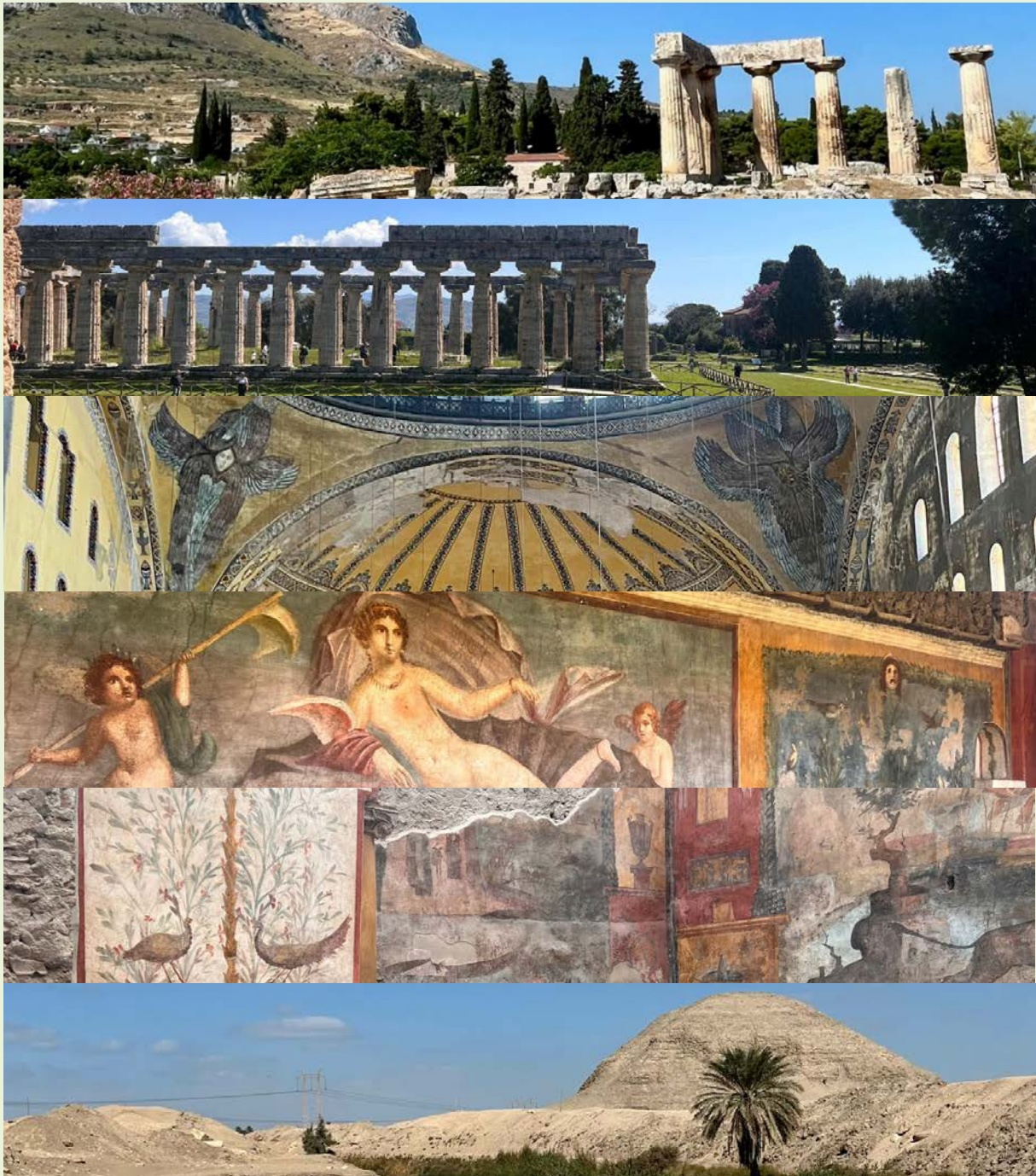


KLEOS

AMSTERDAM BULLETIN OF ANCIENT STUDIES AND ARCHAEOLOGY



Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology

ISSUE 8, 2025

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EDITORIAL**ARTICLES**

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Vera Bouterse ▶ 54-76



The eighth Kleos issue is out! As always, we are proud to present the work of starting scholars of (r)Ma and PhD-level. The papers included in the issue cover a wide range of subjects, starting with Carthaginian-Etruscan relations to discussions about memory regarding graffiti and monuments. As is our custom, you will find the papers ordered in chronological order, leaving aside disciplinary divides.

The first paper by Lucy Visser and Dirk Vervenne, entitled *The Sarcophagus of the Priest. Etruscan-Punic interaction in 4th century BCE Tarquinia*, focuses on a Carthaginian sarcophagus that was recovered in an Etruscan context. It examines how the elements from both ancient societies can be found in this sarcophagus as a result of their constant interaction. The paper states that such an artefact is an outstanding example of new practices and meanings created by this constant exchange with a result that is mutually understandable.

Following the first paper comes the one authored by Maaïke E.J.M. van Etten, *A Teenager on the Throne: Addressing Heliogabalus' Age in Cassius Dio and Herodian's Histories*. The article examines the perspective presented by two classical authors, Cassius Dio and Herodian, regarding their perspective on an adolescent emperor, Heliogabalus. The paper seeks to determine if the point of view presented by them is because of the emperor's age or due to other reasons.

As part of the Archaeology & Memory class of the Archaeology Research Master of the University of Amsterdam was initially developed the next two papers. One is entitled *Silent Voices: Aboriginal Oral Histories and Art as Decolonial Tools in Australia*, written by Lola Stamboulian. The main aim of this article is to explore how cultural manifestations of Australian Aboriginals, like art and oral history, have played a role in creating resistance to what has been said about them. The study successfully demonstrates the historical disregard to their voices and concerns, while highlighting how art and oral history challenge colonial perspectives.

Finally, the last paper of this issue, Vera Bouterse's *Canvases of Change: Protest Graffiti on Colonial Statues and WWII Memorials*. The dilemma of preserving the original or transformed hard memory, deals with the ongoing debate of what should be done

with graffiti on monuments. The paper examines the arguments of the two opposing sides by using two concepts of memory: hard and soft. The case studies illustrate the difficulty in making one of these views to prevail above the other.

As always, this issue would not have been possible without the help of our anonymous expert peer reviewers. We are extremely grateful to them for taking the time out of their busy schedules to peer review the papers and provide the authors with indispensable feedback.

As on previous years, our editorial team has gone through some changes. We have six new members: Alessio Galli, Giulia Moraghi and Nicholas Aherne are part of our Archaeology team; Kevin Hoogeveen and Anne Sieberichs have become the new Ancient History editors; Marije Derksen is the new member of the Classics team. They started at the initial stages of the editorial process of issue 8 and have demonstrated to be valuable to the team.

As usual, we hope you are looking forward to our next issue, which will be published next year and we hope you enjoy reading this issue!

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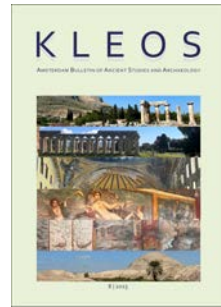
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The Sarcophagus of the Priest

Etruscan-Punic interaction in 4th century BCE

Tarquinia

Lucy Visser
Dirk Vervenne

ABSTRACT

The sarcophagus of Laris Partiuinus, better known as the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest', is a unique example of a Carthaginian sarcophagus that was imported to Tarquinia, Etruria, and adapted to the Etruscan funerary context. The sarcophagus is nearly identical to a sarcophagus found at Carthage, and the figure carved on the lid is depicted with a recognisably Carthaginian gesture and dress. At the same time, the painted mythological scenes in the Etruscan style depicted on the sarcophagus, the incorporation of funerary portraiture, as well as inscriptions in Etruscan, firmly root it in Etruscan funerary traditions.

In this paper, we analyse the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest' in the context of cultural exchange between Carthaginian and Etruscan elites, and the creation of shared meanings and practices as a result of their interaction. By examining both the Carthaginian and Etruscan elements present on the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest', this paper suggests the sarcophagus is essentially a new, mutually understandable expression of Etruscan and Carthaginian material culture, created through a process of cultural interaction. The sarcophagus is thus a unique and prominent example of the shared meanings and practices created in the context of elite Etruscan-Carthaginian exchange.

INTRODUCTION

The 'Sarcophagus of the Priest' is a unique example of a Carthaginian funerary object that was imported to Tarquinia, Etruria, and adapted to the Etruscan funerary context. The sarcophagus was found in the Monterozzi necropolis of Tarquinia in 1876 and is currently held in the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia*.¹ It can be tentatively dated to the second half of the 4th

Lucy Visser studied History and followed the Research Master Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Utrecht University, with a focus on ancient history. She concluded her studies in 2021 with the RMA thesis The Final Act of the Etruscans: Perceptions of Etruscanness in Imperial Rome. Her research focuses on reimagining the role Etruscans played on the Italian Peninsula in antiquity and later periods.

► [Profile page](#)

Dirk Vervenne studied history at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, where he concluded the master Ancient and Medieval Mediterranean Worlds with the thesis Signs of Carthage. Carthaginian self-presentation on stelae and coinage. His research focuses on the history and material culture of Carthage, with a particular interest in Carthaginian coinage. Dirk is also the co-editor of the Dutch language volume Carthago. Ooit verwoest, nooit verdwenen.

► [Profile page](#)

¹ Chiesa 2005, 323-324; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Macintosh Turfa 1986, 66-91; Mahy 2010, 53-75; Rönningberg 2017b, 93-114. *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia*, Inv. Nr. RC 9871.

century BCE.²

Three Etruscan inscriptions on the sarcophagus identify the occupant as a certain Laris Partiuus, a typical Etruscan name.³ The sarcophagus, made of white Parian marble, is carved on the lid, depicting a bearded male in Carthaginian dress, holding a *pyxis* in his left hand and raising his right hand in a sacerdotal gesture (see Figure 1).⁴ The incorporation of the *pyxis* has led some scholars to identify the figure as a priest, hence the name 'Sarcophagus of the Priest'.⁵ The sides of the sarcophagus were later decorated in the Etruscan style with mythological scenes.⁶ One long side and both short sides depict scenes of the Amazonomachy, the other long side is dedicated to the sacrifice of the Trojan prisoners of war by Achilles—motifs commonly depicted in contemporary Etruscan tombs, such as on the 'Sarcophagus of the Amazons', also from Tarquinia, as well as the François Tomb in Vulci.⁷

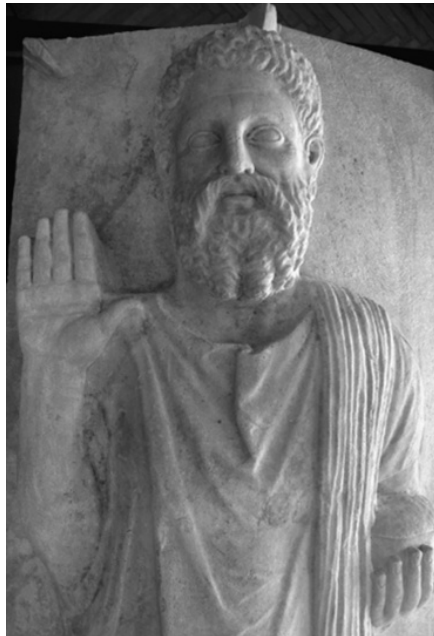


Figure 1.

Detail of the sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia (after Fentress 2013, 162).

² Chiesa 2005, 323-324; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Mahy 2010, 53-75; Meer, van der 2001, 79-100.

³ The name Laris Partiuus is inscribed three times on this sarcophagus, once on the lid and twice on the sarcophagus itself: [la]ris: partiunu / l[aris: part]iuus / laris partiuus. Garin 2010, 13; Mahy 2010, 53-75; CIE 5422.

⁴ Fentress 2013, 157-178; Maes 1989, 15-24; Rönnberg 2017a 84-105.

⁵ Crouzet 2004, 15; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Mahy 2010, 53-75.

⁶ The term 'Etruscan' is Roman in origin and was used to refer to a collection of cities in northern and central Italy that shared a language, religion and (at times) formed a military/political coalition. It is important to note that the Etruscans do not constitute a homogenous group, but were competing states that shared cultural practices. In this article, we will refer to the Etruscans when applicable to (the majority of) the cultural group. For more on this, see Becker 2013. As the sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus was found in Tarquinia, we will refer to this city specifically if applicable.

⁷ Blanck 1982, 11-28; Bocci 1960, 109-125; Krauskopf 2006, 66-89; 76; Meer, van der 2001, 79-100; 91; Steuernagel 1998, 20.

The sarcophagus was found in a tomb chamber containing one cinerary urn and fourteen sarcophagi, of which two were of white Parian marble.⁸ Inscriptions found within the tomb identified it as a family tomb, belonging to the Partunu family.⁹ Because there is some variation in the spelling of the surname amongst inscriptions found in the so-called Partunu family tomb, some scholars have used 'partunus' or 'partunu', while others have opted for the more ambiguous 'part(i)unus'.¹⁰ We will use 'Partiunus' to refer to the individual occupant of the sarcophagus discussed here, since 'Partiunus' most closely fits with the inscriptions found on the sarcophagus in question, and use 'Partunu' to refer to the family tomb in which the sarcophagus was found.

In this paper, we analyse the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest' in the context of cultural exchange between Carthaginian and Etruscan elites, and the creation of shared meanings and practices as a result of their interaction. We will examine the Carthaginian elements present on the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest', followed by an analysis of the Etruscan elements. In doing so, we argue that the sarcophagus displays clear Carthaginian features that would have been recognisable as such to contemporary Etruscan viewers. At the same time, it fits closely with Etruscan funerary traditions and was intentionally further integrated into these traditions through the addition of mythological paintings rendered in a distinctly Etruscan style. The sarcophagus is thus a unique object that would have been understandable to both a Carthaginian and an Etruscan audience, and a prominent example of the shared meanings and practices created in the context of elite Etruscan-Carthaginian exchange.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION OF THE SARCOPHAGUS

Since its discovery in 1876, the sarcophagus has been intensely studied, with a historiography so extensive that it is beyond the scope of this study to present it fully.¹¹ Broadly speaking, however, two distinct historiographical traditions can be identified. The first historiographical tradition tends to focus on the Tarquinian funerary context of the sarcophagus and the painted decorations applied to the sides. This tradition is firmly situated within scholarly discourse on Etruscan art and funerary culture. As such,

8 Macintosh Turfa 1986, 66-91; Mahy 2010, 53-75. One of the white marble sarcophagi is the 'Sarcophagus of the Priest', of Laris Partiunus, discussed here. The other white marble sarcophagus belonged to a certain Velthur Partunus and is often referred to as the 'Sarcophagus of the Magnate'.

