

26th Annual CHRC Symposium

## **The Role of Heritage in Shaping Ontological Security in the Contemporary World**

**Friday 8<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2026**

McDonald Centre for Archaeological Research, Downing Site Cambridge



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# Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to the 26th Annual Cambridge Heritage Research Centre Symposium, at the University of Cambridge, organised in association with the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures. We hope you enjoy the presentations and posters' display, and you stay in Cambridge.

When choosing the conference topic for this year we considered the role of heritage in the wider context of the world we are part of and decided on the theme of ontological security that our heritage provides.

Heritage brings a sense of belonging, identity, and a shared history, which are crucial for fostering a hopeful future while living through current and past turmoils.

Our theme has attracted scholars from across the world, who have brought examples and viewpoints previously not considered in this context, for which we are very grateful.

The conference's success would not be possible without the support of the McDonald Institute for the Archaeological Research, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation and the Japan Foundation Endowment Committee. Most of all, we are grateful to Aimée Daffarn, the CHRC coordinator.

On the behalf of the organising committee

Dr Liliana Janik

**Deputy Director**  
**Cambridge Heritage Research Centre**



**Cover Image & above:** *A repaired celadon lotus bowl, from 'Kintsugi - The Poetic Mind' Bonnie Kemske, 2021, Herbert Press*

# With thanks

Cambridge Heritage Research Centre, along with the Sainsburys Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures would like to thank our supporters and funders, without whom this Symposium would not have been possible.



Japan Foundation Endowment Committee



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# Schedule

## Day 1

Friday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2026

- 09:00 Registration opens
- 09:30 Welcome Address, Dr Liliana Janik
- 09:45 **Session 1**  
*Recovery & Time*
- 11:00 *Refreshment Break*
- 11:15 **Session 2**  
*Creative Ontologies*
- 12:30 *Lunch*
- 13:30 **Session 3**  
*Everyday Heritage & Communal Security*
- 14:45 *Refreshment Break*
- 15:00 **Session 4**  
*(In)security in Past Colonialisms*
- 16:15 *Break*
- 16:30 **Keynote Lecture**  
Dr Claire Nolan - University College Dublin  
*'Going on in day-to-day life': Negotiating the complex and fluid nature of heritage-based ontological security*
- 17:30 *Reception*
- 20:00 Close of day 1

## Day 2

## Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2026

- 10:00     **Session 5**  
**Ontological security and post-war memory: Japanese heritage narratives of the Asia-Pacific War at 80**
- 11:10     *Refreshment Break & Poster Presentation*
- 11:30     **Session 6**  
**Tools of Ontology**
- 12:45     *Lunch Break*
- 13:45     **Session 7**  
**Seeking Stability in (post-)Conflict**
- 15:00     **Discussion and Q&A**  
  
Prof Simon Kaner, Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, University of East Anglia, Oliver Moxham and Shiting Lin.
- 16:00     **Closing Remarks**  
  
Dr Andreas Pantazatos, Deputy Director, Cambridge Heritage Research Centre
- 16:15     Conference Close

# Symposium Organisers



## **Dr Liliana Janik**

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# Day 1 - Session 1

## Recovery & Time

09:45-11:00



## Beyond Yet Bound: The Tigris River and the Politics of Heritage in Diyarbakır

Rosa Kavak

Recognising the Tigris River as a critical site of heritage in Diyarbakır, this paper argues that despite continuous ruptures in its flow—from genocidal violence to extractive capitalist development—the waterway endures as a medium through which residents articulate both their lives and the story of the city. The Tigris enters people’s biographies in local narratives, situating everyday life within the river’s longer temporal horizon, broader spatial reach, and plural cosmological registers that exceed the confines of the Turkish state and its often violently imposed national heritage regime.

I show how the Tigris enables a multi-ethnic heritage that recalls coexistence prior to the Armenian Genocide, sustaining attachments that operate as modes of resilience through its continued presence. These attachments extend recognition to diverse lived experiences of the present and to alternative imagined futures. Local practices unfold in tension with state efforts to flatten the river’s spatio-temporal and cosmological multiplicity, revealing contestation surrounding the Tigris’ heritage as a struggle over ontological “security”: over which histories are recognised, which experiences are rendered commemorable, and which symbolic frameworks are authorised. Attending to the river as both archive and site of intervention, the paper demonstrates how heritage functions simultaneously as a medium of existential reassurance and a technology of state consolidation.

