
Rosetta

Nawaz, Nudrat. (2026); 'Accessibility and Interpretation at a Roman Archaeological Site: The Case of Conímbriga (Portugal).'

Rosetta 31: 1–26

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25500/rosetta.bham.00000050>

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Accessibility and Interpretation at a Roman Archaeological Site: The Case of Conímbriga (Portugal)

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Abstract

Accessibility has developed as a major concern in the management and interpretation of archaeological sites, especially those with challenging topography and multiple historical strata. Roman archaeological sites, while important for public engagement with the ancient world, frequently present considerable physical, sensory, and cognitive hurdles that prevent fair access to cultural property. This article explores the issues presented at Conímbriga, a significant Roman site in Portugal. The site's palimpsestic nature and uneven geography continue to hinder inclusive visitation.

This study examines how visitor experience and knowledge are shaped by existing forms of access and interpretation at the Monographic Museum of Conímbriga based on field observations. The paper employs a multidisciplinary framework that combines archaeological interpretation, heritage management, and accessibility theory to investigate the relationship between physical access, cognitive comprehension, and archaeological integrity. Cognitive accessibility is emphasised, with a focus on how complex historical narratives and incomplete material remains can exclude visitors who lack specific interpretative techniques.

The study contextualises Conímbriga within broader accessibility and inclusive heritage discussions, highlighting that accessibility is more than just a technological or architectural challenge, but also an archaeological and ethical issue. Conímbriga's difficulties are contextualised through comparisons to other archaeological sites, highlighting comparable restrictions and opportunities. The paper contends that balanced, critically informed accessibility accommodations can increase involvement while preserving the authenticity and relevance of archaeological remains. Finally, this essay adds to the continuing discussion about inclusive heritage practices by

emphasising accessibility as an essential component of archaeological interpretation and site management.

Keywords: Roman archaeology; accessibility; heritage interpretation; archaeological sites; Conímbriga

Introduction

Archaeological sites are one of the principal media through which the public encounters and engages with the past. They provide spatial, material, and environmental contexts that differ fundamentally from exhibitions or textual narratives. These sites provide embodied heritage experiences based on physical remnants and environments changed by human activities across time. Despite this importance, access to archaeological sites remains inconsistent and often exclusionary. Limitations are shaped by physical restrictions, sensory limitations, and interpretive practices that favour specific forms of engagement. Accessibility is becoming recognised as a major topic in contemporary legacy discourse; yet it is still too often viewed as a technical or infrastructural issue rather than an inherent component of interpretation and ethical duty.¹

Accessibility issues at Roman archaeological sites are particularly challenging. This is due to their extensive open-air layouts and the preservation of complex architectural features such as streets, mosaics, and multi-room structures. Their maintenance depends on the conservation of fragile remains, uneven surfaces, and stratified deposits, all of which limit physical intervention and visitor movement. At the same time, Roman sites are usually characterised by incomplete buildings whose original uses and meanings are not immediately apparent to non-specialist audiences. Interpretation often relies on visual dominance and written explanation. It frequently assumes prior knowledge of archaeological methods and historical frameworks. As a result, visitors may face difficulties not just navigating these locations physically but also comprehending their

¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2005: Article 2; Mastrogioseppe, Span and Bortolotti 2021; Salvà Cantarellas 2023.

cultural and historical value. Accessibility in this context must be viewed as a multifaceted concept that includes physical access, sensory engagement, and cognitive comprehension.²

Conímbriga is a significant Roman archaeological site in Portugal which presents overlapping problems. The site, near Coimbra, exhibits a complicated chronology of habitation spanning the Iron Age to Late Antiquity. Its exposed remnants include home structures, public areas, and large mosaic pavements across uneven terrain created by ancient construction and later excavation.³ Narrow circulation pathways, elevation changes, and the exposure of intact Roman surfaces present significant challenges for visitors with limited mobility. Simultaneously, the fragmentary nature of many structures makes interpretation difficult for people inexperienced with Roman urbanism or archaeological stratigraphy. Conímbriga's archaeological value is generally recognised and its long-term management and public participation focus on ensuring inclusive access.⁴ This paper suggests some ways in which this may most effectively be achieved in future management practices.

Accessibility at Conímbriga is viewed as an archaeological and interpretive challenge, rather than merely an infrastructural one. This article explores the impact of spatial organisation, conservation priorities, and interpretation strategy on visitor experience at the Monographic Museum of Conímbriga, which is located within the archaeological site itself. Cognitive accessibility is defined as visitors' ability to grasp, contextualize, and engage meaningfully with archaeological remains. Cognitive hurdles are especially evident at multilayered sites, where different stages of occupation disrupt linear narratives and necessitate high levels of visual literacy and abstract spatial reasoning from the public. Without clearly stated interpretive frameworks, such complexity risks favouring specialist knowledge and marginalising broader audiences.⁵

² International Council on Monuments and Sites 2008: Principles 1–3.