9 Cataldi 1988; Chiesa 2005, 323-324; Macintosh Turfa 1986, 66-91; Mahy 2010, 53-75.

10 Garin 2010, 13; Mahy 2010, 53-75; CIE 5422.

11 For a more extensive historiography on the sarcophagus, see: Herbig 1952; Mahy 2010; Meer, van der 2001.

the sarcophagus is often included in studies of Etruscan stone sarcophagi or studies of mythological depictions in Etruscan art.¹² The second historiographical tradition on the sarcophagus presents the sarcophagus in the context of Etruscan and Carthaginian interaction. The similarity of the sarcophagus from Tarquinia to marble sarcophagi from Carthage, first noted by P. Gauckler in 1909, makes a Carthaginian origin for the sarcophagus highly likely.¹³ As such, the sarcophagus has often been cited as evidence of interaction and exchange between Etruscans and Carthaginians in the 4th century BCE.¹⁴ For example, the sarcophagus was included in this way by J. Macintosh Turfa in 1977, who was the first to compile a list of all available evidence for Etruscan-Punic interaction.¹⁵ More recently, this position has been represented by E. Fentress, who convincingly argues that Laris Partiuus likely was an Etruscan trader at Carthage, connecting the presence of this Carthaginian object in Etruria to the international network of elite merchants of this period in the western Mediterranean.¹⁶

A synthesis of these two historiographical traditions, namely including both an analysis of the Etruscan funerary context and iconography of the sarcophagus, as well as its significance in the context of Etruscan and Carthaginian interaction, has so far been largely lacking, an important exception being the research on the sarcophagus conducted by C. Mahy.¹⁷ Mahy provides an analysis of the physical and stylistic characteristics of the sarcophagus and concludes that the sarcophagus was likely created in Carthage for Laris Partiuus and, at some point, was brought home with him to Tarquinia.¹⁸ An analysis of the cultural significance of the distinct Carthaginian and Etruscan elements on the sarcophagus, including its Carthaginian features and origin, was not present in Mahy's study.

CARTHAGINIAN FEATURES

The sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus has several elements which can be characterised as typically Carthaginian. More specifically, the gesture and the dress of the figure depicted on the lid of the sarcophagus stand out.¹⁹ The main argument for a Carthaginian

12 See, for example: Herbig 1952; Krauskopf 1974; Meer, van der 2001; Riedmann 2019; Steuernagel 1998.

13 Gauckler, 1909; Mahy 2010, 53-75.

14 Crouzet 2004; Fentress 2013; Macintosh Turfa 1977; Rönberg 2017b.

15 Macintosh Turfa 1977, 368-374.

16 Fentress 2013, 157-178.

17 Mahy 2010, 53-75.

18 Mahy 2010, 53-75.

19 Maes 1989, 15-24; Michelau 2016, 137-158; Vervenne 2021, 14-18.

origin of the sarcophagus is its strong similarity to another sarcophagus found in 1902-1903 in the necropolis of Sainte Monique, in Carthage, and that is currently held at the Louvre (see Figure 2).²⁰ Both sarcophagi depict bearded men in the Hellenistic style, wearing long tunics, and holding a *pyxis* in their left hand and raising their right hand with the palm outstretched in a gesture of supplication.²¹ Additionally, both sarcophagi are made of the same material, white Parian marble, and can be dated to the same period.²² This similarity has led scholars to conclude that the same workshop in Carthage may have made both sarcophagi.²³ There is clear agreement among scholars that a Carthaginian origin for the sarcophagus is likely.²⁴

The raised right hand of the figure depicted on the sarcophagus, with the palm facing up, is a common symbol of prayer or supplication in Carthaginian religious iconography.²⁵ This gesture is an almost ubiquitous symbol of worship in the Phoenician and Punic world, and is depicted frequently on stelae from the Carthaginian *tophet* as well as on stelae from Tyre—either naturalistically, as part of a portrait (like on these sarcophagi), or symbolically, as a disembodied right hand.²⁶ In addition, the gesture and pose of the figure depicted on the sarcophagus are distinctly different from the typically Etruscan

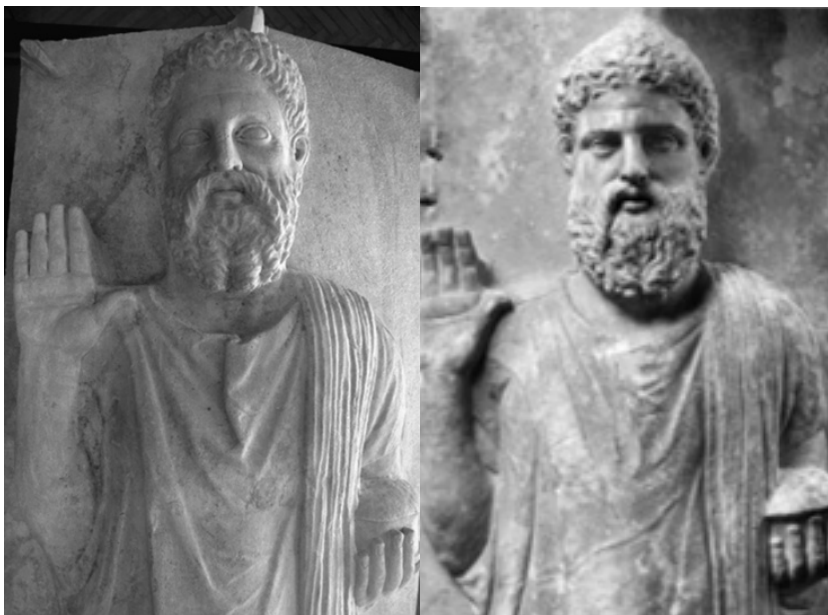


Figure 2.

On the left, a detail of the sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus, found in Tarquinia (after Fentress 2013, 162). On the right, a detail of a sarcophagus found in the Carthaginian necropolis of Sainte Monique (Musée du Louvre, photograph by T. Ollivier, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo10118508>).

²⁰ Crouzet 2004, 15; Rubio González/Martín Martín 2018, 121-134; Louvre, Inv. Nr. MND800, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo10118508>

²¹ Michelau 2016, 137-158.

²² Crouzet 2004, 15; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Rubio González/Martín Martín 2018, 121-134.

²³ Crouzet 2004, 15.

²⁴ Crouzet 2004, 15; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Mahy 2010, 53-75; Rönnerberg 2017b, 93-114.

²⁵ Michelau 2016, 137-158; Vervenne 2021, 14-18.

²⁶ Bisi 1967; Doak 2015, 115-119; Michelau 2016, 137-158; Vervenne 2021, 14-18.



Figure 3.
 The 'Sarcophagus of the Magnate' of Velthur Partunus, found in the Partunu family tomb in Tarquinia, 330-300 BCE. See also: Meer, van der, 2001 (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia, Inv. Nr. RC 9873, CIE 5423. Image: Alinari Archives, Brogi Archive, Florence.)

'banquet style', which depicts the deceased reclining as if at a symposium—compare, for example, the 'Sarcophagus of the Magnate', also found in the Partunu family tomb and from a similar time period (see Figure 3).²⁷

The figure depicted on the sarcophagus of Laris Partius wears a long tunic and earrings, which can also be characterised as typically Carthaginian. Contemporary iconographical evidence from Carthage, such as portraiture on decorated stone stelae or decorated shaving razors, suggests that this type of long, flowing tunic worn without a girdle was common in Carthage.²⁸

There are some rare mentions of Carthaginian dress by classical authors, most notably Plautus writing in the 2nd century BCE, which reinforce the image of a long tunic and earrings being typically Carthaginian.²⁹ The literary evidence must be interpreted critically, however, due to the late dating of the literary sources and the tendency of Greek and Roman authors to attribute elements or concepts from their own culture to the Carthaginian context.³⁰ However, evidence from Carthage also testifies to the popularity of earrings among both men and women. Masks and glass pendants found in Carthage, dating to the 4th and 3rd century BCE, almost universally portray faces with either pierced ears or earrings.³¹ Additionally, the large number of earrings found interred in the Carthaginian necropolises of Saint-Monique,

²⁷ Krauskopf 2006, 70-71; Meer, van der 2001, 79-100. *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Tarquinia*, 15-24.

²⁸ Maes 1989, 15-24.

²⁹ Fentress 2013, 157-178; Franko 1996, 425-452; Maes 1989, 15-24; Plautus, *Poenulus* 5.2.

³⁰ Maes 1989, 15-24.

³¹ Lancel 2012, 46-56.

Douimès, Dermech and the Byrsa further attests to their popularity.³² Therefore, it is safe to characterise these features on the sarcophagus as an example of typical Carthaginian fashion. Thus, the clothing worn by the figure depicted on the sarcophagus matches a style of clothing worn in Carthage at the time.

ETRUSCAN FEATURES

At the same time, the sarcophagus adheres to Etruscan funerary traditions. As mentioned above, the sarcophagus was interred in the Partunu family tomb.³³ Burying loved ones in sarcophagi or depositing cremated remains in cinerary urns and placing them in family tombs was a long-held Etruscan tradition, dating back to the Orientalizing period (750–650 BCE).³⁴ Traditionally, family tombs consisted of several different interconnected chambers and were often in use for several generations. The use of cinerary urns and sarcophagi, for a large part, depends on time and place. However, a larger number of cinerary urns were found in comparison to the extant number of sarcophagi.³⁵ In the Tarquinian necropolis in which the sarcophagus of Laris Partius was found, both cinerary urns and sarcophagi were used. These seem to have been in use contemporaneously, specifically in the Hellenistic period, during which time Laris Partius was entombed.³⁶ V. Zanoni states that in the section of the Monterozzi necropolis, the duality of urns and sarcophagi seems to reflect familial tradition or preference.³⁷ I. Krauskopf states: “The simultaneous use of cremation and inhumation shows that there was obviously leeway for individual preferences in Etruscan burial practices.”³⁸ This helps us make sense of the single cinerary urn found in the Partunu family tomb: while it may seem out of place at first, it seems to reflect a broader tendency in Etruscan funerary practice. Krauskopf also notes: “At different times and different places, one or the other method of burial predominates; there are, however, exceptions observable everywhere.”³⁹ The use of a sarcophagus for Laris Partius is interesting when considering Zanoni’s assertion that the biggest indicator for the choice between sarcophagi and cinerary urns was family tradition and

32 Bénichou-Safar 1982, 246-261; Delattre 1895, 17-19; Gauckler 1900, 294; Lancel 2012, 46-56.

33 Meer, van der, 2001, 79-100.

34 The earliest forms of portraiture have been found dating back to the 7th century BCE, tombs containing urns and sarcophagi have been found dating from the Orientalizing period (750-650 BCE), see: Carpino 2013, 1009-1010; Sannibale 2013, 121-122.

35 Steingraber 2016, 146-148.

36 Zanoni 2019, 86.

37 Zanoni 2019, 86.

38 Krauskopf 2006, 66-67. For a comprehensive analysis of inhumation and cremation in Tarquinia, see de la Genière 1987.

39 Krauskopf 2006, 66.

preference, as it was found alongside thirteen other sarcophagi.⁴⁰ One could therefore conclude that the choice for inhumation in a sarcophagus seems to have been in line with the preferences and traditions of the Partunu family.

Another distinct difference is in the positioning of the figure on the lid. Etruscan funerary styles, both urns and sarcophagi, present the deceased in what is called the 'banquet style'. This entails a reclining posture, often with an elbow resting on a pillow, and laying on their side (see Figure 3).⁴¹ The banquet style must be understood within the function of the tomb: a place to come and celebrate with the deceased, with the tomb as the antechamber to the underworld. Ceremonial fights, games and music were often part of these celebrations. To have a figure in such a different pose must have stood out as foreign to contemporary Etruscan visitors to the tomb.

Despite the differences in size and content (i.e., ashes or physical remains), the sarcophagi and urns have similar functions, which is evident in their decoration.⁴² Both were frequently decorated with mythological scenes, carved in relief or painted on the chest of the sarcophagus or cinerary urn, most commonly depictions of funerary processions leading to the afterlife and decorative patterns or stories from Greek mythology.⁴³ Many of the Greek myths are set in different parts of the Mediterranean, such as the story of Daedalus (Taitale), who flies as far as Sardinia, which was for a time held by the Etruscans and very much part of their sphere of influence.⁴⁴ Many of the scenes featured in Etruscan funerary art seem to have a connection to loss and death, such as those that depict the death of the brothers before the gates of Thebes in the famous "Seven against Thebes". This theme is often repeated.⁴⁵ On the sarcophagus of Laris Patriunus, a depiction of the Amazonomachy and the sacrifice of Trojan prisoners of war from the Iliad is visible (see Figure 4). This scene is most prevalent in Etruscan art on sarcophagi during the second half of the 4th century BCE.⁴⁶

Other myths, such as the journey of Odysseus across the Mediterranean, seem to fit the Etruscan idea of the journey the

⁴⁰ Zanoni 2019, 86.

⁴¹ Krauskopf 2006, 70-71.

⁴² See: Krauskopf 2006; Simon 2013; Zanoni 2019, 86. The practices change over time and vary in different geographical locations.

⁴³ Krauskopf 2006, 67-68, Krauskopf 1974, 133-137: incorporation of Greek myths in Etruscan art can be seen from the 7th century BCE onwards. These scenes incorporate the Trojan cycle, the Odyssey, as well as stories about Thebes.

⁴⁴ Simon 2013, 495-6.

⁴⁵ Krauskopf 1974; Simon 2013, 508.

⁴⁶ Riedemann 2019, 11.



Figure 4.

Detail of the sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus depicting the sacrifice of Trojan prisoners of war, Museo Archeologico Nazionale Di Tarquinia (photograph by P. Lemaire).

deceased would have to make to get to the Underworld, a scene itself visible on urns and sarcophagi.⁴⁷ In the use of these scenes, Etruscan artists often added figures representing a *daímon* in the shape of a winged figure, who could help or hinder the deceased on their journey.⁴⁸ On this sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus, the figure on the left in the dark robe and possible wings stands out, and could depict fate.⁴⁹

One of the most notable aspects of Etruscan funerary art is the portrayal of individual features of the deceased person, which sets it apart from other funerary portraiture.⁵⁰ Of the over 5000 Etruscan urns and sarcophagi found, none seem to have the same facial features. This suggests the importance of remembering the individual characteristics of the deceased in Etruscan funerary art.⁵¹ This lifelike depiction served to evoke the memory and continued presence of the deceased, both during funerary rituals and when family members visited the tomb to honour and remember them.⁵² It is interesting that this very Etruscan aspect does not seem to apply to the sarcophagus studied here. As noted, the facial features are the same as those of other Carthaginian Sarcophagi found. In this sense, the portraiture aspect seems different. This

⁴⁷ Cinerary urn H III C, in possession of the *Rijksmuseum van Oudheden* in Leiden, is an example of a cinerary urn found in Volterra, depicting Odysseus fleeing the island of the Cyclops. An example of a processional sarcophagus is the "Magistrate's Sarcophagus" (Cat. 14950, *Musei Vaticani*), of which only the bottom was found with an inscription detailing the accomplishments of the rather young man it had belonged to, and showing the deceased in a chariot, on his way to the underworld.

⁴⁸ Simon 2013, 508.

⁴⁹ Though this identification is not absolute, the fact that this is the only white figure (signifying it as female), wearing a typical helmet, an object which could be a shield, and wings, seems to point to Vanth, the most often named and seen figure in this type of imagery.

⁵⁰ Carpino 2013, 1007-1009.

⁵¹ Carpino 2013, 1009; Nielsen 2013, 181.

⁵² Carpino 2013, 1009.

may mean that it could not be understood as a portrait in the Etruscan tradition. However, as the sarcophagus was placed in the tomb, the centre for worship, it does not seem to have been enough to exclude it. It might even have been considered a representation of the characteristics of the deceased, embedded in Etruscan elements.

The *pyxis* held by the figure carved on the lid of the sarcophagus also fits Etruscan traditions of funerary portraiture on urns and sarcophagi, where men often—though not always—hold sacrificial items, such as a *phiale* or *pyxis*.⁵³

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The sarcophagus combines a variety of both Carthaginian and Etruscan elements and fits both with Carthaginian elite funerary practices as well as local Etruscan elite funerary traditions. It was created in Carthage and transported to Etruria, where the decorations on the base of the sarcophagus were added, before it was used to hold the remains of Laris Partianus and interred in the necropolis of Tarquinia.