## When Peace Is Not in Sight: Producing Ontological Security Through Heritage in Wartime Recovery Planning

Dr Dora Mérai - Newcastle University

The question of how social and political actors build on the past to sustain a stable sense of self in conditions of radical uncertainty has been central to scholarship on the role of heritage in times of war. In international policy and academic discourse on cultural heritage, however, recovery and reconstruction are typically framed as “post-conflict”, implying that they follow the cessation of violence and are closely linked to peace building, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. Organisations such as UNESCO, ICOM, and ICCROM, alongside scholars, examine how heritage can support reconciliation and how it is “armed” in war and potentially “disarmed” afterwards. Yet modern hybrid or “forever” wars – such as the war in Ukraine – lack clear temporal and spatial boundaries. The distinctions between war and peace, front-line and rear, military and civilian are blurred. Recovery, therefore, unfolds amid ongoing violence, when reconciliation is not on the political agenda.

In Ukraine, recovery planning began in 2022, immediately after the full-scale invasion, and continues today. Across national and local levels, and within political, professional, academic, and public discourse, recovery rests on the premise that this is a war over identity: Russia contests Ukraine’s distinct nationhood, continuity, and its right to shape its own collective memory and heritage. Russian policy has weaponised culture and heritage in international relations and grey-zone warfare, combining information operations with the targeting of material sites. As a result, culture, heritage, and memory are increasingly framed through a security lens in Ukrainian discussions of reconstruction and recovery.

This paper analyses how cultural heritage is mobilised by various actors to produce ontological security in planning Ukraine’s recovery during an ongoing war and considers the implications of this securitisation for the country’s short-, medium-, and long-term futures.

## Heritage, Reconstruction and Ontological (In)Security in a Post-Conflict Historic City: The Case of Diyarbakır

Dr Mehmet Tayfur - University of Strasbourg

This paper examines the role of cultural heritage in shaping ontological (in)security in post conflict urban contexts through the case of the historic centre of Diyarbakır (Suriçi), Turkey, following the 2015-armed clashes. Shortly after the inscription of the “Diyarbakır Fortress and Hevsel Gardens Cultural Landscape” on the UNESCO World Heritage List, large parts of Suriçi were subjected to destruction, displacement, and a centrally driven reconstruction process led by state institutions.

Drawing on doctoral research combining archival analysis, institutional documents, spatial mapping, satellite imagery, and semi-structured interviews, the paper explores how post conflict reconstruction and heritage-making processes seek to restore security while producing new forms of ontological insecurity. Rather than functioning solely as a source of reassurance and continuity, heritage in Diyarbakır has become a contested field in which memory, identity, and everyday relations to place are reconfigured under conditions of centralisation, securitisation, and limited local participation.

By examining how heritage-led reconstruction reshapes everyday relations to place, the paper shows how ontological security is mobilised as a policy objective while simultaneously destabilised through processes of de-heritagisation.

The paper argues that the reconstruction of heritage spaces in Suriçi has contributed to a form of “managed stability” that prioritises physical order and symbolic control over lived continuity and social repair. This has generated tensions between official narratives



*A historic house in one of Diyarbakır's historic neighbourhoods, viewed within a transformed post-conflict urban landscape. M. Tayfur, 2024*

of recovery and residents' experiences of loss and dispossession. By focusing on the governance of heritage and everyday impacts of reconstruction, the paper contributes to debates on resilience, belonging, and well-being in cities emerging from conflict.

# Day 1 - Session 2

## Creative Ontologies

11:15-12:30



M Chagall, *The Promenade*, 1917

## Heritage and identity in precarious times: An exploration of the struggle for ontological security as seen through the work of Marc Chagall

Dr Dacia Viejo Rose - Cambridge Heritage Research Centre  
University of Cambridge

Eric Hobsbawm famously nominated the 20th century as the 'Age of Extremes' and we can see this represented in highly emotional visual and symbolic language in the works of Marc Chagall who experienced several of those extremes from the Russian Revolution to World Wars, from the Nazi pogroms to the creation of the United Nations.

In the works of Chagall, we see him navigating the ontological insecurity caused by these extremes to his own sense of self, of continuity, of memory, and of identity. From flying lovers to the Eiffel Tower, from the silhouette of his hometown of Vitebsk (present day Belarus) to characters of Yiddish literature, we see him responding to tumultuous political and personal times, looking for anchors, for comfort, for the familiar, yet also denouncing and fighting back with the instruments he had.