³ Alarcão and Étienne 1977; Hipólito Correia and Alarcão 2008; Hipólito Correia 2017; Hipólito Correia 2024.

⁴ International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: Principle 'Encourage Public Awareness'.

⁵ Pedersen 2002: 69–70.

International heritage frameworks increasingly highlight site managers' responsibilities to ensure inclusive access while protecting cultural significance. Heritage interpretation is acknowledged as a critical method for increasing access.⁶ Interpretation is more than just providing information; it is also about communicating meaning, context, and relevance in ways that varied audiences can understand. In this sense, accessibility goes beyond physical admission, and while broader structural barriers such as economic or social access may also shape participation, the focus here remains on the readability of archaeological narratives and visitors' ability to create meaningful connections with the past.⁷

This article argues that accessibility should be a key aspect of archaeological practice by situating Conímbriga within broader discussions. Inclusive access does not necessitate the loss of authenticity or excessive change to the archaeological fabric. Instead, it necessitates a critical rethinking of how archaeological knowledge is organised, presented, and communicated in situ. This study adds to ongoing discussions about how Roman archaeological sites can balance preservation with inclusivity, ensuring that access to heritage includes not only physical movement through space but also understanding, interpretation, and participation.

Conímbriga as an Archaeological and Heritage Context

Conímbriga, in central Portugal, is a well-studied Roman urban site in the Iberian Peninsula.⁸ It exemplifies the transformation of archaeological remains into public assets through its long history of excavation, the partial exposure and presentation of the urban fabric, and the deliberate integration of the site with the Monographic Museum of Conímbriga and associated interpretive infrastructure. Archaeologically, the site is

⁶ International Council on Monuments and Sites 2008: Principles 1, 3, 5–6; Moscardo 1996; Van der Linde et al. 2018; Salvà Cantarellas 2023.

⁷ United Nations 2006: Article 30.

⁸ Hipólito Correia & Alarcão 2008; Ruivo & Hipólito Correia 2017; Buraca et al. 2025; Meyer et al. 2026.

notable for its clear urban development sequence, which includes an indigenous settlement phase, Augustan and later imperial monumentalisation, and late antique contraction, as well as the exceptional preservation of domestic architecture, mosaic pavements, hydraulic infrastructure, and defensive works. Conímbriga, as it is known today, has been shaped by a long history of excavation, conservation, and public presentation.⁹ This includes prolonged fieldwork, partial exposure of the urban layout, and intentional integration of archaeological remains with an on-site museum and interpretation infrastructure. This combined model has structured how the site has been conserved, studied, and presented to the public since the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰

Conímbriga is not fully excavated, so visitors do not experience the site as a complete urban organism. Excavations have been conducted since the late nineteenth century, and Conímbriga has been accessible to the public since the early twentieth century. Recent archaeological research confirms that only a portion of the settlement has been excavated, with the exposed remains representing a limited percentage of the total urban footprint.¹¹ This partial exposure impacts both archaeological research and heritage presentation and necessitates the construction of selective narratives based on a subset of material evidence available for display.¹² Conímbriga's archaeological value and limited exposure highlight its importance in rebuilding Roman settlements using various methods, including traditional plans, phasing models, and digital approaches. Interpretation of the site therefore requires mediating between what is materially present, what remains physically unexcavated but extant, and what is archaeologically unknown or no longer recoverable.

Archaeologically, Conímbriga's urban life is typically reconstructed as a series of major construction and reconfiguration episodes. For example, the forum was substantially

⁹ Alarcão & Étienne 1977; Alarcão 2006; Hipólito Correia & Ruivo 2012–2013; Ruivo & Hipólito Correia 2017

¹⁰ Hipólito Correia et al. 2016: 123.

¹¹ Alarcão and Étienne 1977; Hipólito Correia et al. 2016; Meyer et al. 2026.

¹² Ferreira 2014: 145; Pranskūnienė & Zabulionienė 2023; Meyer et al. 2026; Smith 2006; Tilden 1977; Moscardo 1996.

reorganised from its early imperial (Augustan) phase to later monumental phases, reflecting shifts in urban planning and civic function. The civic center, specifically the forum complex, is very important in this sense. A recent synthetic scholarship suggests a developmental pattern beginning with the Augustan period, followed by significant remodeling throughout the Claudian-Neronian era, and culminated in large Flavian interventions that transformed the civic core.¹³ Understanding the phasing of Conímbriga is crucial for heritage interpretation, since it highlights changes over time rather than presenting it as a static settlement. This technique allows for the communication of changing political economics, architectural forms, and civic identities, reinforcing Rome's dynamic urban landscape.

