



Birmingham-Leiden Strategic Collaboration Fund: Memory in Antiquity

Dr Leire Olabarria & Dr Miriam Müller

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This project seeks to create a research group to explore the uses and meanings of memory in ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East. It capitalises on the broad interest in memory in the humanities and social sciences and provides a forum for researchers to reflect on the processes of remembering and forgetting, how these are identifiable in the ancient sources, and what role they play in the construction of ideas about the past. Related to contemporary experiences such as migration, this project speaks to various audiences and will translate the lessons from the past into an engaged dialogue about the future.

Leiden Workshop, March 27th-28th, 2025

Ten workshop participants from Birmingham, Leiden, the Netherlands and Egypt will engage around the concept of remembering. Iconographic representations and the construction of lived experience in ritual landscapes all provide productive case studies to illustrate approaches to this topic.

Birmingham Workshop, April 24th-25th, 2025

Ten workshop participants from Leiden, Birmingham, the UK and Egypt will focus on material and linguistic aspects of the process of forgetting. Exploring themes such as iconoclasm, *damnatio memoriae*, and how events are 'written out' of historical narratives, forgetting will be characterised as a crucial practice to understand the past and the present.

Given the background and expertise of the organizers, the initial workshops outlined will have a clear focus on Egyptological research, with the intention to act as a pilot project to test the feasibility of the group. Invited colleagues from neighbouring disciplines such as Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Ancient History, Archaeology, Art History and Middle Eastern Studies will contextualise the Egyptological cases studies. These workshops seek to establish a firm connection between both universities with a view to develop joint research and teaching activities around the theme of memory in the ancient world.

Leiden Workshop, March 27th-28th, 2025

Thursday, March 27th – Leiden University, Kamerling Onnes Building, A0.08

14.00-14.15 Introduction

14.15-15.15 Memory makers, memory breakers: The politics of cultural memory – Nour Munawar, University of Amsterdam (keynote)

15.15-16.00 Coffee break

16.15-16.30 An ongoing investment: Collective remembrance and added burials at Tomb QH25/26 at Qubbet al-Hawā' – Reuben Hutchinson-Wong, University of Birmingham

16.30-17.00 Memory, embodiment, and genealogies of place: Constructing spaces of memory at Saqqara – Leire Olabarria, University of Birmingham

17.00-18.30 Reception

Friday, March 28th – National Museum of Antiquities, Nehalenniazaal, 2nd floor

10.15-10.45 Building family histories at Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris: Migrant memories of a faraway past – Miriam Müller, Leiden University

10.45-11.15 Serabit el-Khadim as a memorial of the ancient Egyptian missions – Sherouk Shehada, Helwan University

11.15-12.00 Coffee break

12.00-13.00 Museum tour for speakers

13.00-14.00 Lunch break for speakers

14.00-14.45 Belonging to the land: Cultivation, curation, and memory – Diana Spencer, University of Birmingham

14.45-16.45 Discussion with short presentations on

Ancient Egyptian tomb-graffiti – Nico Staring, Leiden University

Royal cult in the Late Bronze Age Mesopotamian periphery: From the Lower Zab to the Upper Sea – Albert Planelles, Leiden University

Forgery, memory and resistance – Caroline Waerzeggers, Leiden University

Too close to the sun? Remembering the dead in non-monumental Palmyrene epigraphy – Nolke Tasma, Leiden University

Abstracts

Memory makers, memory breakers: The politics of cultural memory – Nour Munawar, University of Amsterdam

Cultural memory plays a pivotal role in shaping national identity and public spaces of communities, yet it is never innately given. As a social construct, cultural memory is produced, exhibited, and transmitted through a variety of tangible and intangible mediums, symbolising key moments in a nation's history—whether these memories are rooted in the past or constructed in the present. The processes of selectively remembering and forgetting cultural memory are inherently political acts, particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts, where it is often repurposed by individuals and groups. The (re-)production of cultural memory intrinsically carries nationalistic connotations as it enables a nation's past to be reimagined in contemporary settings. This lecture explores the theories and methodologies underlying the management practices of cultural memory. The talk delves into the active and passive acts of cultural memory in modern society, particularly the misappropriation of collective and individual memories in contested areas, such as the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region and Eastern Europe. Using case study-based analysis of recent conflicts in Syria, Palestine, and Ukraine, the discussion reflects on the semantics and impacts of cultural memory preservation, as well as practices of cultural erasure and commemoration. By critically engaging with contemporary acts of cultural memory, the lecture aims to offer new insights into the politics of cultural memory and its role in shaping identities in divided societies.