Closely examining his works from a biographical perspective set in that age of extremes reveals the deeply intertwined and constantly re-examined relationship between heritage and identity. This revelation is central to understanding how heritage can provide or disrupt ontological security seen here through one creative journey that has often been dismissed as superficial nostalgia yet on closer reading reveals a journey at once extraordinary and representative of how we strive to make meaning even as everything around us is in constant flux and the future permanently out of reach.



M Chagall, 'Autoportrait Bouche Maison', 1922-23

## (In)Secure in Marble Artscapes: The Ontological Diversity of Greek Marble Craft Tradition

Isavella Voulgareli - University of Cambridge

In this paper, I propose a relational understanding of ontological (in)security to examine current transformations in heritage, focusing on marble craftsmanship at the Cycladic island of Tinos in Greece. Ontological security refers to a sense of stability generated through routinised practices and collective self-narratives and has been mobilised in heritage studies to explain how communities maintain continuity. However, in the context of societal uncertainty, heritage is also a site of destabilisation, where established meanings and roles are questioned. Although such transitions potentially threaten ontological security, they may constitute opportunities for individuals and communities to revisit practices in ways that secure more sustainable futures.

Tinian marble craftsmanship, shaped through collective modes of transmission and formalised through UNESCO's recognition of intangible cultural heritage, is currently shifting toward forms of artistic individuality and self-expression, resulting in experiences of ontological insecurity among local practitioners. Arguing that this is both an ethical and an agentic problem, I examine ontological security through three intersecting dimensions: the craft-art distinction, the male-female binary, and the tangible-intangible dichotomy embedded in the case study.

First, I trace how contemporary marble craft practice reshapes place making on Tinos within a post-capitalist context, where artistic orientations reconfigure social relations, material engagements, and experiences of belonging. Second, I demonstrate that while this shift opens the craft to gender awareness and inclusion, it also generates forms of temporal dissonance, as new modes

of making sit uneasily alongside traditional status quo. Finally, I analyse how push-back against or participation in these transitions challenge assumptions about the distribution of agency between humans and materials. The paper concludes by highlighting how forms of craftivism on the island reconcile these tensions: 'ethics of production' are grounded in practitioners' ontological dispositions toward the world, drawing on internal social capital to negotiate security during periods of upheaval.



*Tinian marble craft tradition in church and modern marble artwork, photographs by Isavella Voulgareli, 2023*

## Materialising Móremí: Tillichian Theology, Narrative Authority, and Ontological Security

Akeem Adagbada - University of Cambridge

In 2016, the Oṅni of Ilé-Iḡè erected a 42-foot statue of Móremí, transforming a mythico-historical narrative into a monumental, material form. This act exemplifies how heritage is mobilised to stabilise identity and produce ontological security. However, this reading of the Móremí itàn has been contested by a rival statue commissioned by Oba Akinrùntán, the Adétolugbò of Ùgbò Kingdom. This counter-monument challenges dominant historical narratives and reveals how heritage can also generate ontological insecurity by destabilising shared understandings of origin, belonging, and authority.

This paper examines how competing materialisations of Móremí function as sites of narrative struggle within the Yorùbá historical imaginary. Drawing on ethnographic insight—including the claim that “everything would collapse”—I argue that these contestations are not merely historiographical but existential, implicating the conditions through which communities secure a sense of continuity and being. In this sense, heritage emerges as both a resource for resilience and a locus of anxiety, aligning with the symposium’s concern with how heritage shapes ontological security in times of uncertainty .

The paper further considers the erection of statues of Òrànfè, Odùduwà, and Qbàtálá at the palace entrance in Ilé-Iḡè as a project of historical reconciliation. These figures collectively reconfigure sacred and historical lineages, offering a monumental attempt to stabilise a plural and contested past.

Engaging Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, I explore how courage operates as an ontological response to the anxieties produced



by competing heritage claims. If, as Tillich suggests, transcendence enables individuals and communities to endure uncertainty, then heritage practices may be understood as mediating between anxiety and belonging. Ultimately, the paper asks: how do heritage actors negotiate the tension between narrative authority and ontological security in contexts where the past itself is contested?

