



Universiteit
Leiden

Monuments and Antiquity in Muslim Imaginations

Applicants

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Prof. Joanita Vroom	Archaeology
Dr. Peter Webb	Arabic Studies

How have Muslims imagined the world before Muhammad? We might expect communities identified by confessional labels such as ‘Muslim’ to prioritise their own faith when conceptualising their senses of self, and focus the horizons of their communal memory on their prophet’s generation, with less concern for what happened before. For Islam, this expectation finds some substantiation: Muslims never developed a chronological system for dating time before Muhammad, and Arabic texts refer to pre-Muhammadic time via one word – *al-Jāhiliyya*: the ‘Age of Passion’ or ‘Ignorance’ – seemingly lumping all world history before Muhammad into one solitary mass of pagan time.

But closer inspection of pre-modern Arabic writing actually reveals that narratives about *al-Jāhiliyya* were not uniformly negative, and that pre-Islamic stories form a vivid portion of Muslim communal to structure Muslim identities. The functions of *al-Jāhiliyya* need closer study to identify which specific aspects of pre-history were important to Muslims, and how communities in different parts of the Caliphate integrated local pre-Islamic history. Into these broad questions, the proposed project will research a salient aspect where we can make impactful advances by merging textual and material sources and methodologies to examine narratives alongside monuments.

Muslim civilization developed in lands with ancient historical traditions, and their cities grew around the monuments of past civilisations. Muslims thus wrote about pre-Islamic history while they physically interacted with pre-Islamic buildings, either as ruins, as sources for building material, or as former temples/churches/synagogues converted into mosques. Pre-Islam was visible and tangible in the medieval Muslim present, and analysis of how ancient monuments feature in literature, and how they were incorporated into urban landscapes offers a hitherto unexplored window into Muslim conceptions of pre-Islam.

This project will create the first comprehensive database of pre-modern Arabic literary references to pre-Islamic monuments, and pair it with a series of archaeological/architectural case studies on the presence and re-use of past edifices in medieval material culture. The integration of textual and archaeological analytical methods on the very large corpus of relevant material can now be achieved via digital searching tools to yield data which will provide specific and comprehensive indicators into classical Muslim civilisation’s conceptual and physical encounters with the past.

Research Trainee Profile

BA3, MA and ResMA students can apply to the traineeship. Research Trainees should have a demonstrable knowledge of Arabic at an advanced level (B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). They should also be familiar with the medieval history of the Middle East.

General tasks of each of the Research Trainees:

- searching for and recording references to monuments and pre-Islamic cities in pre-modern Arabic textual sources. Peter Webb will devise with the Trainees the topics, keywords, names and toponyms to search and the corpus of texts to be studied;
- the search will involve both digital and print sources, developing the Trainees awareness of resources available today, the genres of pre-modern Arabic writing, and methods to search the vast array of texts for relevant information;
- the findings will be recorded in a database, Trainees will accordingly be introduced to principles of digital humanities;
- Trainees will also prepare case studies of prominent ruined sites to compare pre-modern Arabic textual descriptions of sites with material remains: the case studies will be Alexandria, Carthage, Ctesiphon, Nineveh, Persepolis and Tarsus;
- the case studies will engage students in survey of archaeological reports and studies of Muslim architecture for references to spolia, architectural relationships with pre-Islamic monuments, and Arabic inscriptions on pre-Islamic monuments; and
- Trainees will organise the data from the case study into reports, and with the aim of preparing a conference presentation (details below); depending on the nature of the findings, an online presentation to be hosted with Peter Webb's Veni project output in 2021.

Collaboration

This project's approach is necessarily interdisciplinary as it studies textual references to ancient monuments together with archaeological and architectural study of physically extant pre-Islamic buildings. The project accordingly merges expertise in Arabic literature and historiography (Peter Webb) with the archaeology of the Middle East from the period straddling the Classical, Late Antique and early Islamic periods (Joanita Vroom). The dual-emphasis is intended to redress the traditional academic separation of textually-dominated Arabic/Islamic studies from the discipline of Middle Eastern archaeology. Efforts to integrate both disciplines have begun, but substantial work remains, and this project specifically targets a corpus of previously under-researched material where critical textual analysis leveraging theories of narratology and Memory Studies alongside material finds and reconstructions of the physical use of urban spaces will yield innovative developments to our understanding of the culture of the classical Islamic Middle East.

Leiden hosts an NWO Veni Grant "Epic Pasts: Pre-Islam through Muslim eyes" (2018-2021, PI: Peter Webb) which studies Muslim reconstruction of pre-history, and the Research Traineeship will enrich its results via integration of material cultural study. In 2021 'Epic Pasts' will convene an interdisciplinary conference in Leiden, and from this proposed Research Traineeship, we intend to involve archaeologists and architectural historians from the University of London (Corisande Fenwick) and University of Texas Austin (Stephennie Mulder) to further develop the research questions, expanding towards a collaborative book-length publication.

The case study on Tarsus will uncover literary material to assist Joanita Vroom's analysis of her ongoing fieldwork on the site. Leiden also hosts an ERC consolidator grant (Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire, PI: Petra Sijpesteijn, LIAS): the proposed project's study of the use of pre-Islamic monuments and integration of urban spaces in the early

Islamic will reveal aspects of how Muslim rule was embedded from a material/spatial perspective, and we aim to collaborate and participate in their conferences and workshops, as applicable.

Deliverables

The deliverables for this product are fourfold:

- *Database*: students will organise their findings into electronic database which will be managed as part of Peter Webb's Veni project outcomes.
- *Conference*: we shall organise a conference in 2021 on pre-Islam and *al-Jāhiliyya* in Muslim cultural production, and the Trainees will be invited to present their findings on one of the conference panels.
- *Collaboration*: to enrich dialogue between textual and material fields, the findings will enable dialogue with scholars from other institutions interested in similar questions (noted in the previous section): they will be invited to the conference and in the writing of a joint-publication in the conference proceedings volume.
- *Publication*: analysis of the findings will contribute to a chapter in a planned monograph on Muslim constructions of pre-Islam by Peter Webb; it is intended that joint-publications by the Trainees, both project proposers, and international scholars will be planned following the 2021 conference.

Planning

February = students meet with Peter Webb to devise the list of terms, keywords, names and toponyms to be searched in Arabic texts, and to select the textual corpus. The form of the database fields to be completed by the Trainees will also be devised.

February = students will meet with Joanita Vroom and Peter Webb to determine the methods for studying material evidence and format of the case studies.

Late February – June = students will conduct the surveys of Arabic texts and archaeological studies, inputting their findings in a database, with regular meetings (every 2-3 weeks) with Peter Webb to supervise progress.

March – May = Trainees meet and assist Joanita Vroom and her ResMA students during the research seminars "The Archaeology of a Byzantine City/Islamic City" at the Faculty of Archaeology where they will also receive a hands-on experience with finds of the Islamic period from the reference collection and the storage rooms of the Faculty. Trainees will also be invited to accompany the ResMA fieldtrip to the Islamic art and architecture collection at the Brussels Royal Art & History Museum (April/May).

June – August = preliminary analysis of the findings will be conducted, and Trainees will prepare the case studies (noted above) in discussion with Peter Webb and Joanita Vroom, and the basis of a paper for a conference in 2021.

Student Application

Prospective trainees should apply by email to p.a.webb@hum.leidenuniv.nl, sending a CV, a motivation letter, and a transcript of courses (including grades) in PDF format.