As the sarcophagus was made in Carthage and the figure on the lid is depicted in Carthaginian style, the sarcophagus likely stood out as foreign to a contemporary Etruscan audience. The pose of the figure on the lid is distinctly different from the banquet style used in Etruria, where, during the Hellenistic period, figures were portrayed in a reclining posture, often leaning on a pillow.⁵⁴ The style and foreignness of the sarcophagus may have been seen as rich, an expensive imported luxury product, which was known and understood to be Carthaginian. The combination of the atypical lid and a more typical painted bottom, therefore, must have been an interesting sight, understood as a mingling of two different funerary traditions.

There is a long history of exchange between Carthaginians and Etruscans around the Tyrrhenian basin. The emporia of Gravisca, near Tarquinia, and Pyrgi, near Caere, played an important role in the facilitation of trade and exchange between Carthaginian and Etruscan elites.⁵⁵ Several objects attest to the familial or community ties that were established in the context of this exchange. A prominent example of this is the remarkable discovery of the multilingual Etruscan-Phoenician plates of Pyrgi in 1964, which commemorate a joint dedication of a sanctuary to Uni-Astarte on behalf of the people of Caere and the

⁵³ Women hold a more varied array of objects, ranging from fans to pomegranates. See for more descriptions: Nielsen 2013

⁵⁴ Krauskopf 2006, 70-71.

⁵⁵ Demetriou 2021, 64-104; Fentress 2013, 157-178.



Figure 5.
Gold plates with inscriptions in Etruscan and Phoenician, from Pyrgi (Santa Severa). Rome, National Etruscan Museum in Villa Giulia (after Xella/Zamora López 2019, 115).

Carthaginians (see Figure 5).⁵⁶ A 6th-century BCE ivory tessera hospitalis, a token of guest-friendship, found in the necropolis of Carthage but carrying inscriptions in Etruscan, further attests to the long history of contact between Carthaginian and Etruscan elites.⁵⁷ While the emporia of Gravisca and Pyrgi seem to have lost that function around the middle of the 5th century BCE, the sarcophagus of Laris Partianus, dated to the second half of the 4th century BCE, suggests that economic and cultural ties between Carthage and Etruscan Tarquinia persisted.⁵⁸ As an imported Carthaginian luxury funerary object, the sarcophagus of Laris Partianus is a more recent example of exchange and personal contacts between Carthaginian and Etruscan elites.

As already convincingly argued by Fentress, Laris Partianus was likely an Etruscan aristocrat who worked as a merchant and who may have lived at Carthage for a time.⁵⁹ While at Carthage, Laris would have dressed as a Carthaginian to fit in with the Carthaginian elite. At home in Etruria, his knowledge of foreign cultures and markets may have been a source of pride. An imported Carthaginian sarcophagus would have served as a permanent reminder of the wealth that Laris commanded and his affinity with the Punic city. The portrait on the sarcophagus, however, could still function as a portrait of Laris in Punic dress: the figure depicted on the lid could still be understood as a representation of the deceased, despite the difference in style compared to contemporary Etruscan funerary portraiture. The

⁵⁶ Botto 2021, 149-150; Camporeale 2015, 67-86; Vella 2014, 24-41; Xella and Zamora López 2019, 114-116.

⁵⁷ Camporeale 2015, 67-86; Russo 117.

⁵⁸ Chiesa 2005, 323-324; Fentress 2013, 157-178; Mahy 2010, 53-75; Meer, van der 2001, 79-100.

⁵⁹ Fentress 2013, 157-178.

pyxis would have been a recognisable reference to a priestly function, as the Etruscan practice in this regard was similar. The paintings added in the Etruscan style, with their depictions of mythological scenes, further embedded the sarcophagus in the Etruscan funerary traditions. The sarcophagus is thus a uniquely 'bilingual' object, that would have been recognisable by both a Carthaginian as well as an Etruscan audience.

CONCLUSION

The 'Sarcophagus of the Priest' shows an interesting mixture of styles, both Etruscan and Carthaginian, which shows that an object that was clearly foreign in origin could still be integrated and used in an Etruscan funerary context. The sarcophagus cannot be exclusively identified as Etruscan or Carthaginian, as in a way it is both: the sarcophagus is essentially a new, mutually understandable expression of Etruscan and Carthaginian material culture, created through a creative process of cultural interaction. Therefore, the sarcophagus of Laris Partiuus is a remarkable visual representation of the shared meanings and practices created in the context of Etruscan-Carthaginian elite exchange, and thus further helps us to understand both cultures and their interactions.

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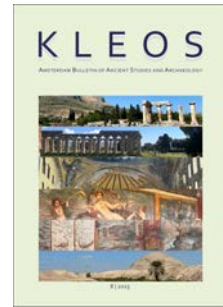
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A Teenager on the Throne: Addressing Heliogabalus' Age in Cassius Dio and Herodian's Histories

Maaïke E.J.M. van Etten

ABSTRACT

Roman emperor Heliogabalus (AD 218-222) assumed sole power at just 14 years old, making him the youngest emperor Rome had known up to that time. His reign was characterised by his eccentric behaviour and controversial religious reforms, leading to an overwhelmingly negative reputation in ancient literary sources. While considerable attention has been paid to the impact of his Syrian origins and perceived femininity on this portrayal, the role his age played remains largely underexplored.

This article examines whether Heliogabalus' age played a distinctive role in the negative assessment of his reign in Cassius Dio's *Roman History* and Herodian's *History of the Empire*. I will provide an analysis of Greek and Roman literary works from the first century BC to the second century AD, identifying recurring themes associated with adolescence. Based on these themes, a close reading of the accounts is conducted to determine whether Dio and Herodian employed these themes to characterise the young emperor. Additionally, the relevant passages are analysed in context to determine whether such traits are attributed to Heliogabalus' age or to other factors. Moreover, this analysis includes a study of the purpose behind Dio and Herodian's work. In this article, I will demonstrate that Dio minimised the significance of Heliogabalus' age, as his primary concern lay with Rome's political institutions. In contrast, Herodian emphasised the emperor's youthfulness, aligning with his broader focus on the character of emperors. Therefore, I argue that the decision to either highlight or exclude Heliogabalus' age in their accounts is shaped by the authors' overall aims in writing their histories.

INTRODUCTION

The reign of Heliogabalus (218-222), a Roman emperor who ascended to power at the age of 14, has long been the subject of fascination.¹ Heliogabalus was known for defying gender norms, at times dressing as a female sex worker and requesting to be

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called 'lady'.² Therefore, the North Hertfordshire Museum in England began using female pronouns for the emperor, suggesting that he identified as a woman.³ However, using female pronouns for Heliogabalus is not commonly accepted among scholars. Many argue that the ancient accounts about him are exaggerated and biased, with references to his femininity intended to defame him.⁴ Central to these discussions are Cassius Dio's *Roman History* and Herodian's *History of the Empire*. Their portrayals of the emperor frequently emphasised his extravagant lifestyle, perceived femininity, and religious beliefs. Current scholarship has therefore primarily focused on these themes, leaving one important aspect underexplored: his age.

In Late Antiquity, the Roman Empire saw the rise of child emperors, with boys as young as 9 months old holding imperial power. This phenomenon has received plenty of scholarly attention.⁵ There is a significant contrast between the teenage emperors of the Principate and the child emperors of Late Antiquity. Boys like Valentinianus II (375-392, aged 4) and Theodosius II (402-450, aged 9 months) were emperors in name only, fulfilling ceremonial and religious roles rather than active political ones, while a general took over the administrative and military roles.⁶ In contrast, the teenage emperors of the Principate, who were no longer children under the law, could exert direct control over the governance of the Empire.⁷ Nevertheless, the abundance of ancient literature on the challenges of youth suggests that their age elicited a response from contemporaries. However, such responses have been insufficiently explored in existing scholarship, leading to an implicit assumption that their age was of little significance.⁸ The question remains how ancient ideas about adolescence shaped the way in which these teenage emperors were portrayed by their contemporaries.

In this article, I will examine whether Heliogabalus' age was used as a theme by Dio and Herodian to characterise the emperor. The article is structured as follows: First, I will provide an analysis of Greek and Roman literary works from the first century BC to the

1 Tadema 1888; Couperus 1905. All dates are AD.

2 Cassius Dio 80.13.3, 80.16.5. All translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, unless stated otherwise.

3 Addley 24th of november 2023.

4 Mader 2005; Icks 2008; Chrysanthou 2021.

5 The emergence of child emperors in Late Antiquity was largely a response to specific political crises, without which such accessions might not have occurred. See Hartke 1951; Hartke 1972; McEvoy 2010; McEvoy 2013; Icks 2019.

6 McEvoy 2013, 318-321.

7 Once a boy had donned the *toga virilis*, around the age of 15, he was no longer considered a child.

8 See Roberto 2021; Cordes 2022.

second century AD, identifying recurring themes associated with adolescence. Next, these themes, particularly moral naivety and political inexperience, will serve as a starting point to provide a critical literary analysis of Dio and Herodian's descriptions of Heliogabalus, to determine whether they employed similar themes to characterise him. Lastly, I explore the purpose behind the histories written by these authors, contextualising their decision to either highlight or exclude Heliogabalus' age in their accounts within the larger framework of their historical narratives. I will argue that Dio did not emphasise Heliogabalus' age, as his focus lay with the functioning of Rome's political institutions. In contrast, Herodian highlighted the emperor's age, reflecting his broader interest in the character of emperors.

Before starting the analysis, it must be noted that Dio and Herodian have been chosen as the main sources for this article, as both historians lived through Heliogabalus' reign and left surviving accounts of it. Although the 4th-century *Historia Augusta* also offers an interesting account of the emperor, it was written over a century after his reign.⁹ Additionally, W. Hartke has already offered a satisfactory and elaborate analysis of the *Vita Heliogabali*. Heliogabalus' age is not mentioned at all, which, as Hartke convincingly argues, results from the *Historia Augusta's* literary aim to present the *Vita Heliogabali* as a counterpart to the *Vita Alexandri Severi*.¹⁰ Since age is emphasised in the latter to portray Alexander as obedient to his mother, Heliogabalus is characterised instead by other traits.

YOUTHFULNESS IN THE ANCIENT LITERARY DISCOURSE

To assess whether Heliogabalus' age was significant to Dio and Herodian, it is necessary to first analyse the views on youthfulness in ancient literary sources. Romans divided life into distinct phases, starting with the first approximately 15 years, known as *pueritia*, followed by *adulescentia*, which lasted until the age of 30.¹¹ The transition between these phases is marked by the donning of the *toga virilis*, the all-white adult toga. This signified a threshold to the Romans, indicating that the boy had left childhood behind and was now eligible to participate in society.¹² However, it did not grant eligibility for all political offices. Political positions often required candidates to meet specific age requirements and to have held prior offices, a path known as the

⁹ Syme 1983, 20.

¹⁰ Hartke 1972, 203.

¹¹ Eyben 1993, 6. These age categories were not strictly defined and could vary by a few years.

¹² Roller 2006, 167.

cursus honorum.¹³ This path reflected the widespread idea that the state should be led by older men. The very term for Senate captured this preference; *senatus* refers to the assembly of *senes*, 'elders'. In *De Senectute*, Cicero echoed this sentiment when he claimed that many great states had been ruined by the young and restored by the old.¹⁴

This idea stemmed from the perception of *adulescentia* as a turbulent and morally precarious stage of life. Literary sources from the late Republic and early Principate contain numerous references to *adulescentiae lubricas*, 'slippery youth'. Cicero noted that giving in to a life of pleasure is especially alluring for young men, because youth is a 'slippery' path.¹⁵ Therefore, Junius Gallio, in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae*, praised his father's ability to pass through *adulescentia* without any problems, acknowledging that it is a challenging time, "lubricum tempus".¹⁶ This idea is reiterated in Tacitus' *Annales*, when Nero asked Seneca: "Why not rather, if the frailty of my youth goes in any respect astray, call me back and guide yet more zealously with your help the manhood which you have instructed?"¹⁷ *Adulescentia* was viewed as a challenging stage of life, because adolescents were considered to be "[...] soft as wax for moulding to evil," and "[...] subject to many a change in impulses."¹⁸ Plutarch even asserted that "[...] some of our young men, as soon as they lay aside the garb of childhood, lay aside also their sense of modesty and fear, and, undoing the habit that invests them, straightway become full of unruliness."¹⁹ This is exemplified by Isaeus in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*: "Isaeus the Assyrian sophist had given the period of his youth over to pleasure, for he was at the mercy of his stomach and love of drinking, and dressed himself in soft clothes and was often in love and openly joined in drunken revels."²⁰ Only when Isaeus reached adulthood was he able to take control over his life again.

To prevent such transgressions, young men required guidance.

13 See Duncan-Jones 2016, 22-35 for an overview.

14 Cicero, *De Senectute* 20.

15 Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 41.

16 Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 2.6.4.

17 Tacitus, *Annales* 14.56: "Quin, si qua in parte lubricum adulescentiae nostrae declinat, revocas ornatumque robur subsidio inpensius regis?" The translation was taken from the Perseus Digital Library.

18 Horace, *Ars Poetica* 163: "imberbis iuvenis, [...] cereus in vitium flecti [...]"; Plutarch, *Moralia*. Tyrwhitt's Fragments 9: "[...] ἐξ ὧν μεταβαλλόμενον ἐπὶ πολλὰ ταῖς ὁρμαῖς τὸν νέον ὀρῶμεν."

19 Plutarch, *Moralia*. On listening to lectures 1.37C-D: "[...] οὕτως ἔνιοι τῶν νέων ἅμα τῷ τὸ παιδικὸν ἰμάτιον ἀποθέσθαι συναποθέμενοι τὸ αἰδεῖσθαι καὶ φοβεῖσθαι καὶ λύσαντες τὴν κατασχηματίζουσαν αὐτοὺς περιβολὴν εὐθύς ἐμπίπλονται τῆς ἀναγωγίας."

20 Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 513: "Ἰσαῖος δ' ὁ σοφιστὴς ὁ Ἀσσύριος τὸν μὲν ἐν μειρακίῳ χρόνον ἡδοναῖς ἐδεδώκει, γαστροῦ τε γὰρ καὶ φιλοποσίας ἤττητο καὶ λεπτὰ ἡμίσχετο καὶ θαμὰ ἦρα καὶ ἀπαρακαλύπτως ἐκώμαζεν."

In Book 1 of Herodian's history, Marcus Aurelius (161-180) stressed the need for a guardian for Commodus (180-192), given that young men are prone to slipping into a life of pleasure.²¹ They lack political and moral experience, simply because they have had less time to gain it. Similarly, in the words of Maecenas, Dio posed the rhetorical question "[...] is it not disgraceful, and indeed hazardous, to entrust the public business to men younger than this [25], when we never commit our private affairs to anyone before he has reached this age?"²² This underscores the notion that young men should not be senators, much less emperors.

Adolescents were clearly considered to be morally naive. They were impressionable and therefore easily influenced. Additionally, their lack of political experience made them more susceptible to poor and unconventional decision-making. These characteristics diminished as men matured and reached adulthood.²³ However, this was not the case for Heliogabalus, given that he died at the age of 18. Therefore, the question must be posed as to whether Dio and Herodian portrayed Heliogabalus as a morally naive and inexperienced emperor, who failed to successfully lead the Empire, due to his young age.

