodology

This IS project began with the creation of an inventorying matrix, scientifically validated by experts in the field, aimed at collecting information regarding Templar-related resources — material, immaterial or natural heritage — that could fit a historical-military tourism framework. For the development of the IS, the Rapid Application Development methodology (RAD) [18], which relies on short and incremental development cycles through the iterations of involved activities, was applied. This methodology was chosen due to being simple and convenient regarding prototype generation but also because the team developing it is small.

Taking into account the goals of this project, a set of general characteristics was defined for the platform, namely the use of several technologies, the inclusion of a set of appealing functionalities (such as indexation and search tools), the availability of a set of services capable of developing historical-military products and activities, like routes, didactic and pedagogical contents, among others.

A website-shaped public interface, the IS aims at promoting national and international Templar heritage, encouraging education and original research in the field, such as the availability of indicators regarding the diversity, quantity and location of Templar resources through analytics. With interoperability in mind, an application programming interface (API) based on a web service is being developed so that the IS may communicate with other domestic and international platforms.

4 Discussion/Findings

4.1 Survey of Functional Requirements

As a starting point, a survey of functional requirements was conducted. Meaning those requirements that express the expected functionalities or services that the system produces (input/output) as well as the non-functional requirements that reveal the expected quality, performance, safety, ease of use (usability), efficacy and efficiency. For the definition of heritage metadata and of their organization typologies, the aforementioned matrix was used.

The general software functionalities were also identified, namely user authentication, search, consultation, editing of the listed heritage assets, as well as incremental levels of user permission requirements like typologies of guest, professional and admin.

4.2 Analysis and Design

In order to comply with the requirement analysis, a data structure study aimed at creating the IS database model was conducted. With that in mind, the relevant entities and attributes for the system were identified, namely entities, resources, multimedia, typologies, sub-typologies, civil parishes, municipalities, district, country and user.
Subsequently, the study of relations between entities and their multiplicity degree was conducted.

Figure 1 represents the entity relation (ER) model at the core of the system.

4.3 Prototype Development

Following the analysis and outlining phase, the IS prototype was developed, being supported by development in both layers involved in Web architecture, which integrate and interact among themselves: server-side and client-side (browser).

The technologies chosen for the system’s development, rely fundamentally on a server-side perspective. This is because, on the client-server perspective, the choices are limited to web language standards, such as HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and their extensions, Cascade Style Sheets (CSS) and ECMAScript, commonly known as Javascript (JS).

The operating software of the server is responsible for receiving and responding to browser HTTP requests. For the development of the server-side component, a LAMP (Linux, Apache, Mysql and PHP) open code type solution was adopted, both for its popularity and usability. The IS was developed using PHP programming language and SGBD Mysql for data persistency, since the Linux operating system and the Web Apache server constitute the ecosystem where the app developed in PHP is executed.

PHP language has the important role of answering HTTP’s requests (input/output) placed by the browser, of providing access/communication any time the SGBD finds it necessary and of managing and identifying each user’s sessions. Figure 2 displays the

Fig. 1. Information system’s entity relation (ER) model
IS’s home page, where general information regarding the project, searches, datasheet, last uploaded heritage goods as well as a private information area, available through authentication, can be accessed.

Identification functionalities will allow user and user privileges identification in the platform by redirecting them to their respective areas. Users with a professional account will be able to introduce/edit heritage assets entries, through an interactive form that automatically adapts to the entry of information in accordance to selected typologies and sub-typologies.

The admin permission level allows users to access an admin task panel and, consequently, manage the whole website. The output of the registers of heritage assets is made by using JSON format, which favours the import of data by apps developed by other entities.

### 4.4 Verification, Validation and Testing

Following the development phase, the software entered an initial testing phase to verify if it complied with the specifications and to identify potential malfunctions. This phase is crucial for the system’s validation and includes several test levels (unitary, integration, system and acceptance) and diverse kinds of tests (functional, structural, usability, performance, safety, load bearing and regression).

The tests results bring forth new interactions in the cycle of development which are vital to improve and refine the IS so that it can be made available to users.
4.5 Information System Management

The platform is being designed to be updated by the entities that oversee the resources themselves. The participation of these entities will be under a logic of “reciprocity” (the more content is updated, the more publicity and more prominence it will get). The program will be underpinned by an agile methodology, so that it can be improved and optimized during this process. To solve issues that may emerge in the collection of information and validation of content, this model will resort to a system of user certification, through training of the different national entities, based on the sustainability of information management as shown in Fig. 3.

![Diagram](image_url)

Fig. 3. Information system management

5 Conclusion

Overall, this IS presents itself as something similar to an open access technological intervention in heritage management. Moreover, it is also the result of the TREF’s call for academic participation in setting up the European Templar’s Route. This, in itself, is already a step up from many existing platforms that are either stagnated due to funding suspension or limited in terms of what the users can accomplish through them.

This platform is still a work in progress and lacks thorough testing. Nevertheless, it should be up and running in 2021 as the outcome of an applied research project in the service of the community. By reason of this idea having unfolded in a pre-COVID-19 period, it became clear that some adjustments had to be made in order to adapt to an emerging new virtual culture reality. With that in mind, the relevance of this IS as a tourism activation and promotion mechanism is even more significant inasmuch as it induces tourist engagement both at a distance or by triggering visits to a specific site. At the same time, the fact that, once fully operational, the management of the IS’s contents is to be handed to and handled by local agents and local governments, makes for its sustainability in the long run. Thus, putting aside the risk of it becoming stagnant. Moreover, the required cooperation with academia regarding content validation, stresses its purpose as a local-identity fostering device as it allows for the replacement...
of mainstream narratives by more updated and accurate versions of history which will, inevitably, be more in touch with the local culture. Despite having been created with Templar heritage in mind, this prototype is versatile to the point that it can be adopted or replicated by other regions with different kinds of heritage on offer.

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