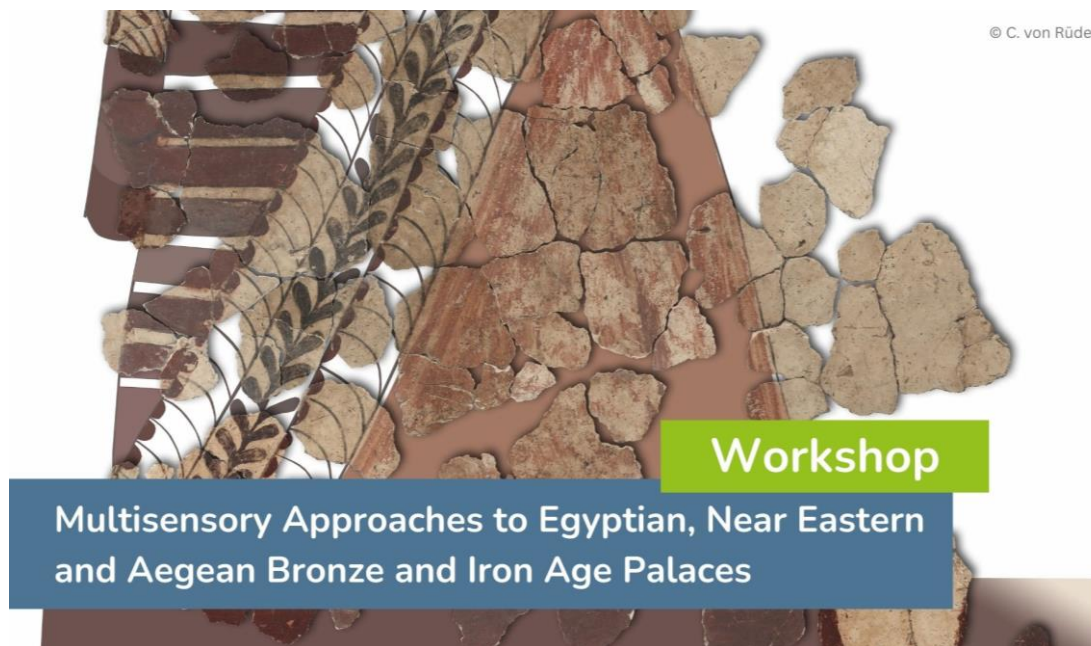


WORKSHOP

Multisensory Approaches to Egyptian, Near Eastern and Aegean Bronze and Iron Age Palaces



2–3 June 2025 | College for Social Sciences and Humanities, Essen

Multisensory archaeology focuses on sensory dimensions of archaeological sites, artifacts, and landscapes to reconstruct past human experiences. This workshop explores the potential of this approach for the study of palaces from the Bronze and Iron Age.

Multisensory archaeology is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to reconstruct and interpret past human experiences by engaging with all the senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. This methodology focuses on the sensory dimensions of archaeological sites, artifacts, and landscapes, aiming to provide a more holistic understanding of the past.

Despite its potential, the multisensory approach is underrepresented in studies of ancient Egyptian, Near Eastern, and Aegean palaces of the Bronze and Iron Ages. This two-day workshop seeks to address this gap by providing a platform for leading and emerging experts to engage in scholarly exchange about the possibilities and challenges of applying a multisensory framework in their archaeological work. Topics for exploration include, but are not limited to:

1. the role of palatial architecture in navigating and controlling movement within the palace;
2. the interplay between visible and invisible elements in palatial spaces;
3. the significance of acoustics in the palatial settings;
4. olfactory experiences and their impact within the palace context.