Before proceeding, an important observation must be made. The traits commonly associated with youthfulness in the literary discourse may also stem from other factors. The fact that Heliogabalus came from Emesa, Syria, is significant. In ancient literary sources, Syrians were often depicted through a lens of cultural stereotyping.²⁴ These portrayals frequently highlighted traits such as sexual licentiousness and effeminacy.²⁵ Consequently, Heliogabalus is frequently depicted as indulging in excessive and unconventional sexual behaviours.²⁶ These actions can also be linked to youthfulness, as moral naivety can lead to questionable (sexual) actions. Therefore, passages referring to the identified themes must be carefully analysed within the broader context of the narrative and the author's intentions, to determine whether the traits attributed to Heliogabalus result from his young age or are informed by other factors.

21 Herodian 1.3.1.

22 Cassius Dio 52.20.1: "πῶς γὰρ οὐκ αἰσχρὸν καὶ σφαλερόν ἐστι τὰ μὲν οἰκεία μηδενὶ πρὸ ταύτης τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπιτρέπεσθαι, τὰ δὲ δημόσια καὶ νεωτέροις τισὶν ἐγχειρίζεσθαι." See Millar 1964, 102-109 for the argument that Cassius Dio is expressing his own political thought here.

23 For a more in-depth discussion about the themes associated with youth, see Eyben 1977; Bradley 1999; Roller 2006; Laes 2011; Laes 2018; Laes 2023.

24 Isaac 2004, 324-351 provides an overview.

25 Isaac 2004, 494; Habash 2017, 985-986.

26 Chrysanthou 2021.

CASSIUS DIO'S PORTRAYAL OF HELIOGABALUS

Having identified the themes linked to youthfulness, it can be examined whether Dio used Heliogabalus' age as a deliberate tool for his characterisation. Dio, who was a senior senator during the Severan age, wrote his *Roman History* between 197 and 230.²⁷ In 80 books, he wrote an overview of Rome's entire history up until his own time, drawing upon his firsthand knowledge from the reign of Commodus onwards. As a defender of monarchy, Dio was concerned with Rome's political institutions and the general (downward) trajectory of the Empire, viewing the emperor as part of a larger institutional framework.²⁸

His account of Heliogabalus is negative from the outset.²⁹ When describing the fall of Macrinus (217-218), Heliogabalus' predecessor, Dio wrote that he "[...] was overthrown by a mere boy of whose very name he had previously been ignorant".³⁰ Dio used παιδάριον, 'little child', to describe Heliogabalus. As a diminutive of παῖς, the word carries a belittling connotation, highlighting Dio's contempt for the emperor. The next reference to the emperor's age appears at the beginning of Book 80. Upon becoming emperor, Heliogabalus promised to emulate Augustus, "[...] to whose youth he likened his own."³¹ According to Dio, Heliogabalus only did this in response to Macrinus' mockery of his age.³² This passage, like the previous one, can be interpreted as an attempt by Dio to ridicule the emperor. The sole respect in which Heliogabalus sought to emulate Augustus—whom Dio regarded as the ideal ruler—was his youthfulness.³³

Most references to Heliogabalus' age are less direct. For example, Dio stated that "he applied to himself certain titles connected with his imperial office before they had been voted, [...]"³⁴ Specifically, Heliogabalus made himself consul twice, without having held the requisite prior offices or titles. Heliogabalus' lack of prior office underscored his political inexperience, which was a direct result of his age. However, it is important to question whether Dio attributed this decision to the emperor's youthfulness or to other factors. The fact that he emphasised that "[...] they were innovations upon established

²⁷ Scott 2023, 28-31.

²⁸ Scott 2023, 4.

²⁹ It has recently been argued that Dio's interest in the negative construction of Heliogabalus was directly related to his tendency to judge the Severan emperors on the basis of the political positions they offered him. See Silvia 2024.

³⁰ Cassius Dio 79.40.3: "[...] ὑπὸ τε παιδαρίου, οὐ μὴδὲ τὸ ὄνομα πρότερον ἠπίστατο, [...]"

³¹ Cassius Dio 80.1.3: "ὅ καὶ τὴν ἡλικίαν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀφωμοίου."

³² Cassius Dio 80.1.4.

³³ For Dio's view on Augustus, see Madsen 2023.

³⁴ Cassius Dio 80.8.1: "[...] τι τε τῶν ὀνομάτων τινὰ τῶν ἐς τὴν ἡγεμονίαν αὐτοῦ τεινόντων, πρὶν ψηφισθῆναι [...]"

usage” is particularly significant.³⁵

This emphasis sets the stage for understanding the other passages. A revealing example is the description of the emperor’s many marriages. Dio ridiculed Heliogabalus’ reason for marrying Cornelia Paula: “The False Antoninus married Cornelia Paula, in order, as he said, that he might sooner become a father—he who could not even be a man!”³⁶ The Greek word for man here, *άνήρ*, is the standard term for the male gender and is not a reference to the emperor’s young age. Dio accused him of being feminine. The marriage did not last long, and Heliogabalus married Aquilia Severa, a Vestal Virgin, instead. Dio described this act as “[...] most flagrantly violating the law; for she was consecrated to Vesta, and yet he most impiously defiled her.”³⁷ Despite committing a crime by marrying a Vestal Virgin, Heliogabalus did not take the matter seriously and married four other women before returning to Severa once more. C. Rowan argued that the grotesqueness of the act and Dio’s wording presented the emperor as sexually licentious.³⁸ His blatant disrespect for Roman law is clearly exemplified here. While his conduct reflects the impulsive nature often attributed to youth, when combined with the reference to his lack of masculinity, this passage must have invoked the Syrian stereotype.³⁹ Dio’s purpose in writing *Roman History* also suggests that he was primarily focused on Heliogabalus’ Syrian origins. The character of the emperor was secondary to the functioning of the state. Dio linked Heliogabalus’ Syrian descent to his sexually deviant behaviour, which he believed violated Rome’s institutions and destabilised the state.⁴⁰ Heliogabalus’ age had no such consequences.

The passage about Heliogabalus adopting his younger cousin, Severus Alexander (222-235), must likewise be understood within this context. After the adoption, Heliogabalus “[...] congratulated himself on becoming suddenly the father of so large a boy, —though he himself was not much older than the other—and declared that he had no need of any other child to keep his house free from despondency.”⁴¹ Heliogabalus is depicted as not taking

35 Cassius Dio 80.8.1: “[...] πλὴν καθ’ ὅσον παρὰ τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐκαινοτομήθη.”

36 Cassius Dio 80.9.1: “Ἐγήμε δὲ Κορνηλίαν Παῦλαν, ἵνα δὴ θάσσοι, ὡσπερ ἔφη, πατὴρ γένηται ὁ μὴδ’ ἀνὴρ εἶναι δυνάμενος.” For Dio’s usage of nicknames, see Rowan 2012, 169-170.

37 Cassius Dio 80.9.3: “[...] ἐκφανέστατα παρανομήσας· ἱερωμένην γὰρ αὐτὴν τῇ Ἑστία ἀσεβέστατα ἤσχυεν.”

38 Rowan 2012, 168.

39 Isaac 2004, 494.

40 Kemezis 2016, 358; Sommer 2004, 104-105; Icks 2008, 481-483.

41 Cassius Dio 80.17.2: “[...] ἐαυτὸν δὲ ὡς καὶ πατέρα ἐξαίφνης τηλικούτου παιδίου, καίπερ οὐ πολὺ τῇ ἡλικίᾳ αὐτοῦ προέχοντα, ἐμακάρισε, καὶ μὴδὲν ἄλλου τέκνου δεῖσθαι ἔφησεν, ἵν’ ἡ οἰκία αὐτοῦ ἴσθαι ἀθυμιῶν διαγένηται.”

the adoption seriously by making jokes. Additionally, Dio recorded that the emperor was controlled by the god Elagabal—the Syrian sun-god of whom Heliogabalus was high priest—who commanded him to adopt and name his new son Alexander.⁴² While Heliogabalus' unserious attitude could be attributed to his age, it should be understood within the broader context of Dio's narrative. The passage began by noting that the adoption was brought before the Senate for approval. By setting the stage in the Senate House and highlighting the emperor's irreverence, Dio showcased Heliogabalus' contempt for this political body. The reference to Elagabal is then meant to underscore the influence of Heliogabalus' Syrian origins on his inappropriate behaviour. Once again, Dio linked the emperor's disregard for Roman customs to his Syrian background.

There are no other references to Heliogabalus' age. The account is characterised by the emperor's deviant behaviour stemming from his Syrian background, which expressed itself in his disregard for Roman customs and institutions. Therefore, the passage regarding Heliogabalus assuming the consulship twice should be understood in this context. Dio focused on his usurpation of titles not granted by the Senate, viewing this as a more significant issue than his lack of experience. Thus, Heliogabalus' failure as emperor is first and foremost caused by his Syrian background, which led to his disrespect for Roman customs. His age, though mentioned in passing, was not significant enough for Dio to use it as a prominent theme in negatively characterising him.

HERODIAN'S PORTRAYAL OF HELIOGABALUS

Herodian wrote the *History of the Roman Empire* somewhere in the 240s.⁴³ He wrote a history from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the accession of Gordian III (238-244), drawing on his firsthand knowledge of this period. Throughout the work, significant weight is placed upon the emperors' traits and actions.⁴⁴ For Herodian, the success or failure of the Empire hinged entirely on the character of the emperor.

Heliogabalus' age is noted at the beginning of the narrative. Upon becoming emperor, he immediately relinquished his imperial duties to his grandmother, Julia Maesa. According to Herodian, this was because Heliogabalus "[...] was young and without

⁴² Cassius Dio 80.17.3. See Icks 2006 for the significance of Elagabal for the reign of Heliogabalus.

⁴³ See Zimmermann 1999, 285-301 for an overview of the time of composition.

⁴⁴ Sidebottom 1998, 2804; De Blois 2003, 154-155.

administrative experience or education”.⁴⁵ Herodian used παιδείας, paideia, to refer to Heliogabalus’ lack of education, suggesting that he lacked more than mere schooling. As U. Roberto has convincingly argued, Herodian considered paideia to be fundamental for cultivating self-control, as it encompassed the teaching of both moral and political virtues.⁴⁶ These virtues were essential for navigating life at the imperial court—virtues which, according to Herodian, Heliogabalus did not possess.

Maesa played an important role in Herodian’s narrative.⁴⁷ Herodian strongly contrasted the emperor’s inexperience with his grandmother’s experience. For instance, she frequently intervened during Heliogabalus’ attacks against Alexander. According to Herodian, her success in these interventions was due to her extensive knowledge of imperial business, having lived at the imperial palace during the reign of her nephew, Emperor Caracalla (211-217).⁴⁸ Heliogabalus’ young age prevented him from acquiring similar experience. By emphasising Maesa’s understanding of political and social matters and pitting it against that of Heliogabalus, Herodian highlighted the emperor’s lack of experience, thereby revealing a flaw in his leadership.

Later in the narrative, Herodian described Heliogabalus as “[...] in most matters a thoughtless, silly young man,” which explained why Maesa was able to intervene so easily.⁴⁹ In C. R. Whittaker’s translation, ἄφρων is translated as silly, but this does not capture the full gravity of the term.⁵⁰ Its relation to φρήν, ‘the seat of the intellect’, suggests that Heliogabalus did not merely make poor decisions; he was incapable of making good ones. This interpretation aligns more closely with Herodian’s portrayal of Heliogabalus, as the emperor is consistently depicted as blindly following orders.

This theme is particularly evident in the prominent influence of Maesa throughout the account. As M. Icks has convincingly argued, Herodian presents an emperor who is played like a puppet by his grandmother.⁵¹ For example, Maesa convinced Heliogabalus to adopt Alexander and appoint him Caesar.⁵² Similar to Dio,

45 Herodian 5.5.1: “[...] αὐτὸς γὰρ ἦν νέος τε τὴν ἡλικίαν, πραγμάτων τε καὶ παιδείας ἄπειρος [...]” It could be argued that ἄπειρος functions as a specification of νέος, illustrating that Heliogabalus’ young age caused his lack of experience, as they are grammatically coordinate. This interpretation is consistent with the broader themes in Herodian’s work.

46 Roberto 2021, 137.

47 Nadolny 2016, 167-172.

48 Herodian 5.8.3.

49 Herodian 5.7.1: “[...] κουφον ἄλλως καὶ ἄφρονα νεανίαν [...]”

50 Whittaker 1969/1970.

51 Icks 2023, 56.

52 Herodian 5.7.1. This contradicts Dio, who claimed that it was Elagabal who instructed Heliogabalus to adopt Alexander.

Herodian noted that the adoption was ridiculous and a charade.⁵³ The passage is followed by Heliogabalus' downfall, thereby highlighting the naivety of the puppet-emperor. The soldiers favoured Alexander and killed Heliogabalus to declare the former emperor, as he was already next in line.⁵⁴ The way the narrative is structured suggests that, had Heliogabalus not blindly followed Maesa's advice and appointed Alexander as his successor, the soldiers might have struggled to find a suitable replacement. This could have prevented them from taking matters into their own hands. Clearly, Heliogabalus was too young to have any political experience or understanding of how to rule as an independent emperor. As a result, he blindly followed his grandmother's advice, even when it put him in danger. Herodian truly painted the picture of a senseless young man characterised by his age.

Due to Herodian's focus on the emperor's character as crucial to the stability of the Empire, Heliogabalus' young age became a key factor in his portrayal. The emperor's inexperience and naivety, attributed to his age, directly contributed to his inability to rule effectively. This conclusion becomes particularly striking when considering that Alexander also ascended to the throne at the age of 14, yet maintained a largely positive reputation. Age alone did not determine Heliogabalus' portrayal. Other factors also contributed to his portrayal, such as his Syrian origins.

The activities Heliogabalus engaged in—dancing, performing sacrifices to Elagabal, wearing makeup, and indulging in luxury—might have reinforced the image of a young man.⁵⁵ However, Herodian primarily drew on Heliogabalus' Syrian background here.⁵⁶ As noted earlier, the traits typically associated with adolescence are not necessarily exclusive to it and can stem from other factors. In Herodian's narrative, as A. Kemezis pointed out, Heliogabalus' effeminacy, love of luxury, and religious practices can be seen as products of his Syrian origins rather than youthful indiscretion.⁵⁷ Herodian drew upon both the common literary stereotype of youthfulness and the prejudiced views against Syrians to characterise the emperor. He attributed Heliogabalus' inexperience and naivety to his youth, while his extravagant behaviour and indulgence in luxury reflect his Syrian origins.

CONCLUSION

Both Dio and Herodian present a negative view of the young

⁵³ Herodian 5.7.4. For Dio as one of Herodian sources, see Scheithauer 1990; Chrysanthou 2020.

⁵⁴ Herodian 5.8.1, 5.8.8.

⁵⁵ Herodian 5.5.4, 5.6.1, 5.6.10.

⁵⁶ Icks 2008, 486-487.

⁵⁷ Kemezis 2016, 366-367.

emperor Heliogabalus, yet they differ in the way they characterise him. For Dio, Heliogabalus' behaviour was not a result of his age, but rather of his Syrian origins. The emphasis on his Syrian background reflects Dio's broader focus on Rome's institutions. The emperor's sexual licentiousness and effeminacy resulted in his failure to respect Roman norms and customs, which Dio saw as the main reason for his failed reign. Heliogabalus' age had no such consequence, and therefore, Dio did not use age as a prominent theme in his portrayal of the emperor. This conclusion raises an intriguing question: would Dio have used the stereotype of youthfulness to negatively characterise a young 'Roman' emperor, such as Commodus, in the absence of other stereotypes?