Domestic architecture constitutes a key archaeological resource at Conímbriga, where the extensively documented and diverse house stock, ranging from large elite domus with mosaics and water features to smaller urban dwellings. This diversity permits detailed analysis of social differentiation, craft organisation, and patterns of everyday life within a Roman provincial town.¹⁴ The excavated portion of the residential quarter has been used to estimate population size. However, this study emphasises that such a study exhibits a transparent methodological approach, with interpretation based on measurable material evidence rather than speculative reconstruction.¹⁵ The site at Conímbriga serves as both a visually appealing collection of archaeological remains and an academic resource for comparison and debate.

Conímbriga's historic identity is inextricably linked to its museum history. The site's on-site musealisation, understood here as the process of transforming archaeological remains into curated, interpreted, and publicly accessible heritage within a museum framework, is an institutional reaction to a common archaeological quandary: extensive exposed remains and massive artefact assemblages that cannot be properly shown in situ without increasing conservation concerns or overpowering interpretation. In 1962, the

¹³ de Alarcão et al. 2017: 131–133.

¹⁴ de Alarcão 2010; Hipólito Correia 2013; Rodrigues et al. 2016.

¹⁵ Hipólito Correia 2018: 53–54.

Museu Monográfico de Conímbriga merged archaeological ruins and museum infrastructure into a single historic landscape. This paradigm allowed for the centralisation of conservation, research, administration of collections, and public interpretation, all while determining how visitors interact with and comprehend the site.¹⁶ Historically, interpretative access at Conímbriga has focused on the relationship between excavated remains and managed material culture, rather than the ruins in isolation.

Conímbriga highlights the challenges faced by high-traffic archaeological sites, such as tourist pressures, long-term conservation needs, and limited museum space and infrastructure. International heritage guideline frameworks emphasise that, while public access is a desirable and ethically sound goal, it must be carefully organised to prevent jeopardizing archaeological significance and material integrity. For example, at Pompeii, heavy visitor traffic has contributed to surface wear and visitor-caused damage to fragile remains, while at Machu Picchu, sustained tourism pressure has raised ongoing concerns regarding site stability and conservation capacity.¹⁷ The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) International Cultural Tourism Charter explicitly warns that poorly managed tourism can endanger both the physical condition of heritage sites and the quality of the visitor experience, and it advocates management strategies that define acceptable change limits and address visitor impacts systematically.¹⁸ Within this perspective, accessibility measures are best understood as fundamental components of visitor management and conservation planning, rather than as peripheral service offerings.

Similarly, the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites views interpretation as an integral part of conservation, emphasising that interpretive programs should be based on reliable evidence, transparent about values and interpretive choices, and integrated into long-term site management strategies rather

¹⁶ Machado Neto 2021: 46–49.

¹⁷ Wallace 2013; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2023.

¹⁸ International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: 1–3.

than being driven solely by attendance metrics.¹⁹ Conímbriga's legible archaeological remains, including streets, household areas, mosaics, and bath complexes, encourage interpretation grounded in visible and well-preserved structures, which can privilege certain phases, functions, or elite contexts while obscuring less visible or unexcavated aspects of the site, thereby lending themselves to simplified or static narratives. A charter-informed interpretative method offers a framework for expressing archaeological complexity while being clear and accessible to a wide audience.

Conímbriga's legacy is relevant to global discussions about sustainable tourism and managing culturally significant sites. Pedersen's UNESCO manual for World Heritage Site managers lays out practical planning principles based on controlled visitation, integrated management processes, and collaboration with local communities and tourism stakeholders to ensure that public access supports, rather than undermines, long-term conservation goals.²⁰ This framework is applicable to sites not included on the UNESCO World Heritage List, such as Conímbriga, where visitor infrastructure, interpretive pathways, and cognitive and sensory supports need to align with the material constraints and institutional realities of an actively managed archaeological landscape.

Accessibility as an Archaeological and Interpretive Framework

Accessibility in archaeology is more than an 'add-on' to heritage presentation. It is a framework that shapes who heritage is for, how information is communicated, and what kinds of bodies and minds are implicitly considered 'normal.' At Conímbriga, this is evident in the tone and structure of site panels and museum displays which prioritise architectural description and historical function in technical language, often assuming prior knowledge and privileging visually oriented interpretation. This shapes what information is presented and how it is perceived by different audiences. The term 'accessible heritage' refers to the junction of ethics (rights, equity, and dignity), conservation (change restrictions), and interpretation. Accessibility is especially important for archaeological sites because the

¹⁹ International Council on Monuments and Sites 2008: 1–2, 6.