Organisation & Chair

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PROGRAMME

Monday, 2 June

- 8:30 Get together
- 9:00 Welcome**
Julika Griem, College for Social Sciences and Humanities, University Alliance Ruhr
- 9:15 Multisensory Approaches to Amarna Palaces**
Kate Spence, University of Cambridge (UK)
- 10:00 A Tale of Two Palaces – Deir el-Ballas and Malqata**
Peter Lacovara, The Ancient Egyptian Heritage and Archaeology Fund (USA)
- 10:45 Coffee break
- 11:00 Following in the King's Footsteps: Experiencing the Memphite Palace Complex of Merenptah**
Kevin Cahail, University of Pennsylvania Museum (USA)
- 11:45 Fear and Things: Multisensory Approach to Intimidation in New Kingdom Egyptian Palaces**
Uroš Matić, College for Social Sciences and Humanities, University Alliance Ruhr (Germany)
- 12:30 Lunch break
- 14:00 Architecture in absentia: experiencing (the Minoan) ruins with the eyes shut**
Clairy Palivou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece)
- 14:45 Polychromy in the Palatial Arts of the Aegean Bronze Age: Visual Signifier, Ideological Concept and Bizarre Colours**
Fritz Blakolmer, University of Vienna (Austria)
- 15:30 Coffee break

- 15:45 Changing perceptions. The interpretive potential of Knossian mural decoration in light of embodiment theory**
Ute Güntel-Maschek, University of Heidelberg (Germany)
- 16:30 Strangely Familiar? Reconstructing Local Perceptions of the Aegean-Style Wall Paintings in the Thutmoside Palace District of Tell el-Dab'a, Egypt**
Johannes Jungfleisch, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)
- 17:15 Being as if dead. The Funeral Banquet of Domitian**
Friedrich Balke, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)
- 19:00 Dinner**

Tuesday, 3 June

- 9:00 On Thinging Architecture: A Biography of Architectural Spaces in the Assyrian Palaces**
Davide Nadali, Sapienza University in Rome (Italy)
- 09:45 Neo-Assyrian Palace as a living entity**
Laura Battini, Collège de France (France)
- 10:30 Coffee break**
- 10:45 Multisensorial Encounters with 'Wonder'-ful Objects in Neo-Assyrian Palaces**
Allison Thomason, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (USA)
- 11:30 'Tamed' Behaviors, Heightened Senses: Experiencing the Divine in Late Assyrian Palaces**
Ludovico Portuese, University of Messina (Italy)
- 12:15 Animated Spaces: A multisensorial exploration of the relief painting in the palatial compound of Ezbet Helmi/Tell el-Dab'a**
Constance von Rüden, Ruhr University Bochum (Germany)
- 13:00 Final discussion**
- 13:30 Lunch and closing**

CONTRIBUTIONS AND SPEAKERS

Being As If Dead. The Funeral Banquet of Domitian

Friedrich Balke | Ruhr University Bochum

“The first and decisive attribute of the autocrat is his power over life and death.” In his work Elias Canetti presents one of the most influential theories of power in the 20th century, drawing on extensive anthropological and historical material. He examines human postures and how they relate to power – standing, sitting, kneeling, lying – and is particularly interested in how architectural environments – palaces, arenas, churches – contribute to the intensification of sovereign power. The ruler lives in constant fear of potential pretenders and thus spreads anxiety and terror to “survive”. In the first part of my paper, I will examine an exemplary scene, reported by the Roman historian Cassius Dio and drawn upon by Canetti: the so-called “Funeral Banquet of Domitian.” I will focus on the role played by the elaborate furnishing and decoration of a specific space, the “black cube” to which the Roman emperor delegated the intimidation of his guests, who were kept in constant expectation of having their throats cut at any moment. The multisensory horror that the scene evokes owes to an excessive display of power, expressed both visually and aurally. At the same time, the emperor’s power proves to be virtual, because it is not confined to the space and time of the banquet and haunts its victims even beyond the emperor’s presence. In the second part of my paper, I will explain Canetti’s idea of power as a phenomenon of growth or accumulation with reference to the “*rising throne* of the emperor of Byzantium”, another ritual of intimidation that took place during an ambassador’s reception.

Neo Assyrian Palace as a Living Entity

Laura Battini | Collège de France

Human enters into a relationship with the outside world through the senses. The man-building relationship is not only an animate/inanimate relationship, where inanimate is the object, i.e., the element that the subject perceives as other than itself and external. Objects are usually seen in opposition to subjects, hence something inanimate, inert matter. Today, however, we realise that the inanimate has the capacity to become subject and to exert a profound influence on the animate, what is called agency. It seems that the Assyrians understood this long before us.