# Day 1 - Session 3

## Everyday Heritage & Communal Security

13:30-14:45



## Rituals of Resilience: Theyyam as Living Heritage, Ontological Security, and Community Well-being in North Malabar

Dr Deepa K V - Central University of Kerala

This paper theorizes Theyyam in North Malabar, Kerala, India, as a form of living heritage that actively produces ontological security and community well-being through ritualized practices of commemoration, reconciliation, and shared pasts.

Drawing on ontological security theory (Giddens) and interdisciplinary work in critical heritage and memory studies, the paper approaches ritual performance as a stabilizing social practice that sustains continuity, moral meaning, and emotional safety amid historical rupture and contemporary precarity.



*Dr. Kumaran A. - KCMT*

Ontological security is understood here not as an individual psychological condition but as a collective achievement, maintained through repeated cultural practices that render the world predictable and meaningful. Theyyam, as a cyclical ritual tradition in which performers embody deities, ancestors, and historically marginalized figures, materializes this process by transforming memory into embodied presence. Through performance, narratives of injustice, sacrifice, and moral transgression are not merely recalled but actively reworked, allowing communities to negotiate identity and belonging in relation to the past.

The paper argues that community well-being emerges through these shared ritual processes. Sacred spaces such as *kāvu* (groves) anchor identity to place, while ritual consultation and divine judgment provide culturally legible modes for articulating anxiety, grievance, and uncertainty. In this sense, Theyyam functions as an alternative form of commemoration, one that prioritizes relational care and emotional repair over static monumentalization. Memory is sustained as an ongoing social practice rather than fixed representation. Simultaneously, the paper critically interrogates the limits of ritual reconciliation, examining tensions between symbolic redress enacted within performance and the persistence of structural inequalities beyond it.

By Positioning Theyyam within broader debates on heritage, resilience, and security, the paper contributes to understanding how living ritual traditions operate as affective infrastructures that sustain ontological security and community well-being through the continual negotiation of shared pasts.

## Alright Marra: Football support as a vehicle for cultural resilience and ontological security in Horden, County Durham

Dr Josh Bland - University of Cambridge

Horden is the archetypal pit village. Set half a mile off the North Sea coast, it was once home to Britain's most productive "super pit". However, since the closure of Horden Colliery in 1987, the village has been beset by profound deprivation, high crime levels and the dissolution of the local institutional architecture. In this sense, it suffers in a perpetual state of industrial ruination. However, against this profound context of de-industrial rupture, one institution in the village remains as a beacon of continuity: Horden Community Welfare Football Club. In this paper, I draw on my PhD research to highlight the crucial role of football support in post-industrial locales such as Horden, in sustaining local forms of identity, community and knowledge into a post-industrial present.

This paper will proceed in three stages. First, I will identify the key characteristics that define football support as a cultural praxis. Here, I will show how football supporters in Horden comprise a symbolic community, the boundaries of which are enforced through an assemblage of heritage-linked behaviours, rituals, values and relationships. Second, I will exhibit how involvement in the community of football support attached to Horden CW enables participants to exercise a degree of cultural resilience against a wider context of industrial ruination. I will particularly focus on how the communal, continual and ritualistic nature of football support can empower supporters to sustain elements of *industriekultur* into a post-industrial present, providing a sense of ontological security against traumatic change. Finally, I will draw on these findings to argue that football support represents a form of living heritage.



Ray Lonsdale, 'Marra', photo by J.Bland

Through this conclusion, I will highlight how the profound continuities that define football support help stakeholder communities sustain a sense of order, stability, and continuity in the face of broader exogenous changes.

## Moravian Mission Heritage in Post-Apartheid Cape Town: The Religious Practice of Moravian House Blessings and the Politics of Return in District Six

Fabian Lüke - University of Cologne

Based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in 2024, this contribution follows the tradition and religious practice of Moravian house blessings in post-apartheid Cape Town, which I situate in the political context of land restitution, urban redevelopment, returning processes of formerly displaced residents to District Six, and strategies of resilience.

In the urban fabric of Cape Town, the Moravian Chapel in District Six plays an important role for local members of the Moravian Church of South Africa (MCSA): As a reclaimed religious heritage site, it is again becoming the centre of Moravian community life in a neighbourhood almost entirely destroyed under apartheid.

