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# From wonderland to site of contention

## Ancient archives in the archival turn

### Applicants

| Supervisor Name          | Discipline                        |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| dr. L.E. Tacoma          | Ancient History, Dept. of History |
| prof. dr. C. Waerzeggers | Assyriology, LIAS                 |

### Project description

No part of the ancient world produced as many texts as did Graeco-Roman Egypt and (first millennium BC) Babylonia. Much of this material was kept in archives. Scholars traditionally enter these ancient archives as a kind of wonderland, where ever more ‘facts’ about daily life can be discovered. But this scholarship, albeit valuable in its own right, has missed out on an important development in (mostly) postcolonial theory, the so-called archival turn. This approach regards archives not as places where documents are stored for posterity, but assumes that strong selectivity is involved in what is preserved, and that major stakeholders like the state and property owners pursue their own agendas in doing so. Archives, then, are places where power is confirmed, contested, and negotiated.

In this project we apply Archival Turn theory to the archives of these two ancient societies, and evaluate the results in a comparative perspective.

*Subproject 1:* Ever more people in first-millennium Babylonia became ‘archivally literate’, i.e. they acquired the skills of collecting and accessing archives. As most of these archives were kept outside the public sphere, the question arises how these practices of record-keeping intersected with the interests of the state. Archival Turn theory will help us get a better understanding of these tensions.

*Subproject 2:* Graeco-Roman Egyptian archives are impressive in their organisation. In almost all settlements some sort of public archive could be found. Modern literature has occupied itself mainly with the question of archival quality. The papyri show serious problems in documentary practices, ranging from scribes who were barely literate to the unwillingness of overseers to pay for making copies of deteriorated documents. Archival Turn theory suggests that it makes sense to shift the analysis of such problems to the perspective of the stakeholders. Not everybody had the same interests in preserving documents.

### Research Trainee Profile

The Babylonian subproject invites applications from students (BA3 or (r)MA) who are keen to delve into the thousands of archival records that survive from first-millennium Babylonia. Knowledge of cuneiform is

useful but not required, for we are interested in the archival aggregate rather than in the individual text or even the individual archive. The student will be asked to draw up a catalogue and typology of Babylonian archives across the first millennium. The aim is to describe the dynamics of growing (and later, contracting) archival literacy in Babylonian society and to interpret the shifting configurations of power behind these dynamics, from the Neo-Assyrian to the Parthian period. The student will make, in cooperation with the research trainee of subproject 2, an assessment of the applicability of archival turn theory on these materials and of the potential benefits to be gained from such an approach.

The Egyptian subproject consists primarily of literature study, both of studies about the ways archives functioned in Graeco-Roman Egypt and of modern discussions of the Archival Turn. In addition the student will study a select number of cases in the papyri where problems and conflicts with archiving occurred. Like in subproject 1, the student will provide an evaluation of the way archival turn theory helps in understanding the Egyptian archival practices and compare the outcomes with that of the Babylonian case. We are seeking a BA3 or (r)MA student from Ancient History, Classics, Egyptology, or a related discipline with an interest in documentary texts, preferably with knowledge of Greek and papyrology, and/or with a strong historical interest in the way ancient societies ordered knowledge through archives and negotiated power relations. The specific tasks for the subproject will be adapted depending on the skills and the study of the applicant.

## **Collaboration**

In both cases the aim of the project is to shift the discussion on the basis of the Archival Turn. At the same time, comparing the two societies allows to understand how the application of the theory might lead to different outcomes.

Comparative studies of ancient documentary practices have sometimes been conducted, but are still thin on the ground. Due to disciplinary divisions in academia the archival cultures of Mesopotamia and Roman Egypt are normally approached through different lenses. In Assyriology, most ‘archival’ studies are concerned with the publication of archival text materials. They rarely ask the question why and how these ancient archives came into being, who had an interest in keeping and accessing them, and why archive-keeping patterns changed over time. In the case of Graeco-Roman Egypt a solid body of literature is available on the organisation of the archives, and relevant papyri have been subjected to intensive scrutiny. Theoretically, however, the Archival Turn has made little headway thus far.

At a personal level, the project combines Waerzeggers’ ongoing interest in Babylonian archival culture with Tacoma’s research in Roman political culture. Waerzeggers’ current book project traces the imprint of the Persian Empire in non-public Babylonian archives. Tacoma’s interest is in the way official documents were actively employed in politics and – whether true, manipulated, or false – were used to support claims of individuals and social groups.

## **Deliverables**

The primary aim of the project is to write a general article for a wider public. Depending on the preferred language of the students the article will be either in Dutch or in English. In the former case we aim to submit the article to *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* or some similar journal, in the latter we are considering a journal within the field of Archival or Library Studies.

In addition we are aiming to present the project in the form of a presentation at an event like *De Week van de Klassieken*.

The research trainees will also be invited to participate in two expert meetings, one organized at Leiden University on the topic of scribality (*Archival scribes in Mesopotamia*) and one on archives as secured places of deposition held in the Lorentz Centre (*Securing Data in Mesopotamia: New Technologies for Studying Secured Cuneiform Texts*) in Spring 2022.

## Planning

The project consists of seven phases, each taking four weeks. Each phase will be concluded with a meeting with the supervisors in which the project results will be discussed.

|         | Sub-Project I (Babylonia)                                  | Sub-Project II (Egypt)                         |
|---------|--|--|
| Phase 1 | Joint study of key publications on Archival Turn           |  |
| Phase 2 | Joint study of key publications ancient archival practices |  |
| Phase 3 | Create methodological framework, write draft introduction  |  |
| Phase 4 | Catalogue of Babylonian archives                           | Study of literature on Roman Egyptian archives |
| Phase 5 | Identification of key trends                               | Study of selected case studies                 |
| Phase 6 | Writing of draft sections of the article                   |  |
| Phase 7 | Joint completion of article                                |  |

## Student Application

Students can apply through a letter in English or Dutch of about 400 words, in which they outline how they aim to contribute to the project and what they hope to learn from it. It should also be clear from the letter at what stage of the study they are and when they intend to graduate. The letter should be accompanied by a resume and a certified copy of the list of grades obtained thus far in the BA (and where relevant) (r)MA. In the resume it should be clearly stated which languages (modern and ancient) the applicant knows, and at what level. No letters of recommendation should be added, but instead the name of one staff member of Leiden University should be provided (name, e-mail, telephone, function) who is willing to provide further information should the need arise. This person cannot be one of the two project leaders.

The dossier should be send as one document in PDF to both project leaders:

dr. L.E. Tacoma at [l.e.tacoma@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:l.e.tacoma@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

prof. dr. C. Waerzeggers at [c.waerzeggers@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:c.waerzeggers@hum.leidenuniv.nl)