In Assyria of the 1st millennium, the palace is not only an object to which the king devotes great care and which helps to magnify the king. The palace is also perceived as a living being. Architecturally speaking, the palace indeed has a life cycle: it was born, develops and dies. Excavations reveal all these phases and written documentation also speaks of the birth, development and decay of palaces. But in addition, royal, epistolary and ominal texts speak of the palace as having senses, and therefore an autonomous life. What is the meaning of this humanization?

Polychromy in the Palatial Arts of the Aegean Bronze Age: Visual Signifier, Ideological Concept and Bizarre Colours

Fritz Blakolmer | University of Vienna

In the arts of the Aegean Bronze Age, polychromy constitutes a remarkably late phenomenon that came into vogue not earlier than in the 17th century BCE. By then, in the Neopalatial period of Crete, colourful figural scenes in Minoan mural paintings replaced the traditional Kamares ornament style and became the standard in elitist artistic media throughout the end of the Aegean Bronze Age. This new style of painting seems to have been much more than merely an artistic fashion. Instead, iconography in an unlimited polychromy constituted a visual signifier of the new rulers at Knossos and the lifestyle of the palatial elites, one which spread throughout the entire “Minoanised” Aegean. A remarkable phenomenon typical of the polychromy in Aegean iconography is the use of bizarre, eccentric, unreal and weird colours for a few, but significant iconographic elements such as floral motifs and various forms of terrain, rocks and the backgrounds of nature scenes, the painted imitation of gypsum slabs in interior architecture, the skins of various animals and the depiction of architectural façades. This study aims at pointing out this artistic (and more common) behaviour in Minoan Crete and in Mycenaean Greece and comparing it with a similar synaesthetic use of colour terms in the language of the Linear B texts (in Mycenaean Greek) as well as in the poetic language of classical Greece in order to delve more deeply into its sensual character.

Following in the King's Footsteps: Experiencing the Memphite Palace Complex of Merenptah

Kevin Cahail | University of Pennsylvania Museum

Clarence Stanley Fisher excavated the palace complex of Merenptah at Memphis for the Penn Museum from 1915 to 1925, and while thousands of objects from the excavations entered the collections of the Penn Museum, Fisher never published his work at Memphis. Thankfully his original records and notes are housed in the Museum's Archives, allowing the present author to undertake a complete re-examination of his work, leading to new interpretations of the palace of Merenptah at Memphis. The current state of analysis shows that the palace was almost certainly built to support the king's coronation ceremony. Fisher's excavations around the palace contain clues overlooked by previous scholars regarding the function and layout of the wider complex, indicating that the palace cannot be seen in a vacuum, but must be understood alongside other major elements of the complex. One of these is a large chapel straddling the enclosure wall of the complex which was dedicated to aspects of the king during the coronation ceremony. The main entrance into the complex was next to this chapel, connecting both to the approach to the Memphite Ptah Temple further to the north outside the palace enclosure wall, but also leading into the palace building itself. Fisher found evidence for painted wall decoration inside the palace, alongside the numerous carved limestone architectural elements inscribed with various texts. Using the building's layout alongside these decorative elements it is possible to identify the portions of the building which were designed as loci for the performance of aspects of the

king's coronation ritual, while other more secluded areas can be identified as the king's private chambers. In this lecture we will present an overall reconstruction of the palace complex supported by 3D models and watercolour paintings, in order to begin to understand how the building appeared to visitors during the 19th Dynasty.

Changing perceptions. The interpretive potential of Knossian mural decoration in light of embodiment theory

Ute Güntel-Maschek | University of Heidelberg

One of the distinctive features of the palace at Knossos is the abundance of anthropomorphic imagery, which has been an important feature of the decorative programmes throughout the various phases of redecoration. Of particular interest in terms of perceptual experience is the contrast between the lively figures modelled in painted stucco relief and the figural scenes executed in flat painting. This invites an exploration of how visual and spatial design influenced the visual and sensory experience of the palatial environment. For example, how the tensed muscles or upright posture of life-size figures elicited embodied responses, causing viewers to feel similar muscle tension or become aware of their own posture; how the tactile qualities of relief surfaces stimulated simulation of haptic engagement; or how densely illustrated scenes intensified the feeling of being surrounded by a crowd.