Herodian, on the other hand, places much greater emphasis on Heliogabalus' age as a key factor in his downfall. Heliogabalus is depicted as a puppet-emperor who lacked experience due to his young age. The emperor is consistently portrayed as a morally naive and thoughtless young man, incapable of effectively leading the Empire. Herodian's focus on the character of emperors explains why he invoked broader themes associated with youthfulness to illustrate Heliogabalus' failure as a ruler. This portrayal was further shaped by the emperor's Syrian background and effeminacy, which, in Herodian's view, reinforced his unsuitability for the role of emperor.

The age of Heliogabalus was not a standard theme in historiographies from the early third century AD. The aims behind writing their histories reflect the differing importance Dio and Herodian attributed to Heliogabalus' youthfulness. Dio did not consider Heliogabalus' age to be a defining characteristic. In contrast, Herodian believed that the emperor's youthfulness was the driving force behind his actions. Dio disapproved of a Syrian on the throne; Herodian disapproved of a teenager on it.

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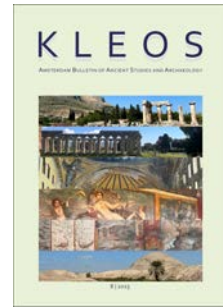
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Silent Voices: Aboriginal Oral Histories and Art as Decolonial Tools in Australia

Lola Stamboulia

ABSTRACT

This article explores the dual role of Aboriginal Australian oral history and art in resisting colonial narratives. By analysing oral testimonies, through the cases of the Bringing Them Home report and the Stolen Generations, as well as Aboriginal artworks, through McKenzie's depiction of the Mistake Creek Massacre, the study demonstrates how Australian Aboriginal voices have continuously been discredited, questioned and mostly ignored by colonial and modern authorities, and consequently dismissed in the public sphere. Drawing from theories such as epistemic injustice and decoloniality, the paper highlights how Aboriginal voices and art can serve as tools of resistance against colonial silencing. While previous studies have mainly analysed one or the other, this article links oral histories and visual art as complementary tools against colonial structures. Based on this multifaceted approach, it offers a new perspective on the ongoing struggle to challenge colonial erasure. In addition, the study advocates for the integration of Indigenous knowledge into Australia's national narrative as a crucial step towards decolonisation, reconciliation, and justice.

INTRODUCTION

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal communities in Australia have transmitted their history through oral traditions and art.¹ While these histories have long passed down mythological tales and stories of kinships, over the last 200 years, they have also come to include accounts of persecutions by European colonisers, which will be referred to throughout the article as 'settlers' or 'colonial' forces. Such violence included the violent conflicts of the Frontier Wars, which led to the deaths and displacement of Indigenous communities, as well as policies like

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► [Profile page](#)

¹ Hamacher et al. 2023, 14; Matchan et al. 2020, 390; Flood 1996, 9; Morphy 1998, 44.

the Stolen Generations, which consisted of the systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families, both of which will be discussed in this article. As of yet, these persecutions have systematically been ignored or denied by colonial authorities and modern Australian governments, leading to a stronger marginalisation of Indigenous Australians and reinforcing colonial dominance.

By exploring Australian Aboriginal art and oral history produced after Australia's European colonisation, this study will examine the systemic denial of Aboriginal knowledge, as well as the importance of bringing out Indigenous historical narratives and integrating them into the official Australian history. Giving authority to Aboriginal accounts of history in particular—which highlight colonial persecutions—is crucial for decolonising Australia's historical narrative. This process could lead to a better understanding and inclusion of these Indigenous communities and ameliorate their relationship with the Australian government and its White Australian population. It is in this context that the present article aims to demonstrate that Aboriginal art and the oral transmission of Native history are essential tools to preserve Indigenous memory while resisting the systematic colonial suppression of Aboriginal narratives.

The article will first analyse the research conducted on Australian Aboriginal traditions and the systemic discredit inflicted by colonial forces. Next, the theoretical framework will be introduced, including concepts such as epistemic injustice and decoloniality. Then, the paper will explore two case studies: the first focuses on oral Aboriginal testimonies in the context of The Stolen Generations. The second examines the Mistake Creek Massacre painting by Queenie McKenzie and its decolonial significance. Finally, the article will discuss how colonial denial has impacted Aboriginal voices, their forces as decolonial tools and the urgency to integrate them into Australia's historical discourse.

HISTORY, WAR, AND CONTESTED MEMORIES

Over the past four decades, the interpretation of Australia's colonisation has been the centre of many heated debates in both the academic and political spheres.² In the 1990s, this dispute, encompassing issues such as how the history of colonisation is written and taught, the validity of Aboriginal oral histories or calls for a national apology, was coined as a *History War*: a cultural conflict between historians' obligations to collect genuine information about the past and demands of patriotism from

² Attwood 2005, 1; Macintyre 2003, 80.

politicians and the media.³ These various debates peaked during conservative politician John Howard's tenure as Prime Minister from 1996 to 2007. His government promoted a "sanitised" historical narrative that emphasised national unity while often dismissing the violent aspects of Australia's colonisation.⁴ This included opposition to the idea of a formal apology and compensation to The Stolen Generations, as well as heavy criticism of academic works that explored European colonialism through the lens of Indigenous suffering.⁵

The dominant settler narrative in Australia has long depicted European colonisation as a progressive mission, where British settlers were portrayed as bringing "civilisation", democracy and the market economy to Australia.⁶ British migrants were perceived as pioneers contributing to the development of a better society out of a wilderness.⁷ This narrative reinforced their sense of accomplishment and ownership over the land they occupied. In addition, their discourse heavily drew on the Enlightenment trope of the "noble savage", which romanticised Indigenous people as pure and innocent but also simple-minded and primitive people, ultimately destined to disappear and clear the land for progress and civilisation.⁸ However, this idea contributed to the systematic erasure of colonial violence experienced by Indigenous communities. The Frontier Wars, a series of violent conflicts between Aboriginal Australian groups and European settlers taking place throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, exemplify this silencing. While European colonists were invading their territories and denying Aboriginal land ownership, Indigenous Australians resisted in vain against British authorities.⁹ Despite the deaths of thousands of Indigenous people due to epidemics and massacres, they were long omitted from official histories.¹⁰ This omission shows the extent of denial embedded within the settler narrative.

Multiple historians have tried to challenge this settler narrative by elevating Indigenous perspectives, which tended to be marginalised in the public sphere. Among them, H. Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier* and L. Ryan in *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* emphasised the importance of Indigenous narratives

3 Macintyre 2003, 77; Macintyre/Clark 2004, 45, 146.

4 Macintyre 2003, 82.

5 Davies 1st of January 2021.

6 Moreton-Robinson 2015, 23.

7 Attwood 2005, 16.

8 Smith 1999, 49; Ellingson 2001, 2; Mazzon 2021, 553; Foster/Nettlebeck 2012, 140-142.

9 Connor 2002, 113; Reynolds 2013, 2.

10 Reynolds 2013, 45-46; Foster/Nettelbeck 2012, 8, 144-147; Sharpes/Parkes 2023, 182-183.

by documenting the violent colonisation of their Land.¹¹ These studies described the history of Aboriginal people who were dispossessed of their land, massacred and displaced by settlers, as well as accounted for their resistance against the invaders, especially during the Frontier Wars. Incorporating these stories revealed some immediate impacts of European colonisation and directly challenged the historical narratives produced by colonial authorities that tend to undermine or justify the violence committed against the Indigenous population.

These few historians challenging the official Australian historical narrative were perceived as wearing a "black armband", i.e., a negative view of Australian history, by conservative public figures such as Australian right-wing columnist and political commentator Gerard Henderson.¹² The term had been popularised by historian G. Blainey in 1993 and aimed to criticise historical perspectives that focused on Australia's colonial violence towards Aboriginal communities rather than its historical achievements as a nation.¹³ Another conservative figure in these debates was K. Windschuttle, who argued in his controversial book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, that studies highlighting colonial massacres were exaggerated or fake, based on inaccurate accounts and misrepresenting or inventing sources.¹⁴ His argument raised further questions about the reliability of Indigenous accounts, leading to the further discredit of Indigenous narratives.

During the 21st century, colonial violence, including the dismissal of Indigenous perspectives, persisted. Tony Abbott, who served as Prime Minister from 2013 to 2015, also believed that Australia should focus on its achievements as 'British settlement was a very good thing' rather than 'wallowing in self-criticism.'¹⁵ During his tenure, he cut \$500 million from vital Indigenous community service programs in his first budget.¹⁶ He also argued that Australia was "unsettled" before British arrival.¹⁷ Abbott's position echoed colonial efforts to deny Aboriginal people's sufferings and preserve a national history centred on European contributions.¹⁸ Eventually, the controversy was mainly dominated by White historians, politicians and media figures. Although the discussion concerned Aboriginal history and identity, Aboriginal

11 Reynolds 1982; Ryan 1981.

12 Clark 2002; McKenna 1998; Wimmer 2002; Macyntyre/Clark 2004, 4.

13 Blainey 1993, 11.

14 Windschuttle 2003; Windschuttle 2001.

15 Karp 18th of January 2018.

16 Uluru Statement 2023, 5.

17 Davidson 4th of July 2014.

18 Sharpes/Parkes 2023, 193; Bishop 28th of April 2020.

Australians were largely absent from the debate, marginalised in a matter that directly concerned them.¹⁹

Still, some scholars have attempted to convey the importance of Aboriginal traditions in preserving historical memory as well as highlighting the massacres experienced by Aboriginal people. Historian L. Ryan argued in *Painted Dreams* that Aboriginal art functioned as historical records that resisted colonial erasure.²⁰ In addition, H. Morphy's book *Aboriginal Art* emphasised how paintings and sculptures—deeply connected to oral traditions—could transmit traumas of colonial violence.²¹ Finally, in *Hidden Histories*, anthropologist D. B. Rose delved into how Aboriginal communities have maintained oral records of massacres and displacement despite centuries of colonial suppression and emphasised the responsibility of engaging with them.²²

Eventually, colonial denial continues because it is deeply rooted in a broader Western view that perceives Indigenous knowledge as illegitimate and unreliable.²³ While scholars like Reynolds, Ryan and Rose believe in the necessity of the integration of Aboriginal perspectives, conservative historians and political figures have sought to maintain a sanitised national narrative.

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE, REPRESSIVE ERASURE AND DECOLONIALITY

To understand how Aboriginal voices have been systematically silenced, it is first necessary to define and describe this process to provide a theoretical framework. To do so, the article draws on the concept of epistemic injustice, P. Connerton's work on forgetting, alongside decolonial perspectives. Together these frameworks aim to reveal how the dominant settler narrative has marginalised Indigenous knowledge and how Aboriginal art and oral histories can resist this silencing.

Epistemic injustice is a concept coined by philosopher M. Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, which refers to the systemic marginalisation of one's knowledge when a hearer gives a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word.²⁴ This injustice is based on the hearer's prejudices depending on the speaker's gender, sexuality, race, etc. In brief, their identity. This article explores the mechanism that leads to the dismissal of Aboriginal oral histories and art, as they are

¹⁹ Attwood 2005, 3.

²⁰ Ryan 1995.

²¹ Morphy 1998.

²² Rose 1991.

²³ McRanor 1997, 80.

²⁴ Fricker 2007, 1.

perceived as unreliable and illegitimate due to colonial biases that prioritise Western historiography, particularly written records.²⁵

This pattern of epistemic exclusion reflects what some scholars, such as William E. H. Stanner, have called a 'Great Australian Silence' around Aboriginal histories: a form of historical amnesia that dismisses Indigenous voices from dominant discourses.²⁶ This deliberate 'amnesia' connects with Connerton's exploration of collective memory and forgetting, which he ties closely to political structures and their roles in shaping historical narratives.²⁷ His concept of 'repressive erasure', which is a deliberate political act of concealing violence, aligns with Australia's context, where its history of violent colonisation of Indigenous land, and displacement of Indigenous people, was marginalised and repressed in order to provide a sanitised version of settlers' history.²⁸

To analyse and actively challenge the colonial discourse and its lasting effects, it is essential to adopt a decolonial framework to examine Australian history effectively. Sociologist A. Quijano, first introduced the term "coloniality" in the context of Latin America.²⁹ It was further developed by scholars such as W. D. Mignolo and L. T. Smith, who examined how colonial structures of oppression continue to impact colonised groups beyond political decolonisation by being integral parts of modern institutions and knowledge production.³⁰ They argue that Eurocentric standards have shaped the world's history and historiography, while systematically dismissing Indigenous knowledge, perceived as non-existent, unreliable and illegitimate.³¹

More recently, scholars like C. E. Walsh and R. Vásquez have explored ways to counteract coloniality in practice. In *On Decoloniality*, Walsh and Mignolo look at the "colonial matrix of power", i.e., colonial structures and their power on modern institutions as well as its transformation and manifestations throughout time.³² They also interlink both theory and active praxis of decoloniality as tools challenging this colonial matrix of power. Vásquez, in *Vistas of Modernity*, examines universal aesthetic norms which are deeply colonial and White. He proposes decolonial aesthesis as a new way of looking at artistic practices

25 Hulan/Eigenbrod 2008, 8.

26 Stanner 1979, 214.

27 Connerton 1989, 16.

28 Connerton 2008, 60.

29 Quijano 2000.

30 Smith 1999, 90-98; Mignolo 2011, 2.

31 Smith 1999, 100; Mignolo 2011, 10.

32 Mignolo/Walsh 2018, 2-8.

and questions Western aesthetic values.³³ Their works have reinforced the need to move beyond merely recognising Indigenous knowledge to rather entirely dismantling epistemic hierarchies.

In the Australian context, decoloniality criticises the marginalisation of Aboriginal knowledge systems and narratives in the national discourse and the dominance of a colonial historiography in the public sphere. It advocates for the recognition of Aboriginal forms of knowledge as essential to Australia's understanding of its past, and the importance of including them within academic, social and overall public structures.³⁴

METHODOLOGY

The research will be using a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the frameworks of epistemic injustice, decoloniality and Connerton's theory of forgetting to analyse two case studies: The Bringing Them Home report and Queenie McKenzie's painting of the Mistake Creek Massacre.

The Bringing Them Home report documents the process and impact of The Stolen Generations. It will be examined through thematic discourse analysis, which will identify themes of trauma and dispossession and explore how minority narratives can challenge institutional forgetting and reclaim Aboriginal history. The second case study, focusing on Queenie McKenzie's Mistake Creek Massacre painting, will be approached through visual and contextual analysis and will examine the possible reasons behind the painting's delayed display at the National Museum of Australia and the challenge of decolonising public knowledge in a climate with/of enduring colonial ideologies. Together, these case studies offer a comparative exploration of how Aboriginal communities can reclaim agency and resist epistemic erasure.

CASE STUDIES

ORAL HISTORIES AND DISENTANGLING VOICES: BRINGING THEM HOME REPORT

The first case study directly addresses oral history and its significance in recovering Aboriginal testimonies of colonial violence. The Stolen Generations refers to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (mostly those of mixed background) who were removed from their families and communities by state governments. The practice began in 1869 with the Aboriginal Protection Act that emerged in the state of

³³ Vásquez 2020, 7-9.

³⁴ Mignolo 2011, 54.