²⁰ Pedersen 2002: 4–5.

interpretive burden is unusually high: visitors are expected to understand incomplete architecture, partial excavation, specialist chronologies, and complex conservation constraints in open-air settings where fatigue, heat, glare, uneven surfaces, crowding, and sensory overload can quickly turn learning into exclusion.²¹ The ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter explicitly defines access as physical, intellectual, and/or emotive, and it connects access to a duty of respect for heritage values and host communities.

This analytical approach to accessibility describes it as a continuum of facets including physical, sensory, cognitive, and emotional/intellectual access, rather than a single technological criterion. Access ‘barriers’ at archaeological sites include more than physical obstacles such as steps and slopes. They also include dense text panels, low-contrast labelling, single-channel interpretation, unclear wayfinding, and narratives that assume prior knowledge. This is important for archaeology because it legitimizes accessibility as part of core management responsibilities, not just customer service.²²

From an interpretive standpoint, accessibility can be viewed as a means of minimizing interpretive inequality. People enter with varying literacy levels, languages, cultural references, sensory capacities, and time constraints. If interpretation is tailored to a single ‘ideal visitor’ – fluent, well educated, able-bodied, and comfortable reading long texts - the site is effectively curated as exclusive. UNESCO's visitor-management guidance frames the visitor experience across the entire ‘life-cycle’ of a visit, beginning well before arrival and continuing after departure; for accessibility, this makes pre-visit information and expectation-setting part of interpretation because visitors make decisions based on what they can understand and believe they can physically do.²³ In an archaeological context, this is not trivial: a visitor who cannot forecast route difficulty, surfaces, distances, rest locations, shade, or the availability of different interpretive formats may self-exclude before visiting the site. This dynamic extends into the on-site experience, where

²¹ International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: 1.

²² International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: 2.

²³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2022: 7.

accessibility depends on the alignment of pathways, signage, and interpretive clarity, as well as the availability of rest points and alternative formats. At the same time, while not all physical barriers can be removed in a protected archaeological landscape, the responsibility of site management lies in providing clear, anticipatory information and coherent interpretive support, allowing visitors to make informed decisions about engagement.

The broader ‘visitor journey’ lens also keeps accessibility from becoming a narrow checklist (ramps, bathrooms, handrails). Instead, accessibility is a design guideline for the entire interpretive system: arrival, orientation, movement, encounter, meaning-making, rest, exit, and post-visit learning. The ICOMOS Charter endorses this systems-thinking by acknowledging that circulation patterns may be required to avoid fabric impacts while allowing people to explore the area ‘at their own pace’.²⁴ Routes at archaeological sites serve as interpretive tools, structuring what visitors see first, what they miss, and how they mentally compose space. Accessibility entails creating routes that are not just ‘possible’ but also legible, with obvious decision points, consistent signpost logic, and interpretive clues that translate ruins into understandable stories without compressing complexity.

Another important analytical move is to consider accessibility as a multimodal interpretation. If you deliver meaning across various channels (brief text + long text; images + audio; tactile + digital; guided narrative + self-directed options), you lessen reliance on a single mode and increase engagement.²⁵ The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) *Manual on Accessible Tourism for All* expressly links accessible tourism planning to Universal Design guidelines which can be translated into heritage contexts such as design environments and information so that the greatest number of tourists can utilize them without requiring specific adaption.²⁶ Even where comprehensive ‘design for all’ is constrained by fragile archaeological fabric,

²⁴ International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: 4.

²⁵ Nanthasamroeng et al. 2026; Nowacki 2021.

²⁶ United Nations World Tourism Organization 2017: 9.

interpretation can be adapted through varied information formats, allowing accessibility to be enhanced without physically altering in situ features such as mosaic pavements or standing walls.

The National Disability Authority's *Code of Practice on Accessible Heritage Sites* is a helpful resource for understanding accessibility as an interpretive issue rather than a physical one. The Code emphasises the importance of information format and provides recommendations in a variety of accessible formats, including Plain English, Easy-to-Read, Large Print, Audio, Braille, and accessible digital formats.²⁷ This emphasis indicates that accessibility goes beyond physical modifications to heritage locations and includes the creation and transmission of interpretive material. In archaeological contexts, this approach emphasises clarity and transparency in interpretation, where core narratives are communicated through multiple formats and levels of detail, allowing visitors with different abilities, literacy levels, and sensory preferences to engage meaningfully with the site while maintaining scholarly rigor.