Drawing on insights from neuroscience relating to embodiment and aesthetic perception, this study examines how the varying decorative systems of the palace activated distinct sensorimotor and cognitive processes in viewers. Against this background, the abandonment of the execution of scenes in painted stucco relief, which had produced comparatively engaging perceptual experiences during the Neopalatial period, in the decorative programme of the Monopalatial period, which saw the move to altogether more formal compositions executed entirely in flat painting, is remarkable. Exploring the differences between the decorative programmes opens up a new way of understanding how the renovated palace communicated the content of its visual programme not only through motif and composition, but also through the choice of a style of execution that significantly altered the perceptual and embodied experience of palatial space at the beginning of the Monopalatial period at Knossos.

Strangely Familiar? Reconstructing Local Perceptions of the Aegean-style Wall Paintings in the Thutmoside Palace District of Tell el-Dab'a, Egypt

Johannes Jungfleisch | Ruhr University Bochum

Since the remarkable discovery of thousands of Aegean-style wall painting fragments in the Thutmoside-period palace district at Tell el-Dab'a – ancient Avaris – scholarly debate has primarily focused on two key questions: who the craftspeople behind these murals were, and

why wall paintings that closely resemble Aegean examples in both technique and motif suddenly appeared within an Egyptian royal setting. While both inquiries are essential to understanding this unique corpus, the question of how these wall paintings were sensually perceived within an Egyptian cultural context has remained largely overlooked.

Acknowledging the inherent impossibility of fully accessing the individual sensory experiences of people in the past, this paper aims to explore potential approaches to reconstructing historical perception. To this end, it draws on concepts from Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which situate the emergence of human perception within the interplay between individual sensory engagement with the material world and socially learned practices of sensing. Perception is thus both individual and collective, and always shaped by a specific material environment. Consequently, it may be assumed that local beholders approached the wall paintings at Tell el-Dab'a with a distinct perceptual horizon of expectation, deeply embedded in the material world of ancient Egypt. This study, therefore, focuses on one group of Aegean-style wall paintings – the so-called architectural simulations unearthed in 'Palace G' – and evaluates them in relation to various aspects of Egyptian material culture and architectural tradition. In doing so, it seeks to identify potential sensual correspondences that may have evoked similar perceptual responses among local viewers. Through this lens, established habits of seeing may have contributed to a specific production of meaning – one that rendered the Aegean-style wall paintings not only intelligible but also appropriate within the Egyptian palatial context.

A Tale of Two Palaces - Deir el-Ballas and Malqata

Peter Lacovara | The Ancient Egyptian Heritage and Archaeology Fund

Despite their importance as the epicentre of government in ancient Egypt very few royal palaces have been excavated and most of those early on in the days of Egyptian archaeology with the results that the records of these pioneering expedition are often superficial and leave us with many questions about the design and functions of these buildings. In addition, what few studies have been published on them concentrate largely on ground and do not take into consideration the wider "experiential reality" of the structures. Egyptian palaces had a myriad of functions and an examination of two recently re-excavated examples give us a picture of the widely divergent purpose of this class of building and how landscape and decoration added to the perception of them. The earlier illustration, the North Palace at Deir el-Ballas was constructed as a campaign palace at the close of the Second Intermediate Period on the west bank of the Nile approximately 30 kilometres north of Luxor. Here both the landscape and limited decoration that survived served to underscore the bellicose intent of the architecture. The other palace, that of Amenhotep III at Malqata in Western Thebes was built to celebrate the king's jubilee celebrations in years 30, 34 and 37 had a markedly different purpose. The massive complex here served to showcase the divinity of the king and celebrate his rule. Here the landscape was not only used to emphasize these aspects, but it was even altered and manipulated to serve that purpose.