Victoria and lasted until 1969.³⁵ The Aboriginal Protection Board would visit families to assess if they had Aboriginal or Western ways of living. In most cases, they would take children from their parents for neglect or incompetent guardianship.³⁶ The children were then placed in White families as unpaid servants or agricultural labourers until their 18th birthday, to assimilate into Western culture.³⁷ Some of these children, who were taken at a young age, grew up without knowing they were Indigenous. Later on, and even now, many people who were removed from their families experience mental illnesses due to neglect and physical or sexual abuse perpetrated by host families.³⁸

The history of the Stolen Generations connects to epistemic injustice by demonstrating how Australian government policies systematically silenced Aboriginal culture and knowledge. Connerton's notion is relevant here as the systematic removal of Aboriginal children was not just a social policy but a deliberate act of repressive erasure, of eradication of Indigenous memory, culture, and identity: a cultural genocide in which violence was hidden under the guise of child protection.³⁹

The Bringing Them Home report, published in 1997, is an investigation of The Stolen Generations commissioned by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It was based on the extensive oral testimonies of approximately 600 Indigenous people who were removed from their families as children.⁴⁰ The report documents the traumatic impacts of this policy on individuals and communities, highlighting experiences of cultural erasure, physical and sexual abuse, and lasting psychological harm. In addition, the report recommended that Australian parliaments apologise for their actions. In 2008, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd (in office 2007–2010), officially apologised to Aboriginal Australians. In addition, the Australian government established reparation measures, including a payment of damages, a personal apology, support programs, and the possibility of sharing one's story for the victims of The Stolen Generations.

The testimonies documented in the report challenged the repressive erasure and institutional forgetting committed by Australian states and illustrated the lasting impacts of colonial mechanisms. From a decolonial perspective, Aboriginal survivors' oral histories become active forms of epistemic resistance against

35 Healey 2019, 6.

36 Read 2007, 7.

37 The Stolen Generations n.d. 3.

38 The Stolen Generations n.d. 11.

39 Connerton 2008, 60.

40 Human Right and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997.

the silencing of colonial structures. The Bringing Them Home report aimed to ensure that Aboriginal experiences and cultural knowledge were finally recognised. Rudd's speech in response to the report demonstrates the impact and power of bringing to light Aboriginal voices. In particular, the measures put into place after his formal apology highlight the decolonial power of Aboriginal voices.

ART AS A TOOL: THE MISTAKE CREEK MASSACRE

The second case study addresses Aboriginal oral testimonies through the medium of art. Queenie McKenzie was an Aboriginal artist of the 20th century, belonging to the Gija people, located in Northwestern Australia. She is known for her artworks that explore themes such as Aboriginal cosmology and the violence of colonialism in Australia.⁴¹ One of her most significant contributions was her portrayal of the 1915 Mistake Creek massacre (see Figure 1), where several Aboriginal people were killed by settlers according to the Aboriginals' account. This massacre, however, has been repeatedly contested, and the story has two versions. According to the Gija oral accounts, a White former policeman and his two Aboriginal employees killed eight Gija people. The attackers believed that one of the former policeman's cows had been killed and eaten by members of the camp that was attacked. According to the non-Indigenous story, including the opinion of historian Windschuttle, who emphasises the lack of reliability of oral history, however, no White men were involved in the killing.⁴²

McKenzie learnt about the event from her people's oral stories. She consequently represented White and Aboriginal men in her painting depicting the massacre.⁴³ In 2005, the National Museum of Australia bought her artwork, but it was not exhibited until 2020. As of 2025, the painting remains on display at the National Museum of Australia.

The long refusal to exhibit McKenzie's artwork may be explained by various reasons, such as curatorial decisions, other priorities in the museum's schedule or a lack of understanding of the painting's significance. However, while these factors have to be considered, these delays also reflect broader difficulty with incorporating Aboriginal perspectives, especially oral histories, into the public sphere and national narratives.⁴⁴ In this case, especially, the different historical accounts of the event

⁴¹ Kjellgren, 2001, 11.

⁴² Windschuttle 2001; Daley 4th of July 2013.

⁴³ Burnside 22nd of April 2020.

⁴⁴ Whittington 2021, 259; Attwood 2011, 177.



Figure 1.
*Painting of the Mistake
Creek Massacre by Queenie
McKenzie, 1997.*

furthermore challenged the reliability of Aboriginal testimonies. Though these oral histories, like the ones McKenzie drew inspiration from, are often questioned for their accuracy as memories can change over time, this scrutiny is rarely applied to other forms of historical representation.⁴⁵ Artworks depicting historical events, such as those commonly found in museums, can often carry biases, yet that rarely prevents them from being exhibited. The museum's hesitation and delay can therefore symbolise the broader challenge of integrating Aboriginal historical perspectives into the national consciousness: an institution may seek to go towards decolonisation and inclusion but simultaneously struggle with the pressures of official historical discourse and public reception.

The National Museum of Australia, primarily funded by the government, may be influenced in what it promotes.⁴⁶ While museums have more artworks than they can exhibit, the delayed exhibition of the painting could reflect political unwillingness, especially on the government's part, to display colonial violence. As Connerton argued, institutions can selectively choose what to remember or forget, thereby shaping collective memory.⁴⁷ In this case, the exclusion of an artwork reflecting an Aboriginal narrative shows the reluctance of a modern institution to be confronted with its colonial past and its power in marginalising Indigenous voices.

McKenzie's piece not only documents the historical trauma of her people but also resists the systemic forgetting and epistemic

⁴⁵ Smith 2021, 71; Thomson 2011, 79-90.

⁴⁶ National Museum of Australia, 2023.

⁴⁷ Connerton 1989, 14.

injustice of Australia's colonial mindset.⁴⁸ Her artwork contributes to decolonising Australia's historical consciousness and dismantles the structural denial of Indigenous knowledge. Its eventual exhibition in 2020 can be linked to growing public support for reconciliation, increased visibility of Aboriginal advocacy through NGOs, and increased pressure on institutions to address colonial legacies.⁴⁹ For instance, in 2017, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was published, which ensured a truth-telling of Australian colonial history; and in 2020, the destruction of Juukan 2 rockshelter, a 46,000-year-old Aboriginal sacred site, provoked public outrage.⁵⁰

DISCUSSION

DENIAL AS CONTINUED COLONIAL VIOLENCE

The Stolen Generations and the Mistake Creek Massacre demonstrate how the Australian government has historically denied Aboriginal experiences, not only through physical crimes but also through epistemic injustice, emphasising the persistence of colonial persecution.⁵¹ In October 2023, a referendum was called to add an Aboriginal voice to Parliament in order to give Indigenous Australians a significant role on matters affecting their communities. However, the vote resulted in a 'No', which further exemplifies the ongoing colonial mindset within Australia's government.⁵² This systemic suppression of Indigenous voices ensures that colonial narratives dominate Australian historical discourse, but also reinforces social inequalities as the narrative of national unity favours settler perspectives.⁵³

Aboriginal members of the population receive little support from the country. They face significant disadvantages compared to the rest of the Australian population, such as higher rates of unemployment, poverty, poor housing and infrastructure and health disparities, including higher rates of chronic illnesses, lower life expectancy and mental health issues.⁵⁴ Effectively, the government's difficulty in dealing with its colonial past still has a heavy impact on Aboriginal Australians and the nation as a whole today.

ABORIGINAL ART AND NARRATIVES AS FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Since the colonisation of Australia, Aboriginal art and oral

48 Mignolo 2011, 176.

49 Whittington 2021; Attwood 2011, 172.

50 ANTAR 2023; Reconciliation Australia, n.d; Uluru Statement from the Heart, 2017.

51 Spivak 1998, 25.

52 Biddle et al. 2023, iii.

53 Connerton 2008, 60; Mignolo 2011, 171.

54 Tilbury 2015, 273.

histories have ceased to exist as mere cultural practices: they now act as tools of resistance against colonial erasure. They not only serve to remember past colonial violence but also reshape the common understanding of history for non-Aboriginal people, as these perspectives are systematically suppressed from the main discourse.

Art like McKenzie's turns contested events into powerful statements that confront Australia's colonial violence. Her depiction of events like the Mistake Creek Massacre offers her people's version of events, which destabilises the colonial narrative and forces the public to reconsider the narrative they have been taught. Similarly, Aboriginal oral testimonies, as seen in *The Bringing Them Home* report, highlight Aboriginal experiences and contest colonial suppression. These testimonies challenge epistemic injustice, preserve Indigenous memory and ensure reparation and transmission through generations.

In both mediums, there is an underlying act of resistance that refuses to accept the colonial version of history and demands that Indigenous voices be heard. These narratives and artworks emphasise Indigenous power and demand a decolonial approach to Australia's history, in which these voices become essential to narrate the past and shape the future.

NEED FOR RECOGNITION AND ACTION

The suppression of Aboriginal voices and the detached attitude towards the colonisation of their land and culture show that there is an urgent need to highlight Aboriginal narratives. Recognising the historical importance of Aboriginal experiences in academic spaces and within Australian society would allow for a better understanding of Aboriginal people's struggles and initiate reconciliation. More recently, Aboriginal Australian scholars have raised their voices. Some examples include A. Moreton-Robinson and her book *The White Possessive*, where she explores the links between race, sovereignty and property; L. Behrendt, who criticises colonial storytelling and its depiction of Aboriginal people in *Finding Eliza*; and T. Yunkaporta in *Sand Talk*, in which he aims to look at the contemporary world through Indigenous perspectives.⁵⁵

However, the inclusion of Aboriginal voices should go beyond academic work and be implemented within Australian society in government policies and knowledge hubs. It could take place through the integration of Aboriginal perspectives into official histories, school curricula, and public discourse to ensure that new generations receive a more inclusive and multifaceted

⁵⁵ Moreton-Robinson 2015; Behrendt 2016; Yunkaporta 2019.

understanding of Australia's history.

Without this recognition, Indigenous people will always remain marginalised and continue to face the psychological impacts of erasure as well as the broader social and economic consequences of being written out of the national narrative. Decolonial approaches to history are thus essential to promote justice by highlighting Aboriginal voices and challenging the epistemic and structural violence of Australia's colonial past.

CONCLUSION

The article has aimed to illustrate the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal Australians, such as physical and psychological violence, the long dismissal of Aboriginal sufferings, as well as the ongoing inequalities Aboriginal communities experience. It has also demonstrated the significance of elevating Aboriginal voices through their oral histories and art. The latter can become a decolonial tool of resistance against repressive colonial erasure and allow the inclusion and reparation of Aboriginal communities. Victims of The Stolen Generations were offered a formal apology and reparations after the publication of The Bringing Them Home report, while McKenzie's painting was finally exhibited after 15 years to offer an Aboriginal decolonial perspective on the past to the public. Finally, the article has emphasised the urgent need for Australia to engage in meaningful structural changes that recognise and incorporate Aboriginal perspectives. A genuine reconciliation between Aboriginal people and Australia's institutions and society can only happen through the decolonisation of knowledge and history for a future grounded in equity and justice.

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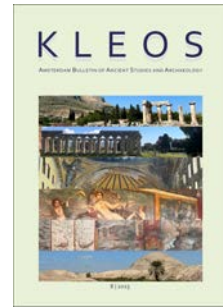
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Canvases of Change: Protest Graffiti on Colonial Statues and WWII Memorials

The dilemma of preserving the original or transformed hard memory

Vera Bouterse

ABSTRACT

This article examines the debate surrounding the treatment of protest graffiti on historical monuments. Two opposing sides are examined by critically reviewing the validity of their arguments, which propose that either removing or preserving graffiti would allow for a more diverse and inclusive memorial landscape. Through the identification of protest graffiti as a memory event, the extent to which removing or preserving graffiti affects inclusivity and diversity will be examined using the concepts of hard and soft memory. Case studies concerning Black Lives Matter and pro-Palestinian protests will be used to illustrate the difficulty in following just one of these views, since both include and exclude certain groups at the same time. In the discussion and conclusion, suggestions will be made regarding the complexities of creating an inclusive memorial landscape, as well as the responsibilities of academics and, primarily, authorities to employ a more nuanced perspective. This includes using the discontent expressed through graffiti as a starting point for dialogue with inhabitants and encouraging their participation in the decision-making process.

INTRODUCTION

Officials often place historical monuments, statues, and memorials to inscribe (collective) memories into the public space, attempting to represent or create a communal identity. While these structures are often set in stone, the memories which they represent are not. Not everyone will identify with the displayed memories and may even express counter-memories. These counter-memories can increase or be highlighted due to current socio-political events and discourses, like the Black Lives Matter movement or the conflict between Israel and Hamas. If certain public structures do not align with the current memories of (parts of) society, to what extent should these monuments be conserved? This article will explore this question in the context of

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protest graffiti on monuments and examine the validity of the two opposing sides in this debate. One side argues for the need to conserve the original historical structure, whilst the other aims to preserve the added graffiti as a new memory.¹ Both sides argue for a more diverse and inclusive memorial landscape, but have opposing ideas on how to attain that. This article adds to the existing debate by proposing a third, more nuanced view—one that acknowledges the diverse and fluid perspectives on protest graffiti and aims to comprehend these through dialogue on a case-by-case basis.

This article will initially describe the perception of graffiti in general and the concepts of hard and soft memory, as well as memory events, which will aid in the understanding of the varying perceptions regarding the preservation of protest graffiti. Subsequently, the two opposing views concerning the preservation of graffiti are elaborated upon, after which case studies on Black Lives Matter and pro-Palestinian protests are explored to see the extent to which removing or preserving graffiti forms a diverse memorial landscape. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will state some remarks on the complexities of creating an inclusive memorial landscape and what the responsibilities of academics and, primarily, authorities should be in contributing to a diverse and fluid landscape.

INSCRIBING NEW MEMORIES OR CONSERVING THE OLD

As previously mentioned, there are two opposing views regarding the preservation of protest graffiti on monuments. First, to understand these views, a more general existing perception of graffiti will be described and how its reputation may (partly) hinder the reception of protest graffiti. Second, the concepts of memory event, and of hard and soft memory are explored, which are relevant in understanding the connection between protest graffiti and the dynamics of memory. Finally, the two opposing views will be elaborated upon in connection with these outlined concepts.

GRAFFITI'S REPUTATION

Graffiti, as the placement of texts or images on public surfaces, has existed for thousands of years. The modern form of graffiti, such as the placement of an artist's signature or tag, increased from the 1960s/1970s onwards in New York, after which it spread internationally.² This practice became associated mainly with

¹ Pozo-Antonio et al. 2016; Ricci et al. 2020; Van Hunen 2004 argue for the need to conserve the original historical structure, in contrast to Đukić 2020; Merrill 2011; Zieleniec 2016.

² E.g. Andron 2024, 59; Ladrado 15th of May 2018.

youth, vandalism, and anti-social behaviour that was considered deviant from civilised norms and expected conduct. Eventually, this perception led to criminalisation of these acts.³ Graffiti was—and some forms, such as tags, often still are—thought to create an unsafe environment and attract or signify other criminal behaviour as well.⁴ By framing the act as criminal, moral panic is created among the public, serving to justify the removal of the graffiti and the punishment of the artist.⁵ Authorities can perceive illegally placed graffiti as a loss of control over urban spaces, which they then try to reassert by, for example, cleaning the graffiti or stimulating regulated ‘nice’ street art to promote the city’s image.⁶ Graffiti, mainly in the more positive denomination of street art or mural paintings, has seemingly become more accepted, although the legality of these paintings and their perception as being aesthetically pleasing have been important factors in gaining this acceptance.⁷ In the Netherlands, a project that is supported by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed) has been designating graffiti as cultural heritage.⁸ The same institution, however, also describes the need to prevent historical monuments and statues from becoming the podium for graffiti, an act they consider illegal on these types of public structures.⁹ This contrast reflects the arguments of both Karen Jewell, who states that social acceptance of graffiti depends on its content, medium, and location, and of Sabina Andron, who argues that a creative output is more easily welcomed than one with a destructive or anti-social intention.¹⁰ Apparently, historical monuments and statues, at least for Dutch authorities, are not considered a desirable location, and paint is not seen as a welcomed medium, as it is perceived as destructive to these culturally valuable objects. This makes it harder for protesters who target these kinds of structures to gain acceptance of their graffiti messages, though disapproval may also stem from the message itself, as demonstrated in the case studies discussed later. While all graffiti can be seen as political in that they defy the control of the ‘appropriate and accepted’ use of space, the content of protest graffiti, specifically, is a form of political discourse through which marginalised groups can make

3 Andron 2024, 72, 141-142; Jewell 2022; Ross 2016, 1.

4 Andron 2024, 144-145; Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed n.d.-b.; Willems 22nd of May 2025

5 Andron 2024, 72-75, 144-145.

6 Andron 2024, 72; Dijksterhuis 26th of June 2025; Willems 22nd of May 2025.

7 Andron 2024, 80; Dijksterhuis 26th of June 2025; Omroep West 28th of May 2025; Willems 22nd of May 2025.

8 Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed n.d.-a.