Accessibility serves as a framework for democratic government. The Turismo de Portugal *Accessible Destination Management Handbook* emphasises the application of Universal Design to visitor information and websites alongside capacity building and disability awareness. In archaeological contexts, this translates into understanding accessibility as an ongoing management process involving staff training, institutional coordination, maintenance, and the continuous updating of information.²⁸ The same handbook emphasises that providing enough accessible information throughout the tourist journey can be a 'quick win,' because even seemingly minor details can make a significant impact on guests planning a trip.²⁹ This is important for archaeological sites because the barriers are often predictable (distances, uneven ground, lack of shade, stairs, narrow passages) and can be mitigated through open communication and alternatives such as shorter routes, resting points, partial experiences, or different interpretive pathways.

²⁷ National Disability Authority 2010: 42.

²⁸ Turismo de Portugal 2014: 64–65.

²⁹ Turismo de Portugal 2014: 112.

The approach becomes more rigorous when accessibility is clearly linked to sustainability and change constraints. Before advocating more tourism, the ICOMOS Charter advocates setting 'limits [on] acceptable change' and examining the effects of visitor numbers on physical qualities, integrity, and environment.³⁰ In archaeological settings, this lends credence to the argument that accessibility interventions should be planned alongside conservation priorities: by using reversible measures, managing flows, and providing alternative experiences (e.g., accessible viewpoints combined with high-quality interpretation). Rather than insisting on full physical access everywhere, you can broaden participation while still protecting significance. This is not a retreat from inclusion; rather, it is a conservation-based strategy to facilitate inclusion ethically, as it avoids providing access that would harm the site's significance.

Accessibility can thus be understood as an interpretive framework based on the methodical detection of impediments to participation, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, and informational constraints. Approaches developed in the heritage management literature emphasise that such barriers should be viewed as interpretive issues rather than isolated technical shortcomings, and that their removal must be integrated into route design, interpretive media, and visitor management plans.³¹ Within archaeological contexts, this viewpoint emphasises the significance of multimodal interpretation and properly planned circulation systems that safeguard fragile material while allowing for more participation.

Equally important is treating accessibility as a continuous process rather than a one-time intervention. Heritage guidelines continually emphasise the importance of evaluation, visitor feedback, and adaptive management, acknowledging that patterns of use, tourist expectations, and interpretative needs change over time.³² Accessibility decisions are thus strong when they are based on recognized international charters and professional

³⁰ International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999: 3.

³¹ Turismo de Portugal 2014: 111; Ababneh 2021; Darcy & Dickson 2009; Flego & Tei 2025.

³² Turismo de Portugal 2014: 137–138.

guidance which give a common ethical and methodological foundation for balancing inclusion, conservation, and academic responsibility.³³ By defining accessibility as an interpretative process rather than a collection of discrete enhancements, archaeological sites can address challenges of partial visibility, evidential doubt, and site conservation while also broadening the conditions under which public knowledge is produced and shared.

Case Study: Accessibility Challenges at Conímbriga

Conímbriga's accessibility challenges are shaped by a basic tension that characterises many open-air archaeological sites. The material qualities that give the site evidential value such as uneven stratified ground, exposed masonry, fragmented paving, and long outdoor routes also create predictable barriers. These affect visitors with reduced mobility, low vision, sensory sensitivities, fatigue, or cognitive differences. These barriers do not exist in isolation. They accumulate throughout the visitor journey. They begin at arrival and intensify as visitors move from controlled areas (ticketing, museum galleries) into the ruin field, where routes are longer, surfaces more variable, and interpretive support more limited.

The first set of problems are topographical and surface related. The ruins are met as a vast horizontal landscape rather than a single structure inside. In practice, this means that small changes in level, loose gravel, irregular stone surfaces, and narrow passages frequently disrupt smooth movement and increase the risk of slipping or losing balance, particularly when visitors must choose routes that are manageable to follow, interpret, and navigate.³⁴ Even if a visitor can enter the site, the ability to go independently and safely is frequently hampered by the cumulative effect of micro-obstacles. Research on cultural involvement and disability regularly shows that barriers are frequently environmental and interactional, created when the built (or excavated) environment is not suited to varied bodies and modes of movement.³⁵ At Conímbriga, outside exposure (rain,

³³ National Disability Authority 2010: 42–43.

³⁴ English Heritage 2004: 4–6.