Fear and Things: Multisensory Approach to Intimidation in New Kingdom Egyptian Palaces

Uroš Matić | College for Social Sciences and Humanities, University Alliance Ruhr

This paper investigates the mechanisms of fear and intimidation in New Kingdom (NK) Egyptian palaces (ca. 1550–1070 BCE) through an interdisciplinary lens, combining textual analysis, visual studies, spatial analysis, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Ancient Egyptian literature often portrays the pharaoh as a figure of overwhelming power and dread. Sources like Amarna letters, Ramesside papyri and ostraca describe encounters with the pharaoh and highlight intimidating architectural features, such as the "window of appearance". Pharaoh's throne, dais, and footrests display violent imagery of bound prisoners, reinforcing subjugation during proskynesis. Wall and floor paintings in NK palaces adored throne rooms and access routes and included violent motifs, confronting visitors with vivid symbols of control. Thus, intimidation relied heavily on the spatial and material aspects of palaces. The paper examines how architectural layouts, decorations, furniture, and objects created an atmosphere of fear. It employs ANT, which considers humans and objects as active participants (actants*) in social interactions, to explore material culture's role in shaping intimidating experiences. This research not only clarifies fear's role in NK Egypt but also sets the stage for broader studies on intimidation in ancient palace cultures, offering fresh insights into power dynamics in antiquity.

On Thinging Architecture: A Biography of Architectural Spaces in the Assyrian Palaces

Davide Nadali | Sapienza University of Rome

This paper explores the architecture and spaces within Assyrian palaces. It analyses how these spaces serve as physical structures imbued with cultural and historical significance. The biographical approach enables the author to examine the life and evolution of these spaces over time, considering how they were used, perceived, and transformed. Furthermore, it is a method of study and analysis that emphasises the life and personal experiences of individuals within the space to understand how such experiences influence behavior, choices, and works. The biography of architectural spaces is a fascinating topic that examines how buildings and built environments influence and reflect culture, history, and the needs of society. Every architectural space has its own unique history, which may include the context in which it was designed, the construction techniques used, and the people who inhabited or used it.

The spaces and objects surrounding us are not merely physical elements; they embody stories, traditions, and meanings that can shape our experiences and perceptions. Each place possesses its own identity, often tied to the culture and history of its inhabitants. This renders architecture and design not just a matter of aesthetics but also of emotional and cultural connection. It is fascinating how a simple object or place can unveil so much about a

community and its evolution over time. Furthermore, architecture is shaped by climate, available materials, and local traditions, making each space distinct. The biography of an architectural space can also include transformations over time, such as renovations or changes in use, which mirror the evolution of society's needs and tastes.

Architecture in absentia: experiencing (the Minoan) ruins with the eyes shut

Clairy Palyvou | Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Architectural space is revealed through the embodied experience of opposing elements – mass and void, height and depth, light and shadow, narrowness and breadth, inside and out – each engaging the senses differently so as to evoke a lived sense of wholeness. Archaeologists, however, work with ruins; that is, with an entirely different category of architecture, where missing parts challenge the understanding of what is still there. The urge to fill in the -assumed- missing components and to reconstruct the whole is imperative. Yet this raises critical questions: What is truly missing, and what was never there to begin with? How do we account for the varying degrees of certainty associated with individual elements? Gestalt theory offers valuable insight into the conceptual processes at play in navigating these ambiguities. Reconstructions are rarely – and only partially – applied directly to the physical remains. Representations are produced on paper or rendered digitally within the confines of the office or the laboratory. Over time, they tend to take on a life of their own, solidifying into stereotypical images that cease to invite further questioning. For these images to relate to the actual ruins a powerful on-site agent is required: imagination. Imagination is an image making process that works with the eyes shut, so as “to dim the sharpness of vision and invite tactile fantasy” (Pallasmaa 2005). The process however has two serious deficits: it is elusive and temporal, and it is also personal and non-communicative. Ruins were once vibrant places of life; the kind of life that both archaeologists and tourists aspire to apprehend. Life, at its core, is about movement – including pause and arrest – and it is through this lens that we might begin to empathize with the occupants and transient users in their varied roles and identities. Examples from Minoan sites will illuminate some of the challenges inherent in how architecture is apprehended, both in academic discourse and on-site.

‘Tamed’ Behaviors, Heightened Senses: Experiencing the Divine in Late Assyrian Palaces

Ludovico Portuese | University of Messina

The Assyrian king was not considered divine. As the intermediary between gods and humans, he bore the title “vice-regent of Assur” (*iššak Aššur*) and served as the deity’s representative on earth by divine mandate. Despite his essential human nature, the royal palace articulated a wide variety of associations of the divine with the king in a nuanced fashion, one that incorporates architecture and accessibility, imagery and ceremonial, senses and emotions.