Drawing on Ernesto de Martino's notion of the "crisis of presence" (2012), I analyse a retired couple's house blessing, members of the MCSA who moved back to the Moravian Hill neighbourhood following land restitution as a collective practice of religious reintegration into a reconstructed religious topography. On an individual level, it is a strategy to deal with uncertainty and precarious living conditions, contributing to a restored sense of ontological security and 'regained' presence.

My argument is that Moravian house blessings serve as across-scale means of the present to anticipate the not yet resolved legal status of returnees (missing property deeds) against the backdrop of opaque state bureaucracy and security issues. By altering the local social reality, this practice supports the formation of

religious communalization after the ruptures of racial segregation and positively affects individual returnee's notions of 'residing' as a more stable and future-oriented way of living than their initial perception of temporal dwelling.

Via intangible and material forms of mission heritage, Moravian actors articulate and negotiate individual senses of past, present, and future belonging and their collective identity linked to a religious heritage site in a contested urban space where different groups grapple for their eligibility to return.

# Day 1 - Session 4 (In)security in Past Colonialisms

15:00-16:15



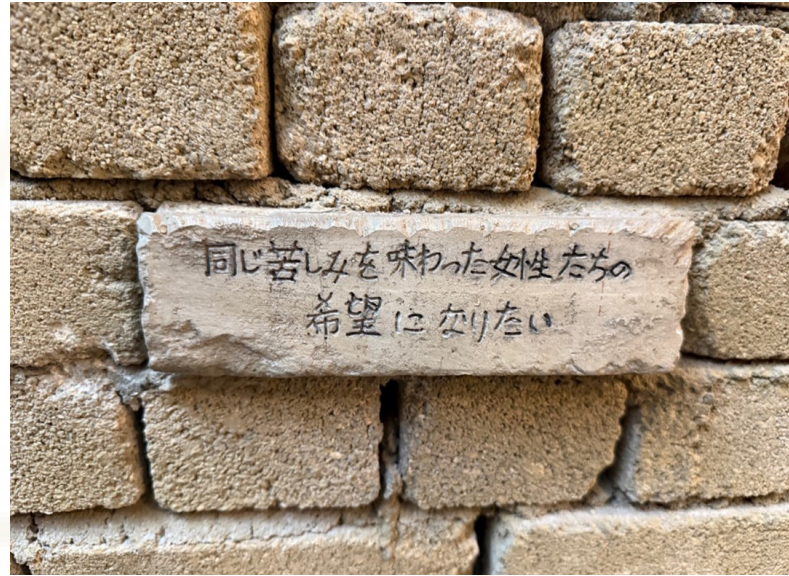
Detail from the "Butterfly Message" Walls outside the War and Women's Human Rights Museum, Seoul, Korea J. Wang, 2025

## From Victims to Activists: A Connective Heritage in the Global Fight Against Gender-Based Violence

Joceyln Wang

This paper examines three exhibitions in Nanjing, Shanghai, and Seoul addressing the Japanese “comfort women” (military sexual slavery) system during the Second World War. It explores how victim-survivors forge connections and open future possibilities within the contested heritage of historical atrocities and gender-based violence.

Historically, the “comfort women” system was a systematic and bureaucratized regime of sexual violence, human trafficking, and sexual slavery. In postwar memory politics, the experiences of women victim-survivors have frequently been absorbed into nationalist narratives of general suffering. Survivors’ voices are often overshadowed by representations saturated with sorrow and powerlessness, while nationalist discourses of historical grievance may reinforce patriarchal shame, leading to



further stigmatization and re-victimization. Against this backdrop, the paper foregrounds survivors’ everyday struggles, endurance, and forms of resistance that do not conform to nationalist “heroic” imaginaries. It focuses on how women mobilize shared experiences not to solicit pity, but to demand recognition. Through activism, testimony, and engagement with civic spaces such as museums, they transform vulnerability into agency and reconstitute heritage as an ethical commitment and political practice.

The paper argues that these practices produce what may be termed connective heritage (Macdonald 2025): a future-oriented approach that challenges classificatory logics and entrenched identities, links past violence to present struggles, and enables solidarity across national boundaries. Such heritage not only confronts wartime sexual violence, but also offers critical resources for addressing ongoing gender-based violence in both conflict and so-called peacetime societies.