9 Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed n.d.-b.

10 Jewell 2022; Andron 2024, 80, 143.

their (often controversial) opinions and discontent heard publicly.¹¹

When considering the negative reputation that illegal and non-aesthetically oriented graffiti have had throughout time, the question arises as to what extent this perception can impact the reception and acceptance of the political content expressed by protest graffiti. Furthermore, does the danger of 'uglifying' the city, and more specifically monuments, justify a stricter control over the presentation of the public space by authorities than by the general population?

MEMORY EVENTS, HARD AND SOFT MEMORY

Etkind describes two forms of memory: soft and hard memory.¹² Soft memories can take the form of, among others, texts, public opinions and historical debates. Hard memories are the anchoring of soft memories in the form of physical structures, such as monuments, memorials, and museums. These two forms of memory must interact with each other to remain significant. In this interaction, cultural memory is shaped. Hard memory is needed as a physical focal point for soft memories, enabling the materialisation of a collective identity, remembrance of the past, and preventing the fading of these memories with future generations. Soft memory, on the other hand, causes the continuing significance of these hard memories due to the integration of these represented memories into public discourse and texts. However, soft memory does not always follow the hard memory it represents. While hard memories seem to illustrate a singular view of the past, soft memories allow for plural interpretations of how the past should be remembered. This can lead to an imbalance between the two forms of memory, potentially resulting in memory events. These memory events are performative moments through which shifts can emerge in how the past is remembered. These shifts only occur if this new form of remembrance is believed to be truthful, original, and central to the collective identity by the community whose past it concerns. Memory events can be performances in the sphere of hard memory, such as the erection or dismantling of, or vandalism towards, statues and monuments. These memory events can also occur in soft memory, such as through a historical debate or specific archival findings, causing a change in perspectives of the past. Memory events can thus be products of changes in hard and soft memory, but also agents in furthering these transformations. Since these memory events operate in the interaction between hard and soft memory and influence it in return, these moments

¹¹ Zhang and Chan 2021, 521.

¹² Etkind 2013.

are crucial in the dynamic development of cultural memory.¹³ Returning to the topic of protest graffiti, we can understand it as a form of memory event as well—one that alters the hard memory of a monument. Protest graffiti emerges from a perceived imbalance between hard and soft memory and is intended to alter cultural memory. The extent to which people accept this new form of remembrance differs.

DEBATE ON THE CONSERVATION OF GRAFFITI ON MONUMENTS

First, Pozo-Antonio et al., Ricci et al., and Van Hunen focus mainly on how to clean graffiti on monuments in a way that conserves the integrity of the structure's materials.¹⁴ The preservation of graffiti is not considered in these articles, as it is viewed as a threat to the historical and aesthetic value of monuments.¹⁵ The authors are concerned with preserving the originally presented hard memory. Ricci et al. even argue that conservation of the original hard memory is the key to retrieving inclusivity and diversity. However, the authors do not discuss this statement in depth.¹⁶ They may refer to the fact that graffiti not only results in financial costs, as argued by Qwatekana and Zondi, but can also mean the loss of the cultural heritage and social values which the original structures represent.¹⁷ This loss can lead to the exclusion of certain groups and their memories.

The abovementioned authors arguing for the removal of graffiti do not address the motivations behind the graffitiing of historical monuments and statues. These motivations are considered by Đukić, Merrill, and Zieleniec, who see the positive value of graffiti and (in)directly discuss the need to preserve graffiti on monuments.¹⁸ Zieleniec says that leaving monuments in their original context does not guarantee inclusivity, but rather creating a democratic space in which people can add their own thoughts does.¹⁹ Hard memory in public space is often controlled by authorities who make the decisions on its visual aesthetic organisation, such as which monuments are placed and where. Furthermore, authorities to some extent regulate how people are supposed to behave around such spaces through regulation, surveillance, and policing.²⁰ These monuments form a memorial landscape in which certain collective memories and identities are

¹³ Etkind 2013, 177-179, 182, 194.

¹⁴ Pozo-Antonio et al. 2016; Ricci et al. 2020; Van Hunen 2004.

¹⁵ Pozo-Antonio et al. 2016, 1; Van Hunen 2004, 1.

¹⁶ Ricci et al. 2020, 1-2.

¹⁷ Qwatekana/Zondi 2021, 190.

¹⁸ Đukić 2020; Merrill 2011; Zieleniec 2016.

¹⁹ Zieleniec 2016, 10-11, 13-14.

²⁰ Đukić 2020, 124; Zieleniec 2016, 6.

presented, while others are excluded. By leaving monuments in the public space without additional texts or counter-monuments, the impression is given that those memories are still a part of the collective identity, even if they are contested in soft memory.²¹ This representation of hard memory in the public space may not always align with the narratives, or soft memories, of (parts of) society. Therefore, certain groups may not be able to identify with the collective narrative which is told, and thus feel unacknowledged. This imbalance between hard and soft memory can lead to memory events, such as the targeting of monuments with graffiti to express certain narratives in hard memory as well.²² This act can be seen as countering the previously mentioned control of authorities on hard memory by adapting the visual aesthetic space and opposing the way people are expected to behave at such monuments.²³ Following Lefebvre's thoughts on inhabitants having the right to participate in the shaping and appropriation of urban spaces, Zieleniec sees the use of graffiti as inhabitants' "right to write the city".²⁴ In contrast to removing statues or monuments, this 'writing the city' is a way to inscribe their own memories over older ones instead of only removing the latter. Merrill argues that graffiti should be acknowledged as one of the site's many culturally significant layers.²⁵ These changes are necessary to maintain the significance of the represented hard memory for society, as views of history and how it is represented as heritage are constantly evolving.²⁶ As previously discussed, memory events operate in the interaction between hard and soft memory, so changes in one of the two can result in changes in the other as well. Originating from dynamics in soft memory, the adaptation of hard memory through graffiti can cause further developments in both forms of memory and perhaps even cultural memory overall. It can, for example, lead to the decision of dismantling statues or spark more public debates. Since many monuments or statues can become normalised, unnoticed 'furniture' of an urban landscape for many passersby, the transformation of these structures' hard memory through graffiti can make the familiar unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity can draw the attention of passersby to the unexpected changes made to the monument or statue and thus ensure that the message is received more consciously and memorably. The visible and unexpected graffiti invite the passersby to reflect on their message and enter

21 Abrassart 2022, 57; Qwatekana/Zondi 2021, 195.

22 Abrassart 2022, 57.

23 Đukić 2020, 125-126.

24 Lefebvre 1991, 422; Lefebvre 1996, 158, 174; Zieleniec 2016, 13-14.

25 Merrill 2011, 69.

26 Holtorf 2018, 643-644; Merrill 2011, 71.

the public debate.²⁷ So, the changing of hard memory by adding new layers of graffiti is not only done to express discontent, but also to encourage further reflection in public debates and transform cultural memory.²⁸ The success of the latter depends on the community's acceptance of these changes as truthful, original, and central to their communal identity.

SITES OF CONTESTATION: EXAMINING GRAFFITI ON COLONIAL AND WORLD WAR II MONUMENTS

Some case studies will now be discussed to contextualise the potential reasons and events leading up to protesters graffitiing these structures. While there are also some cases in which monuments without an apparent connection to the graffitied message are targeted to express discontent, this article will focus on the ones that seem to have a direct or semi-direct relationship with the content of the graffiti.²⁹ This will allow the disjuncture to be examined between the originally represented content and the new message people add onto it or transform it into. It is important to acknowledge that the assumptions made in this article about the motivations of protesters and the meaning of their graffiti are based on media reports and this author's interpretation of the content on the monuments. Conversations with protesters would provide a clearer and more accurate understanding of why they targeted monuments and what they intended to express through the graffiti, but that is beyond the scope of this article.

COLONIAL CASES

Large amounts of statues representing the 'heroes' of the colonial era adorn the urban landscape in many countries: people who were once celebrated for their contribution to the wealth and supremacy of Western countries, which they achieved through violent conquests abroad. Nowadays, their legacy is being questioned more and more, altering the narratives and soft memories about them.³⁰ This change, however, is not yet always visible in the public space, or hard memory, where they are still well-represented, in contrast to the lack of visibility given to

²⁷ Bentley 2021, 213-214; Zieleniec 2016, 11.

²⁸ Zieleniec 2016, 11.

²⁹ For example, the targeting of the statue of Gandhi and a boy with rabbits by pro-Palestinian protesters, NOS Nieuws/NH Nieuws 4th of August 2024.

³⁰ As seen with the examples of King Leopold II, mentioned by Boffey, 23rd of November 2019, and the Canadian figures John A. Macdonald and Edward Cornwallis, referenced by McHutchion 2022, 71-72.

victims of the colonial era.³¹ As many societies become increasingly multicultural, people of different colours or ethnicities may be confronted with a certain identity and view of the past expressed in this hard memory which excludes their voices.³² Especially after the death of George Floyd and the massive global Black Lives Matter protests that followed, this feeling of exclusion led to the targeting of many statues or monuments which protesters felt promoted a colonial or racist view of the past.³³

In Belgium, for example, many statues commemorating King Leopold II have been graffitied on. One statue in Brussels has been marked several times with, among others, “assassin”, “Black Lives Matter”, and “no justice, no peace”. Furthermore, Leopold’s hands were painted red, possibly referring to the blood on his hands due to his role in the perpetuation of colonialism in the Congo.³⁴ The paint was removed by authorities, after which another message was written: “Stop cleaning, start reflecting”. Protesters did not feel heard and acknowledged, as the hard memory depictions of Leopold II remained unchanged in many cases, thereby excluding the protesters’ voices. His violent, colonial legacy and the continuation of racism are not fully recognised in soft memory either.³⁵ Twenty thousand four hundred people signed a petition claiming that the monarch could not be held responsible for what others did under his rule, therefore wishing the statues of him to remain in place.³⁶ He was also described as a hero for Belgium by Foreign Minister Louis Michel in 2010, and a celebration for him was initially planned in 2015.³⁷ This positive perspective was in contrast to that of Belgian-Congolese Joëlle Sambi Nzeba, who felt disassociated from this Belgian identity and missed an acknowledgement of her version of history.³⁸

Graffitiing statues of the former king, like the one in Brussels, not only caused changes in the hard memory of Leopold II, but also stimulated broader reflection and discourse in society at the level of soft memory. First of all, discourse on how Leopold should be remembered increased, resulting in a report stating the need to

³¹ Van Roosmalen 13th of February 2023. As for example in Belgium, Van Rensbergen, 29th of June 2024, mentions that there are no monuments representing the victims of colonialisation.

³² Abrassart et al. 2022, 8-10, 57, 59; Rannard/Webster 13th of June 2020.

³³ Abrassart et al. 2022, 100, 145; KNAW 2023, 19, 82, 99.

³⁴ Spinks 10th of June 2020.

³⁵ Abrassart et al. 2022, 8.

³⁶ Galindo 22nd of June 2020.

³⁷ Abrassart et al. 2022, 100; Rannard/Webster 13th of June 2020. Abrassart et al. 2022, 100 mention that protests, during which the statue of King Leopold II in Brussels among others was defaced with red paint, caused the cancellation of this celebration.

³⁸ Rannard/Webster 13th of June 2020.

preserve the graffiti as illustrations of “decolonial contestation”.³⁹ Graffiti was furthermore used to encourage reflection on current discourses and events. Statues can be seen as symbols of current political and social struggles and, therefore, used as platforms to express opinions about these issues. A statue of King Leopold II in Ghent was covered in red paint, and a cloth marking the words “I can’t breathe” was placed around its head, quoting the last words of George Floyd in 2020. This statue, which the protesters deemed to have racist and colonial associations, became a symbol illustrating continuing structural racism, to which King Leopold II in their eyes contributed.⁴⁰

WORLD WAR II OR HOLOCAUST MONUMENTS

Another pattern of monuments and statues being targeted is related to World War II (WWII) and/or the Holocaust. These monuments have been targeted for a long time, such as by graffitiing antisemitic symbols on them.⁴¹ After the attack of Hamas against Israel on the 7th of October 2023, and the following war, multiple monuments have been targeted by pro-Palestinian protesters. The monuments seem to function as podiums to express discontent against the current actions of the Israeli State, which pro-Palestinian protesters condemn as a genocide against the Palestinians.⁴² While other types of monuments have been targeted as well, like a statue of Gandhi or of an unknown boy, Holocaust and WWII monuments seem to either be targeted the most or reported on most frequently by the media.⁴³ The exact reasoning for using these specific monuments is unclear, and this may vary from case to case. Three possible reasons are elaborated upon in this section, which argues that the associations these monuments have with Jewish people, genocide in general, or the Holocaust specifically, may be causes.

The association between Jewish people, often commemorated at Holocaust and WWII monuments, and the Israeli State may be one motivation. Jewish people as a whole have experienced blame for the actions of the Israeli government: at a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, named Block of Women, the phrases “Jews are

³⁹ Abrassart et al. 2022, 214.

⁴⁰ Chini 3rd of June 2020.

⁴¹ There is an example reported in the New York Times at 1987 of an undefined Holocaust monument which was defaced with swastikas, New York Times 2nd of June 1987. Another example is of 2009, when a Holocaust memorial at Drancy, France, was defaced with swastikas, Davies 12th of April 2009. Lastly, a Holocaust memorial in Philadelphia was targeted with a swastika symbol in 2024, Freeman 15th of January 2024. These few examples illustrate the lengthy targeting of, among others, Holocaust and World War II monuments with antisemitic symbols.

⁴² NOS Nieuws 11th of January 2024.

⁴³ NOS Nieuws/NH Nieuws 4th of August 2024.

committing genocide”, “Free Palestine”, and a Palestinian flag were painted (see figures 1 and 2), the first statement clearly associating the actions of Israel with Jewish people in general.⁴⁴ Moreover, a statue of Anne Frank in Amsterdam was defaced twice, with the word “Gaza” written on the pedestal, and her hands painted red, probably indicating blood.⁴⁵ The transformation of this statue’s hard memory sparked considerable debate in soft memory as well, not only regarding this action but also the war between Israel and Hamas in general. Several organisations shared their views on the defacement via social media, it was reported on by news outlets, and many commented on these news articles and social media posts.⁴⁶ Here, it seems that while there are people who seem to (partly) agree with this action, many are condemning the use of Anne Frank’s memory for pro-Palestinian protest and see it as antisemitic.⁴⁷ Although the graffiti may have been meant to condemn Israel’s actions or demonstrate against the suffering in Gaza, for many, it seemed to express that Jewish people in general, with whom Anne Frank can be associated, have blood on their hands.⁴⁸ This caused strong reactions, such as the comment of one person who felt personally attacked as a Jew.⁴⁹ These graffiti transform the narrative that represents Jewish people as victims of the Holocaust into one that depicts them as perpetrators, and are, therefore, seen as disrespecting Anne Frank’s memory and that of other Jewish victims.⁵⁰ After the graffitiing of this statue for a second time, a camera was placed by the police to prevent the recurrence of such an incident.⁵¹

Secondly, there are also graffiti on monuments that do not specifically refer to Jewish people, but only refer to the wish to free Gaza and Palestine in their content.⁵² These monuments may be used as symbols of genocide, onto which protesters wish to add their perspectives of the attack on Gaza as another genocide. The chief executive of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust in England, Olivia Marks-Woldman, stated: “One thing we hear quite often is people saying the war in Gaza is another genocide, it’s just like the Holocaust”.⁵³ This does not automatically mean that the graffiti

44 Hajdenberg 2024.

45 NOS Nieuws/NH Nieuws 4th of August 2024.

46 World Jewish Congress 9th of July 2024; European Jewish Congress 6th of August 2024.

47 NU.nl 4th of August 2024; HLN 4th of August 2024.

48 NOS Nieuws/NH Nieuws 4th of August 2024.

49 At the post of World Jewish Congress 9th of July 2024 one person wrote as a comment: “Its not about Israelis. Its about us, Jews. Again.”