An ongoing investment: collective remembrance and added burials at Tomb QH25/26 at Qubbet al-Hawā' – Reuben Hutchinson-Wong, University of Birmingham

In ancient Egypt, mortuary cults connected the living, the dead, and mortuary space. However, an overlooked aspect of mortuary cult relates to the role of added burials in reinvigorating and transforming these practices. Added burials refer to burials incorporated during or after an initial interment, either of a named or unnamed person. Using QH25/26 from Qubbet al-Hawā' in southern Egypt, this paper focuses on the concept of collective remembrance. Collective remembrance is the ongoing act, where people come together as a group to acknowledge by way of action and performance those that came before, usually centred around an event. This paper suggests that this concept could be enhanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's Assemblage Theory, showing the relational ways that added burial with mortuary cult at QH25/26 came into being over time. QH25/26 has around 35 complete and partially complete burial locations inside and outside of the tomb, many associated with uninscribed false doors and, when initially excavated, offering tables. I use collective remembrance and its intersection with material and meaningful elements of the tomb to think about how the local Egyptian community

established and maintained ongoing connections to their past and place. In a sense, these practices continually invigorated and transformed the mortuary cult linked to this joint tomb, reflecting local choices and beliefs in remembering the past as a community.

Memory, embodiment, and genealogies of place: constructing spaces of memory at Saqqara – Leire Olabarria, University of Birmingham

Archaeological traces of memorial practices are often seen to offer a snapshot of one moment in time, but the dynamic nature of remembrance should not be downplayed. Iterative actions contribute to the creation of ‘genealogies of place’, through which belonging to a social group and to a symbolic space can be claimed. The chapel of Sekwesekhet in Saqqara provides an excellent case study to illustrate the continuing reworkings of memory in a particular place. Located at the Teti cemetery, this monument consists of one single and four double false-door stelae dating to the First Intermediate Period and belonging to individuals of the same family group. Offering tables were added to the cluster in the Middle Kingdom, potentially drawing connections between the chapel of Sekwesekhet and later tombs in the area. The perceived potency of this chapel is also highlighted by the deposition of a group of execration figures, indicating that it remained active and accessible for a long period. In this paper, I explore how the chapel of Sekwesekhet serves as a focal point to attract and foster practices of remembrance that maintained this place of memory active for generations.

Building family histories at Tell el-Dab’a/Avaris: Migrant memories of a faraway past – Miriam Müller, Leiden University

The site of Tell el-Dab’a in the eastern Nile Delta during the later Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (1800-1550BC) exhibits a material culture mixing different traditions from Egypt and the Near East. As one of the sites in the eastern Nile Delta that displays a so-called “Hyksos culture”, named after the foreign kings ruling over Egypt during the 15th dynasty from their capital Avaris, it shows clear traces of a migrant community establishing a new home in this peripheral area of Egypt. Various practices visible in non-elite domestic architecture such as foundation rituals, ancestral cults and foodways reflect a faraway past that link a part of the population with the area of the Levant and northern Mesopotamia. This lecture will consider different strategies of place-making as they can be traced from the archaeological record and shed light on the potential roots of this enigmatic “Hyksos culture” in Egypt.

Serabit el-Khadim as a memorial of the ancient Egyptian missions – Sherouk Shehada, Helwan University

Serabit el-Khadim with its temple of the goddess Hathor is an ancient Egyptian site, located in southwest Sinai where mining expeditions used to extract copper and

turquoise. The site is the biggest temple outside the Nile Valley and place of origin of alphabetic writing in the ancient and even modern world. Over 500 inscriptions from the Middle and New Kingdoms (1985-1069 BC) are attested from Serabit el-Khadim. They are written in hieroglyphs, cursive hieroglyphs, hieratic, hybrid, i.e., script between hieroglyphic and hieratic and proto-Sinaitic, which is considered the earliest alphabetic writing in the world. This paper aims to tackle the socialization of this crucial contact area at the border between Egypt and the Levant in the Eastern Desert landscape during the 2nd millennium BC, through tracking the lived experience of the place-maker in the Sinai in general and Serabit el-Khadim specifically. This research will examine (a) the Rod el-Air graffiti as a pathway to Serabit el-Khadim, (b) the challenge to reach the site through history (c) the dynamic power in Serabit el-Khadim to keep remembering.