**Fig.1** The “Peace Girls” statues on the campus of Shanghai Normal University, J. Wang, 2025, **Fig.2** “I want to be a hope for women who have experienced the same pain.” J. Wang, 2025

## Difficult Heritage as a Spectral Anchor: Colonial Remains and Ontological Security in Northeastern China

Yiyang Xiao - Chinese University of Hong Kong

In the contemporary of Northeast China, the colonial remnants of Lushun (Port Arthur) function as a site of structural aporia, where the rigid state-authorized heritage discourse (AHD) of “National Humiliation” cohabits with a strategic “tacit permission” of colonial legacies. This paper argues that ontological security in Lushun is produced not in spite of, but through the friction between these seemingly contradictory narratives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork (2023–2025), I examine how this delicate equilibrium allows for a multi-layered negotiation of identity and belonging.

At the macro-level, the “National Humiliation” narrative serves as a performative frame that anchors nationalistic pride. Yet, beneath this didactic surface, a romanticized “colonial nostalgia” for Russian and Japanese-built environments emerges among local residents. In the face of post-industrial decline, this nostalgia functions as a form of everyday resistance, where residents mobilize the “spectral modernity” of the past to reclaim a sense of dignity that the present economy lacks. Simultaneously, the state exercises a tacit permission toward transnational commemorative practices. By allowing South Korean pilgrimages for An Jung-geun, Russian mourning for Tsarist soldiers, and Japanese visitations to Russo-Japanese War sites—where private commemoration of Imperial fallen often subtly persists alongside official re-contextualization—the state utilizes the heritage landscape as a diplomatic “safety valve.”

By analysing this symbiotic tension, the paper demonstrates how ontological security is maintained through “managed ambiguity.” It reveals that “humiliation” and “nostalgia”

narratives are mutually constitutive: the former provides a protective ideological shell, while the latter offers a pragmatic psychological refuge. Ultimately, this study illustrates how residents and transnational stakeholders collectively navigate these “negotiated spectres,” weaving a relational heritage space that accommodates both colonial trauma and the quest for resilience in an era of social upheaval.

## Contested Heritage and Mental Decolonisation: Soviet Monuments, Memory, and Belonging in the Baltic States

Assoc Prof Dr Dovilė Sagatienė - Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius

This paper examines the removal of Soviet-era monuments in the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—as a form of mental decolonisation and a heritage practice that directly shapes ontological security in post-imperial societies. Drawing on post-colonial theory, memory studies, and critical heritage discourse, the study situates Soviet monument removal after 1990 within broader global debates on contested heritage, identity, and the legacies of empire.

Ontological security, understood as the confidence in the continuity of self-identity and social order, is profoundly affected by symbolic landscapes. In the Baltic context, Soviet monuments long functioned as material carriers of an imposed narrative of “liberation” and socialist progress, conflicting with lived experiences of occupation, repression, and cultural erasure. Their presence destabilised collective belonging and perpetuated mnemonic dissonance within public space.

The paper analyses key case studies—including Estonia’s Bronze Soldier, Latvia’s Victory Monument, and Lithuania’s Green Bridge statues—to demonstrate how dismantling these monuments represents not an erasure of history but a reconfiguration of heritage aimed at restoring agency, dignity, and historical continuity.

The research argues that monument removal serves as a mechanism of reconciliation with the past by enabling societies to renegotiate shared memory and re-anchor identity in locally grounded historical narratives. The intensification of monument removal following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014

and 2022 further underscores the link between heritage, security, and geopolitical threat perception. In this sense, heritage practices become tools of resilience, contributing to emotional well-being and collective stability amid ongoing political uncertainty. By framing Soviet monument removal as an active heritage intervention, the paper contributes to discussions on how contested heritage can foster ontological security, support communal healing, and reshape belonging in post-conflict and post-colonial contexts.



*A monument erected in 2024 in Uplyna, Lithuania, commemorating Jewish heritage and the site of a former synagogue, with inscriptions in the Samogitian language, reflecting broader efforts to recover suppressed histories and reshape collective memory in post-Soviet contexts.*

## Key Note Speaker

### Dr Claire Nolan

University College Dublin



Claire Nolan is a researcher based at University College Dublin, specialising in public archaeology, cultural heritage and landscape studies. With a background in archaeology and psychotherapy, her work is concerned with the public value of heritage assets

Claire has written and spoken widely on archaeology and wellbeing, and the power of cultural heritage to ground and create meaning for individuals and communities. After completing her PhD research on therapeutic value of the prehistoric landscapes of Avebury, Stonehenge and the Vale of Pewsey, UK, she worked on a number of postdoctoral projects, examining different aspects of public

and community heritage, including: the role of heritage in place-making; heritage and ecocultural identity; the impact of heritage loss on communities; decolonial heritage; and inclusive landscape management. Claire is currently a researcher on the British Academy-funded Prehistoric Policies project, which aims to understand how ideas of the deep past influence present-day environmental policy.