³⁵ World Health Organization and World Bank 2011: 93–94.

heat, glare) can impact traction and endurance, making surfaces or slopes unavailable based on season and weather.³⁶

A second difficulty concerns route logic and distance. Conímbriga's interpretive promise involves connecting residences, streets, water infrastructure, mosaics, and public architecture to create a cohesive 'city' experience. However, this spatial criterion may disqualify people unable to travel distances without rest stops, predictable hills, or well-expressed route options. In accessibility practice, 'choice' is more than a matter of visitor preference; it refers to the availability of meaningful alternatives. However, such alternatives are often constrained both by visitors' differing capacities to move through the site (e.g. limited mobility, fatigue, or balance) and by the physical and conservation conditions of archaeological landscapes, including uneven terrain, fragile surfaces, and restricted access areas. As a result, options such as short loops, step-free sequences, shaded rest points, or partial routes that communicate key narratives without requiring completion of the full circuit are not always feasible or evenly distributed across the site.³⁷ Without specified route hierarchies (e.g., short/medium/long itineraries) and consistent signage, visitors may leave early or continue into more challenging terrain, transforming heritage participation into a stamina test rather than an interpretative experience.

A third difficulty is the difference in thresholds between museums and ruins. The Museu Monográfico offers a somewhat consistent setting, with controlled floors, predictable lighting, seating options, and focused interpretation. The ruins necessitate a transition to outdoor navigation, and self-directed reading of material remains. This discontinuity can be especially challenging for visitors who require stable sensory settings (e.g., controlled sound levels, decreased brightness) or who benefit from structured interpretive pace. It also matters for visitors who require accessible restrooms, rest areas, and sheltered pause locations at regular intervals. Where support infrastructures are unevenly deployed across the site, accessibility becomes fragmented, available at first but not maintained.³⁸

³⁶ Heritage Council 2011: 6–7.

³⁷ United Nations World Tourism Organization 2013: 5–7.

³⁸ Direção-Geral do Património Cultural 2017: 7–8.

This pattern reflects a larger issue observed in cultural accessibility research: participation is influenced not just by individual accommodations, but also by the continuity of assistance throughout the visitor pathway, including arrival, orientation, engagement, rest, and exit.³⁹

The fourth set of issues is informational and cognitive accessibility. Conímbriga has a rich material heritage, but its ruins constitute uneven survival of walls and mosaics, competing visual cues, and the need to bridge gaps and uncertainties for interpretation. For many visitors, particularly those unfamiliar with Roman urbanization, the site can be intellectually challenging, necessitating continual translation from fragment to whole. The issue is not just ‘confusion,’ but unequal access to meaning. Visitors with more prior knowledge or reading stamina can extract narratives, whilst others face an impressive but opaque landscape.⁴⁰ Accessibility frameworks are progressively treating information design as a primary access issue rather than a supplementary interpretative enhancement. The problem at Conímbriga is not only the existence of panels, but also their readability, arrangement, narrative hierarchy, and availability in formats that lessen the need for prolonged standing, precise visual discrimination, or dense text processing.⁴¹

This is related to sensory accessibility, particularly for those who have impaired eyesight, light sensitivity, or neurodivergent sensory processing. Outdoor archaeological environments often produce strong contrasts between light and shadow; reflective materials such as mosaics and stone surfaces can also create visual disturbance, while the limited availability of tactile and auditory interpretation may restrict engagement for visitors who do not rely primarily on visual information. The DGPC's system-level accessibility work explicitly distinguishes accessibility in a ‘broad sense’; it prioritizes equal participation and emphasises the relevance of universal design across several dimensions. In Conímbriga, it is possible to achieve significant accessibility gains through multiple complementary interpretive channels, such as clear pre-visit information, audio

³⁹ Leahy & Ferri 2022: 69–70.

⁴⁰ Diário da República 2006.

⁴¹ Soares Neves et al. 2019: 32–33.

description, tactile/relief supports in controlled points, high-contrast and plain-language routes, and carefully staged rest/orientation nodes.

Another barrier is institutional and regulatory: legal and governance frameworks set expectations for accessibility while also acknowledging exceptions where full compliance would necessitate disproportionate intrusion in protected fabric. Portuguese accessibility law defines accessibility as essential to citizenship and participation, recognizing that barriers can be physical, sensory, intellectual, or communicational; it also establishes mechanisms and exceptions relevant to heritage contexts. Conímbriga faces the challenge of demonstrating good-faith compliance and inclusion through auditable planning, transparent communication, and prioritized interventions. However, some archaeological areas cannot be completely step-free without compromising material integrity.

The site's challenges are also socially organised. The Museu Monográfico de Conímbriga's audience research reveals that visitors with 'dificuldade de locomoção' and 'pessoas com necessidades visuais' express a need for improved conditions, including the absence of interpretive supports like audioguides and braille. This feedback is significant because it places accessibility demands as actual public expectations, rather than abstract norms. It indicates that visitors understand accessibility in both physical and informational terms, and that gaps in interpretative offering can be perceived as exclusion even when basic admission is possible.