50 Starr. 10th of July 2024.

51 Redactie Trouw 9th of August 2024.

52 Jordan 9th of August 2024; Starr 13th of April 2024.

53 Tapper 27th of April 2024.



Figure 1.
Graffiti on the Block of Women memorial in Berlin (after Sapir, 28th of August 2024)



Figure 2.
Graffiti on the Block of Women memorial in Berlin (after Sapir, 28th of August 2024)

dismiss the memories of the Jewish people, but that they intend to have the Gaza-genocide expressed in hard memory as well. During a protest at Auschwitz, pro-Palestinian protesters claimed to be bowing down for the Holocaust victims as well as wanting to express their hope for an end to the genocide in Gaza.⁵⁴ So, while some pro-Palestinian protesters may have inscribed their memories over the Jewish genocide, the graffitied message can also be meant as acknowledging an additional memory next to the original one.

Another possibility is the use of Holocaust monuments to

⁵⁴ Oliver 6th of May 2024. Also, at a pro-Palestinian protest during the opening of the Dutch Holocaust Museum on the 10th of March 2024, the organising group Erev Rave claimed to be honouring the memory of Holocaust victims, but needing to protest against what was happening in Gaza as well, Van Campenhout/Van de Wouw/Verweij 10th of March 2024.

counter current pro-Israeli memory politics. Some Israeli state officials, as well as pro-Israeli institutions and public figures, have merged Holocaust memory with the attack by Hamas.⁵⁵ The employment of this memory can help the government represent current events as a Holocaust continuation of which Jewish people in their eyes continue to be the victims, and to legitimise their counterattack on Gaza.⁵⁶ While there is no direct evidence that this use of Holocaust memory has motivated protesters to graffiti Holocaust monuments, there are pro-Palestinian individuals and groups protesting against this employment of the Holocaust in soft memory by Israel.⁵⁷ In this case, protesters would not per se explicitly attack past memories, but current Holocaust-associations.

DISCUSSING DEFACEMENT

GRAFFITIAS A MEMORY EVENT: EXCLUSION PAIRED WITH INCLUSION

Two distinct types of monuments have been explored: colonial statues and monuments commemorating the Holocaust or World War II. Both types of monuments have been targeted by protest graffiti, which can be classified as memory events, attempting to evoke changes in both hard and soft memory.

Protesters attempted to transform or add memories to the originally presented hard memory. They have, for example, changed King Leopold II from a 'hero' into an 'assassin', or Jewish people from 'victims' to 'perpetrators'. Furthermore, new memories which were more identifiable for the protesters were added over or alongside the original memories. Examples of this are the phrases "Black Lives Matter" and "Gaza". These changes in hard memory also intend to stimulate further reflection in soft memory, and ultimately, in cultural memory as a whole. In the case of one King Leopold II statue, the phrase "stop cleaning, start reflecting" made this very explicit. The protests against Leopold II eventually led to public debates and the drafting of a report with the advice to preserve the graffiti.⁵⁸ The changes in hard and soft memories of the monarch also transformed his representation in cultural memory. Aside from countering the historical narratives and values which monuments represent, protesters may also draw attention to current events, like racism against black people or the

⁵⁵ Bartov et al. 20th of November 2023; Klein 5th of October 2024; Novis-Deutsch/Adams 2024, 87; Segal 2024, 62-63.

⁵⁶ Bartov et al. 20th of November 2023; Klein 5th of October 2024; Segal 2024, 64.

⁵⁷ An 87-year-old Holocaust survivor argued that the Holocaust should not be used as cover by Israel, Tapper 27th of April 2024, and some Dutch institutions critiqued Israeli president Herzog for using the Holocaust to legitimize a genocide in Gaza, Het Parool 9th of March 2024.

⁵⁸ Abrassart et al. 2022, 214.

genocide in Gaza. Colonial and Holocaust or WWII monuments seem to be most commonly employed due to their historical associations, such as colonialism, racism, the Jewish people, the Holocaust, or genocide, which (in)directly refer to current events.

By graffitiing monuments, the social and historical values and memories attached to the physical structures are affected as well. This can be considered a positive development because these new layers added onto them can cause black or pro-Palestinian inhabitants to feel more represented in the public space, aid reflection in public debates, and stimulate changes in cultural memory. In this way, a more democratic and dynamic space can be created, which transforms alongside changes of soft memory in society instead of presenting a seemingly fixed collective identity and cultural memory. If we solely focused on conserving the original structures and cleaning the graffiti, the memorial landscape would only be inclusive for the memories already represented, but exclusive for the ones graffitied onto monuments and removed afterwards. By only focusing on keeping certain visual aesthetics and policing unwanted behaviour, through the punishment of 'vandals' or the placing of cameras, as was the case for the Anne Frank statue, the opportunity for public engagement is ignored.⁵⁹

On the other hand, while preserving the new layers can aid the diversification of the memorial landscape for black and pro-Palestinian groups, it can dismiss and exclude the memories and perspectives of groups who feel more affiliated with the original memory showcased. As mentioned before, to have memory events that successfully transform cultural memory, they must comply with the three factors of truthfulness, originality, and being central to a community's identity.⁶⁰ While the perspectives are new to the initial memories, and can therefore be deemed original, they are not accepted as truthful or central to a collective identity by all. In the case of the colonial statues, there are still people who appreciate the historical value of the monuments and do not want them to be vandalised. Also, some people do not acknowledge the role of King Leopold II as a perpetrator and celebrate a positive image of him as part of the Belgian identity, not the graffitied negative one. While his violent and colonial legacy is attested in soft memory, and the need to transform the hard memory of him is therefore understandable, the perspectives of people who see him as a hero will be excluded.⁶¹ In the case of the Holocaust and WWII monuments, online comments and posts

⁵⁹ Lawson-Tancred 13th of July 2022.

⁶⁰ Etkind 2013, 179.

⁶¹ Rannard/Webster 13th of June 2020.

about the graffiti on the Anne Frank statue exemplify the fear that graffiti will change the memory of her and other victims and increase antisemitism. Many did not accept the portrayal of Jewish people as perpetrators, and this new memory, which they consider antisemitic, as central to a collective identity. These cases demonstrate the inaccuracy of the argument that preserving graffiti will create a more diverse memorial landscape. The addition of new memories also accompanies the (un)intended exclusion or change of older memories, which is why we should speak of a transformed memorial landscape instead of a more diverse one.

USING DIALOGUE TO EXPLORE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Since municipalities are the ones in control of the visual aesthetics of public places and the accepted behaviour in them, they are the ones responsible for deciding what should happen with the monuments and protest graffiti. However, this decision should not rely on a single, uniform solution imposed solely by the authorities on all case studies. As also argued by Abrassart et al., decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis and through a dialogue where inhabitants are included in the decision-making process, preferably, if existing, with people supporting and opposing the preservation of the graffiti. A dialogue is required to avoid focusing solely on how to handle the hard memory, but also to understand how the structures (mis-)match with the soft memory of varying groups. A case-by-case approach within such a dialogue can be better equipped to support the varying wishes that may exist between each case study, and allows authorities to monitor the constantly evolving perceptions citizens hold regarding how the past should be represented, as well as how public space should be used and shaped. This approach can also help to understand the underlying motivations and discontent which led to the targeting of a specific monument.

When thinking about the format of such a dialogue, this research has highlighted three important topics that should be addressed. First, what should be done with (the graffiti on) the monument itself? Second, how does this specific case relate to the broader memorial landscape and the extent to which people feel represented in hard memory? Third, what current social issues and forms of discontent are reflected through the protest graffiti, and how might these issues and discontent be addressed? Referring to the first question and based on Jewell and Andron, the level of acceptance of graffiti on a specific monument can be understood by surveying the perceptions of the graffiti's location, medium,

content, and intention among the various participants.⁶² These aspects help to understand if the targeted monument is deemed a proper location for these messages, or if it is regarded as an inappropriate location, as is often felt in the case of Holocaust or World War II monuments. Furthermore, it can clarify if paint is seen as the right medium or if this is seen as aesthetically unpleasing or too damaging for the historical structure. Moreover, it can be examined to what extent the content of a message is deemed original, truthful, and central to the collective's identity.⁶³ Thus, examining whether the new content of the hard memory corresponds with the soft memory of the varying participants is important. If the message is not perceived as central to the collective's identity by the majority, the dialogue should explore why it is excluded and whether it should be more deliberately incorporated. Finally, the dialogue can make participants aware of the intention behind the graffiti, which may challenge the automatic reputation of graffiti as anti-social and criminal. When aware of the intention, participants might be able to make a more carefully considered judgement on whether the graffiti is deemed a justified act or rather considered anti-social and vandalistic.

If it is decided that the message should remain, but must be expressed through a different medium or at a different location, several alternatives are possible. Rigney describes the concepts of removal, reframing, and re-signifying.⁶⁴ The removal of a statue or monument is an option, but she states that this complicates efforts to address the problematic history and current societal problems attached to it. Re-framing—replacing a monument in a different context, such as a museum—can have a more educational function. Still, the monument does lose its value as a place of protest and awareness for random passersby. Finally, re-signifying means that a new (or additional) meaning is among others given through the placement of a plaque, a counter monument in close proximity to the original, or via graffiti. In Flanders, Belgium, almost all statues of King Leopold II have received a plaque to provide extra context.⁶⁵ A plaque can be a way to keep the monument visually the same, but add new historical perspectives. Still, the question remains if it always accurately represents the views of groups who do not feel identifiable with the older memory. In the case of the Leopold statues in Flanders, the views of affiliated Congolese people were almost entirely disregarded

62 Jewell 2022; Andron 2024, 80, 143.

63 Etkind 2013, 179.

64 Rigney 2023, 24-26.

65 Abrassart et al. 2022, 39.

when writing the texts.⁶⁶ While a plaque can be a good way of adding additional context, it is often again a seemingly fixed and one-sided narrative added by officials. Graffiti, on the other hand, can be added by anyone at any time and may be more flexible to changing dynamics in the memories of society. A Leopold statue in Ghent was initially left alone after a plaque with additional historical context was added. Nevertheless, after the death of George Floyd, protesters used this statue to express their opinions on current racism.⁶⁷ A plaque may therefore not always be enough to go along with all perspectives and rapid dynamics in society. Graffiti, furthermore, have a more pronounced 'shock effect' due to their abnormality and visibility on a monument, which likely attracts more attention than a traditional plaque and highlights a problematic history or political discontent that might otherwise go unnoticed by passersby.⁶⁸

Prerequisites for such a dialogue should be a willingness to listen to all the different perspectives, excepting perspectives, or graffitied messages, which are meant to be discriminatory. In some cases, a message can be felt as hurtful to a group, as illustrated by the Anne Frank statue example—something which should be taken into account during the decision-making process. A dialogue can then clarify the exact reasoning behind the targeting of a monument, and the extent to which these reasons are indeed discriminatory in nature.

Aside from discussing the specific case study, the dialogue should be seen as an opportunity to understand if the varying soft memories of the participants match with the memorial landscape in general and if inhabitants feel represented and welcome in the hard memory of public places. Finally, as demonstrated, protest graffiti is often not solely directed at the monuments themselves, but also expresses broader social discontent about issues that protesters may feel are unacknowledged by society.⁶⁹ Abrassart et al. drafted a report on how to proceed with colonial statues in Belgium and argue that the decolonisation of the public space should be paired with education about the problematic history behind it and support for current social problems that are tied to it.⁷⁰ A dialogue can thus also help in understanding the current issues in society and how this discontent can be addressed.

66 Ibid., 39

67 In the case of this statue in Ghent, the message on the plaque is the following: "The city council regrets the many Congolese victims who died during the Free State" (Chini 3rd of June 2020). While the Congolese victims are mentioned, no explicit reference is made to the colonial legacy of King Leopold II.

68 Rigney 2023, 24-26.

69 Zhang and Chan 2021, 521.

70 Abrassart et al. 2022, 210, 216-220.

Acknowledging their disaffection may in turn also lead to a decrease in protest graffiti.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the question of what to do with protest graffiti on historical monuments, two opposing sides were explored, specifically the validity of the argument that either removing or preserving graffiti would lead to a more diverse and inclusive memorial landscape.

This research has pointed out that both sides are too optimistic in stating that either conserving the original structure or preserving the graffiti creates a more diverse and inclusive memorial landscape. By not allowing any graffiti and simply deeming it vandalistic behaviour, a fixed landscape is created that does not allow for changes to hard memory and the resulting reflection in soft memory. This approach does not align with the ever-changing nature of memory and excludes alternative voices of groups who do not yet feel represented. Nevertheless, preserving all graffiti as new layers may result in the exclusion of previously represented voices. This is especially tricky when new voices are felt to be antisemitic, like the generalisation of Jews as perpetrators of genocide, or to diminish the memory of Holocaust victims like Anne Frank.

Memory events, such as graffitiing monuments, are caused by an imbalance between how the past is remembered in soft and hard memory. However, this imbalance may not be visible for some individuals at first, but will be created once the hard memory is affected by protesters. These individuals, for whom the hard memory is negatively reframed, will therefore not accept memory events as truthful and central to the community's identity. There will thus always be an imbalance between soft and hard memory for some, leading to memory events such as protest graffiti. Cultural memory is inherently dynamic, fluid, and diverse, so there will always be opposing views on what our society should forget and what should be remembered. It is therefore difficult to make choices on how to manage graffiti on monuments, since in both cases—preserving or removing it—an imbalance is created, and people's memories are excluded. This article has demonstrated that both sides, as illustrated at the beginning, neglect to consider the exclusion that coincides with their "inclusive memorial landscape". Academics should avoid promoting one side of the discussion on how to handle protest graffiti without considering the opinions of and impact it has on the people whose memories are excluded by these choices. It will likely be impossible to achieve a perfect inclusive memorial landscape for all, but in our aim to make it as inclusive as possible,

we should at least also consider the complexities paired with this. For those who have the authority to establish and manage hard memory, a constant dilemma persists regarding how to address these diverse perspectives. Although not everyone can be fully accommodated, a dialogue for each case separately with a diversity of stakeholders acknowledges that there are multiple, ever-changing perspectives, and helps to monitor these. Furthermore, a dialogue may increase understanding between the different groups, hand over some control to the inhabitants in the decision-making process, and help to gain a broader understanding of the (dis)content people have within public spaces or society. Academics have a responsibility to critically monitor the extent to which this happens, since consultation with the stakeholders whose memories are concerned is not always included, as is evident in the example of the plaques mentioned previously.

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