The aim of this contribution is to identify the features that made the royal palace feel divine and how specific rooms – primarily throne rooms – created a physical and emotional “sense” of specialness or distinction. Building on Amos Rapoport’s work that people react to environments affectively before they analyse them, this analysis considers how environmental cues affecting sight (images, size, colour, light and shade), sound (sound quality, human-made sounds, natural sounds), smell (pleasant and unpleasant smells), could spark an affective reaction that shaped visitors’ behavior. These sensorial cues probably prescribed “unwritten” rules for correct behavior within the palace, reinforcing the king’s elevated status. This contribution adopts a multisensory approach to explore late Assyrian palaces, comparing diachronically the innovations and transformations introduced by each king to construct their image – either as purely human rulers or as individuals at the border of the divine.

Multisensory approaches to Amarna Palaces

Kate Spence | University of Cambridge

Amarna provides evidence for a range of palatial structures across a single royal city. As expected, the majority of the surviving palaces are constructed of sun-dried mud brick, although the Great Palace is largely a stone structure. The palaces vary in scale and complexity, reflecting a range of settings for framing the lives of the king, his functionaries, family and servants, and his interactions with visitors to the court. Settings for the formal presentation of the king contrast with those designed for interaction with courtiers and private settings for family life. All palatial settings modified sensory experience and there is evidence that aspects of this were deliberately exploited to enhance the differentiation between the king and others. All aspects of sensory experience will be considered, but there will be a particular focus on touch.

Multisensorial Encounters with ‘Wonder’-ful Objects in Neo-Assyrian Palaces

Allison Thomason | Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Continuing the exploration of Neo-Assyrian sense-scapes, I investigate how assemblages of portable objects, working in concert with fixed monuments, transformed royal palaces and their surroundings into arenas of multi-sensory and ambient experiences. In this presentation, I focus first on one depositional context at Nimrud, the domestic wing of the Northwest Palace, which contained storage rooms, living quarters, workspaces, royal tombs, and wells. The wing housed a great variety and number of portable objects such as utensils, statues and figurines, jewellery, textiles, storage boxes and furniture made from an equally diverse set of materials including elephant ivory, metals, wood, shell, and semi-precious stones. Second, I focus on the ivory objects excavated throughout the domestic wing, and explore the wondrous work that they performed. The “Nimrud ivories” have been the subject of numerous scholarly explorations related to production, through the study of style, manufacture and artisanal practice, workshop origins, technology, and craftsmanship. Yet,

the materiality of ivory as the medium for these objects, the affordances of their the natural and human-altered characteristics, and the wonder of images carved in and with ivory have been only occasionally noticed. Following Feldman (2014) and Langin-Hooper (2023), I explore how the ivories' materiality and affordances allowed such objects, collected in mass quantities by elites, to incite wonder for an Assyrian audience. I contend that in Assyria, carved ivory objects, whether bare, incrustated or overlaid with other materials, had the ability to invoke feelings of pleasure, intrigue, and enchantment in humans who encountered them through their scale(s), tactile, and visual qualities, as much as their luxuriousness, rarity, and associations with wild (and perhaps exotic) animals and distant locales. Thus, I investigate this single area of a Neo-Assyrian palace as an aesthetically, sensorially, and cosmologically powerful "ambient space" (Papalexandrou 2021) that produced wondrous experiences for visitors and residents.

Animated Spaces: A multisensorial exploration of the relief painting in the palatial compound of Ezbet Helmi/Tell el-Dab'a

Constance von Rüden | Ruhr University Bochum

The investigation of stucco reliefs, which were predominantly discovered in palatial architecture on Crete and in the eastern Nile delta, has been primarily conducted from a visual perspective. The pre-eminence of the visual sense in these approaches is noteworthy, given that the genre almost imposes a multisensory approach due to its three-dimensional nature. The smooth and cool surfaces of the figures' prominent extremities are tempting the visitor to engage in a haptic experience with the reliefs and thus to experience a multisensory enhancement. The paper therefore tries to explore the way the people might have vividly experienced these art works within their architectural setting and how this entered their personal and collective memory.

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