Belonging to the land: Cultivation, curation, and memory – Diana Spencer, University of Birmingham

Disruption, deterioration, and threat are ever-present environmental challenges. In Rome, territorial empire brought into focus a sense of convergence between permanence on the land, its cultivation, and the challenges of maintaining an equilibrium tilted in favour of citizen landholders and farmers. Roman memory invested in agricultural identity and food security as signs of rightness and justification of expansive ideology, but at a grass-roots level the pragmatics of different kinds of memory only emerge as assertions of echoes in the cultural production that remains. This paper emerges from the beginning of a project. My aim here is to investigate whether, and in what ways, contemporary perspectives and theoretical approaches applied to ancient texts, images, and artefacts relating to Roman agricultural land and practice can deepen understanding of this unrecorded interplay between disruption, memory, and environment.

Ancient Egyptian tomb-graffiti – Nico Staring, Leiden University

Necropolis sites are amongst the prime loci for studying the meanings of memory in Ancient Egypt. Tombs (in particular those of the elite) were built to promote the biographical representation of their commissioning patrons. The elaborate iconographic programmes and texts preserved the memory of the tombs' owners and of their extended households. However, the images and texts tell us little about how the living interacted with the tombs and how the memory of their owners were actually maintained (or not). This is where ancient graffiti come to the rescue. This theme will focus on figural and textual graffiti scratched and/or painted on tomb walls as the material form of acts of remembrance.

Royal cult in the Late Bronze Age Mesopotamian periphery: From the Lower Zab to the Upper Sea – Albert Planelles, Leiden University

Today there is a large consensus on the fact that the rich documentation from ancient Nuzi (modern Yorghana Tepe, Iraq, 15th-14th centuries BC) was produced in a context of diglossia: by people who spoke Hurrian but wrote in Akkadian. A proof of this is the common appearance of Hurrian words embedded in the Akkadian texts. One such word is *šarrina*, used to refer to a group of deities whose identity is considered unclear by some scholars. Based on the interpretation of the term and on comparison with contemporary evidence from Ugarit, Emar, and Hattuša, it is possible to argue that these deities were, in fact, former kings who received cult. Although most details of this cult remain unknown, the fact that it was practiced links Nuzi to widespread Ancient Near Eastern traditions.

Forgery, memory and resistance – Caroline Waerzeggers, Leiden University

One of the most famous forgeries from ancient Mesopotamia is the Cruciform Monument of Maništušu. It is a cunning masterpiece that fooled its first (modern) editor in believing that it was an actual inscription of the 23rd century BCE Akkadian king. In reality, the monument was recarved from an old kudurru-stone in the 6th century BCE by priests of the Ebabbar temple in Sippar. They imitated the style, language and script of original Akkadian inscriptions to fake a charter documenting the privileges that their institution would have received from this ancient king more than 1,500 years earlier. In my lecture I will consider this famous forgery through the lens of cultural memory studies. First, I will argue, against *communis opinio*, that this object does not date from the reign of Nabonidus but from the early Persian period. Second, I will argue that it was part of a memorial site in the Ebabbar temple that celebrated the royal praxis of pious endowment after the Persians had suspended this tradition upon their conquest of the Babylonian kingdom. Forgery can thus be seen as an act of resistance by Sippar's temple community—recreating its past while facing up to a new and unfavorable political reality.

Too close to the sun? Remembering the dead in non-monumental Palmyrene epigraphy – Nolke Tasma, Leiden University

'This monument is close to the sun', or 'this soul is near to Šamaš'? In this short talk, an obscure commemorative formula attested on three funerary stelae at Palmyra will be presented. As this formula is only attested on funerary stelae found on what has been called a 'non-elite' cemetery, this presents an opportunity to discuss the diverse ways in which the Palmyrenes remembered their deceased. I will open the discussion on how the different interpretations of this formula can connect to lived commemorative experiences at Palmyra, in doing so extending the study of Palmyrene funerary epigraphy and ritual beyond the sphere of the city's monumental tombs.