Conímbriga's issues are part of a larger systemic trend throughout museums and historical institutions, not a failure of a single location. National and international diagnostic work on museum accessibility has consistently revealed inconsistent improvement in areas such as physical access, communication, staffing, and inclusive programming. For an archaeological site that relies on both outdoor remains and museum mediation, this broader pattern is important: accessibility is a constant institutional responsibility that necessitates training, maintenance cycles, data collection, and iterative improvement.

Comparative Perspectives from Other Archaeological Sites

Comparative examples help to understand what ‘accessibility’ looks like when viewed as an interpretive and management priority. Conímbriga is not unique in facing the combined constraints of uneven surfaces, partial visibility, conservation sensitivities, and limited visitor infrastructure. However, how these constraints are framed and translated into visitor routes, interpretive media, and risk-managed access varies across sites. The following quick comparisons are chosen because they demonstrate diverse yet adaptable techniques: (1) a formalized barrier-free route through an exceptionally complex urban ruin (Pompeii); (2) an accessibility-led itinerary that explicitly connects mobility access to archaeological sequencing and visitor flow (Ancient Athens/Acropolis slopes); (3) access planning within a landscape-exposed prehistoric site where safety and surface conditions are persistent challenges (Skara Brae); and (4) the use of management planning and stakeholder engagement to align conservation.

1. Pompeii: accessibility as route design within a topographically uneven archaeological city

Pompeii highlights a practical idea applicable to Conímbriga: in locations with discontinuous surfaces and fragile archaeological fabric, access often coincides with designated routes and circulation hierarchies. A public notice defining visitor circulation in the Archaeological Park identifies a ‘Pompeii for All’ route for visitors with mobility issues, linked to a specific entrance and a return route that respects circulation priorities and site requirements.⁴² It defines a predetermined path through key landmarks rather than promising full access to the entire site. For heritage interpretation, this approach has a clear communicative advantage: the accessible route becomes part of the interpretive offer, indicating where the site can be experienced safely and meaningfully whilst acknowledging where uneven terrain, thresholds, or conservation restrictions still limit access. The Pompeii approach argues for transparent access design, prioritising both inclusion and preservation simultaneously. Conímbriga faces similar constraints (e.g. mosaics, thresholds, gradients, weather-exposed surfaces).

⁴² Obligatory Routes in the Archaeological Park of Pompeii 2020: 3.

Accessibility initiatives at Pompeii have also made their way into broader public-facing and instructional narratives, expanding their reach beyond technical conservation and site management contexts. An educational paper created for design learning specifically mentions the ‘Pompeii for All’ route as a significant barrier-reduction pathway that increased access across the archaeological city.⁴³ The inclusion of this project in non-specialist material suggests that accessibility measures at prominent archaeological sites are increasingly serving as reference points in broader discussions about heritage stewardship. In this way, accessibility at Pompeii serves not only as a practical solution to movement limitations, but also as a manifestation of institutional principles such as inclusiveness and public accountability.

2. Ancient Athens: accessibility articulated through itinerary, facilities, and site entry conditions

An accessibility guide for Ancient Athens Uncovered presents mobility access through an organised itinerary that connects multiple archaeological sites, specifying accessible entrances, ticketing provisions, and practical conditions for movement between monuments.⁴⁴ In its overview of the Acropolis South Slope, the guide notes that wheelchair access is available with assistance via the main entrance and defines a principal route enabling visitors to encounter key remains such as the Theatre of Dionysus.⁴⁵ Rather than classifying the site as simply accessible or inaccessible, this approach frames access through clearly articulated parameters, entry points, assistance requirements, route orientation, and the sequencing of what can be meaningfully experienced. Accessibility is thus constructed as an experiential structure shaped by circulation and interpretation rather than a fixed attribute.

In contrast, at Conímbriga, accessibility is less formally structured through predefined itineraries and more dependent on the selective exposure of the archaeological remains

⁴³ Oregon Museum of Science and Industry 2018: 19.

⁴⁴ This is Athens 2021: 1.

⁴⁵ This is Athens 2021: 4.

themselves. While Athens makes access legible through planned routes and institutional guidance, Conímbriga requires visitors to navigate a partially excavated urban landscape where pathways, visibility, and interpretive sequencing are conditioned by what has been uncovered and stabilized. This comparison highlights a key distinction: accessibility in Athens is actively designed through route-making, whereas at Conímbriga it emerges more indirectly from the archaeological and conservation realities of the site.

