Archives, Power and Memory

PhD seminar, fall 2020, block 2

The LIAS & LUCSoR PhD seminars sit in between the overview-type courses such as those offered by LeidenGlobal and the specialized work students do with their advisors and fellow subject specialists. They are open to PhD students from across the full breadth of the institute. Built around themes and ways of thinking that drive various research communities in the institute, they enable students from *across* these communities to benefit in terms of their development as researchers. They advance students' ability to think across different fields of inquiry, to reconsider what counts as self-evident in their own field, and to locate and position their work in the wider scholarly landscape.

The seminars consist of six weekly sessions of 90 minutes, in a read-and-discuss format (no written assignments). Students share what they take away from the course with their thesis supervisors, along the way as necessary and in a brief written report at the end: What have I learned? Can I relate this to my field and perhaps my project? How might it be useful to me more broadly, toward developing my orientation and profile as an academic? Etc.

Convenor: Dr Jonathan Valk

Jonathan Valk is a social historian of the ancient Near East whose research focuses on the construction of group identities. Jonathan combines his philological training with broad reading in the social sciences, bringing modern theoretical work to bear on ancient evidence. His publications include articles on infant loss in ancient Mesopotamia, on the Assyrian King List, and on the Assyrian practice of deportation in the Levant. He is currently working on a book that revisits the question of ethnicity and reconsiders our approach to group identities in the past. Jonathan holds a BA in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford, an MA in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Chicago, and an MPhil and PhD in the ancient world from New York University. He joined LIAS as University Lecturer in Assyriology in 2018.

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Course description

Assembling texts and storing them together results in the production of the archive. But this act requires agency. Individual human beings decide which texts to assemble, which texts to preserve and which to exclude, and which texts belong together. How are archives produced? Who makes them, and for what reasons? How are they used? Such questions prompt us to reconsider the nature of our sources, as well as their potential and their limitations—and to question the seeming self-evidence of "what's there" in any particular archive in any particular field.

From the emergence of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BCE, states, communities, and households have produced archives as powerful sites of knowledge, control, identity and memory. Our discussions will address each of the three main functions of archives (selection, preservation, access) and their interplay with power and wealth. Case studies are placed against a wide comparative and theoretical background. We will work with a flexible understanding of archives as assemblages of texts as well as objects within their archaeological context.

Session 1: What is the Archive?

We all work with evidence: with sources of all kinds, from which we select the material we need to construct the narratives we perceive or wish to advance. Such evidence can often be found in archives. But what is an archive, anyway? In this introductory session we will discuss what makes an archive; how we engage with archives; and revisit the idea of the archive as a "neutral space." We will also touch upon digitization and the archive.

> Farge, *The Allure of the Archives* (Yale, 2015).

Session 2: Seeing like a state: Administration and control

In recording human activity and preserving an ordered memory of it, archives are powerful tools of extraction, domination and prediction. In this session we will examine the concurrence between state formation, literacy, and archive-keeping in the earliest states. We will then step back to explore the implications of the nexus between archives and the state: what does the world looks like through the eyes of the state, and what is the archive's role in giving shape to the state's power of perception?

> Scott, "State Projects of Legibility and Simplification", in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven 1998), 9–84.

> Postgate, Wang, and Wilkinson, "The Evidence of Early Writing: Utilitarian or Ceremonial?," *Antiquity* 69 (1995), 459–480.

Session 3: Education, value and normativity

This session is dedicated to the creation of cultural value in and through archives. Which norms inform the production of texts and their selection into assemblages by households, communities and state institutions? Special attention will be paid to the education of scribes in institutional practice and the mediation of state and elite ideology through their record-keeping activities.

Burns, "Introduction" and "Of Notaries, Templates, and Truth", in *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC, 2010), 1–41.

Dirks, "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History", in B. K. Axel (ed.), *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham, 2002), 47–65.

Baines, "Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society", *Man* New Series 18/3 (1983), 572–599.

Trigger, "Literacy and Specialized Knowledge", in *Understanding Early Civilizations* (Cambridge 2003), 584–625.

Session 4: Selection, silence, and distortion

If archives are biased towards the most powerful and wealthy, how do they reflect the lives and experiences of socially or politically less favored groups? In this session we will look at the processes of silencing and distortion that accompany the selection of records and objects into archives. Is it at all possible to identify who and what is not recorded? Historians have negotiated the structural limitations inherent to archives in various ways, from subversive reading strategies ("against the grain") to ethnographic approaches ("along the grain").

Davis, "Introduction", in *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987), 1–6.

Stoler, "The Pulse of the Archive", in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009), 17–53.

The modern census

Session 5: Archives, community and social survival

In recent years archival research is increasingly sensitive to the community function of archives in building communities and creating social cohesion. In this session, we will ask ourselves what the "community archive" is and how it should be distinguished from conventional state-aligned archives. We will explore community archives through various contemporary examples and through the example of the Ringelblum archive, assembled in secret by Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. What does it mean for a community to construct its own archive, and how does this relate to social survival?

van Alphen, "A Monument for Future Memory: The Ringelblum Archive as a Classical Archive", *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 20 (2018), 1–16.

Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream", *Archival Science* (2009), 71–86.

Ashmore, Craggs, and Neate, "Working-with: talking and sorting in personal archives", *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012): 81–89.

Session 6: Encounters with the archive(s)

How do archives shape our own encounter with the past, as philologists and historians? And how have the expectations and conditions of our engagement changed, from the positivist's embrace of the archive as a laboratory of facts in the 19th century to present-day notions about archives and social justice? And what about the affective impact of records on those who find, see and touch them?

Cifor and Gilliland, "Affect and the Archive, Archives and their Affects", *Archival Science* 16/1 (2016), 1–6.

Jimerson, "Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice", *The American Archivist* 70 (Fall/Winter 2007): 252–281.