3. Skara Brae: access planning under exposure, narrowness, and safety constraints

Skara Brae provides a different type of comparison: a well-known prehistoric settlement whose preservation, weather exposure, tiny corridors, and safety issues severely limit visitor movement. A Historic Environment Scotland advice leaflet for learning groups expressly mentions accessibility and cites potential hazards such as low thresholds, limited passages, insufficient illumination, slippery surfaces, and vulnerable edges.⁴⁶ Although brief, this text is informative because it views access and safety as inextricably linked: visitors are welcome, but the site's physical characteristics necessitate careful route control, risk communication, and realistic expectation-setting.

Visitor management literature on Skara Brae emphasises that management plans often describe how archaeological sites are maintained, how visitor needs are met, including accommodations for people with disabilities, and how interpretation is offered through guides and information boards. In this concept, accessibility is viewed as an inherent component of site management rather than a standalone intervention. Access, conservation, and interpretation are handled as interrelated factors, with long-term planning and regular evaluation forming the foundation for the practical routines that present and preserve the site throughout time.

Accessibility challenges at Conímbriga emphasise that accessibility extends beyond physical features; it should include providing visitors and group leaders with reliable

⁴⁶ Historic Environment Scotland 2023: 1.

information and decision-making support through pre-visit guidance on route difficulty, distances, surface conditions, on-site signage indicating accessible paths and rest points through interpretive materials that allow visitors to anticipate constraints and plan their visit accordingly.

4. Çatalhöyük: management planning and participation as enablers of accessible interpretation

At Çatalhöyük, management planning plays a crucial role in coordinating excavation, conservation, interpretation, and tourism. A multi-author work on ‘protecting and exhibiting’ at Çatalhöyük outlines the management plan as a comprehensive tool for conserving cultural significance, incorporating planning, design, excavation, conservation, information management, interpretation, and tourism.⁴⁷ This is essential to Conímbriga because it supports a significant methodological claim: accessibility interventions are more defensible, academically and ethically, when they are embedded within an explicit framework of principles and policies rather than justified as isolated ‘improvements.’ In other words, accessibility is a governance practice that connects evidence, conservation responsibility, and public interpretation. For Conímbriga, accessibility should be approached as part of an integrated management strategy that aligns interpretive clarity, visitor movement, and conservation priorities within a coherent institutional framework rather than a set of isolated or uncoordinated interventions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has posited accessibility as a necessary component of archaeological interpretation and asset management. Examples from Conímbriga and other archaeological sites demonstrate that accessibility for visitors is influenced by material limits, interpretive practices, and institutional decision-making. In open-air archaeological contexts, when evidence is incomplete, surfaces are uneven, and movement is inextricably linked to interpretation, accessibility directly influences who can participate in the formation of archaeological meaning and under what circumstances.

⁴⁷ Atalay et al. 2010: 11.

The case study of Conímbriga shows that accessibility difficulties are cumulative. Physical impediments such as uneven pavements, changes in level, and long walking distances combine with sensory, cognitive, and informational demands to shape uneven visitor experience. These issues are not unique failures, but rather typical of big archaeological sites. Conímbriga's combination of extensive in situ remains and a long-established on-site museum highlight the potential and limitations of accessible interventions in sensitive archaeological contexts. Conímbriga's accessibility can be seen as a continuum between museums and ruins, entry and exits, and interpretation and reality on site.

Comparative examples support this perspective. Sites like Pompeii, the Acropolis slopes in Athens, Skara Brae, and Çatalhöyük show that accessibility works best when integrated into route planning, visitor management, and interpretive design, rather than being framed as universal physical access to all regions. Accessibility is expressed in these circumstances through planned itineraries, explicit disclosure of conditions, and integration into management frameworks that balance inclusion with conservation obligations. These approaches highlight a common principle: accessibility does not necessitate the eradication of archaeological complexity or risk, but it does necessitate transparency, choice, and acceptance of many modalities of participation.

By framing accessibility as an interpretive tool, this study expands beyond simple concerns about compliance or infrastructure. Accessibility can address evidential uncertainty, partial visibility, and material fragility. It does this by clearly communicating what is known, what remains unexcavated or inferred, and where interpretation is provisional. This broadens how public knowledge can be accessed and understood. In this way, accessibility is strongly related to key archaeological ideals such as critical engagement with evidence, openness about the boundaries of interpretation, and an ethical duty to current and future audiences.

Conímbriga demonstrates how accessibility can be viewed as an inherent part of archaeological stewardship, rather than a separate requirement. Addressing accessibility

issues at such sites necessitates ongoing institutional commitment, iterative evaluation, and a willingness to view interpretation, circulation, and conservation as interrelated practices. For managed archaeological sites, this viewpoint represents a positive shift: accessibility is about shaping fairer and more inclusive encounters with the past by addressing barriers that may lead visitors to feel that heritage spaces are ‘not for them.’

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