## **‘Going on in day-to-day life’: Negotiating the complex and fluid nature of heritage-based ontological security**

Since the publication of Jane Grenville’s foundational work on ‘Conservation as Psychology’ in 2007, the concept of ontological security has come to feature more frequently in cultural heritage studies, especially with the advent of heritage-based wellbeing research.

Accordingly, studies have demonstrated that engagement with heritage can provide a sense of permanence, continuity, connection, self-identity and meaning for individuals in certain contexts: conditions and qualities that are needed more than ever in this current era of ecological and geopolitical instability. However, ontological security is also contingent upon the stability of the reference points that facilitate it, and the socio-cultural-political context in which they exist.

This paper will review some of the ways in which heritage has been shown to support ontological security in recent years. At the same time, it will examine the relative resilience of individual and collective ontological security in the face of different types of heritage loss, identifying when particular assets, practices and narratives are critical to wellbeing.


Ultimately, the paper will consider how, at a time when the rate of cultural loss is accelerating due to conflict, climate change and development, heritage engagement can not only contribute to the continuity of existing personal and collective narratives, but also the creation of new ones.



**Day 2 - Session 5**

# Ontological security and post-war memory: Japanese heritage narratives of the Asia-Pacific War at 80

10:00-11:10

 **SAINSBURY INSTITUTE**  
for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures  
セインズベリー日本藝術研究所



August 2025 saw the 80th anniversary of the Second World War (1939-45), better known in Japan as the Asia-Pacific War (1931-45). In the 6 years between Imperial Japan's defeat and the return of a secular Japan to the world stage at the Treaty of San Francisco (1951), the nation underwent great ideological change from empire to democracy amidst severe repression of public discourse on the conflict that had just ended, still evident in the post-war ruins and decimated population. Since then, Japanese museums, historians, and grassroots movements have grappled over establishing a dominant national narrative of the conflict to provide ontological security of a turbulent past on which all stakeholders can build a secure, peaceful future.

Material heritage has been at the centre of these efforts, although the framing of the material can tell very different stories. For example, a salvaged Mitsubishi Zero fighter plane can be used to tell of the bravery of imperial soldiers through suicide attack pilots and the ultimate sacrifice they were willing to make, or it can emphasise the young lives wasted by a desperate, militarist empire. As the last survivors of the conflict pass away, ontological security feels yet out of reach, with memory institutions becoming increasingly influential in the ongoing struggle. Our two invited speakers will discuss their own experiences in working directly with distinct types of material heritage from the conflict.

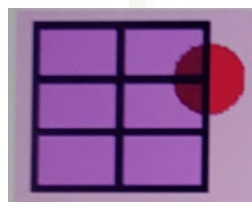
**This special session within the Cambridge Heritage Symposium celebrates the relationship between the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures and the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre.**

Since 2024 the Sainsbury Institute has hosted a research project on Reconciliation and Commemoration through Arts and Cultures 80 Years after the end of World War Two. The theme of this conference, ontological security,

connects researchers at the Sainsbury Institute and the CHRC.

We are grateful to the Japan Foundation Endowment Committee and to the Sasakawa Foundation for their generous support towards the costs of bringing our speakers from Japan.

The session will comprise short presentations and a discussion involving the four participants.



## Ontological security and post-war memory: Japanese heritage narratives of the Asia-Pacific War at 80



### **Prof Simon Kaner**

Executive Director of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, Professor of Japanese Archaeology and Heritage at the University of East Anglia

Professor Kaner is currently researching the archaeology of World War II-related sites in Japan as part of a project on the role of arts and cultures in reconciliation and commemoration 80 years after the end of the war.

[www.sainsbury-institute.org](http://www.sainsbury-institute.org)



### **SUZUKI Katsuo**

Chief Curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

Suzuki Katsuo recently curated an exhibition of wartime artworks for the 80th anniversary of the conflict

<https://www.momat.go.jp>



**KIKUCHI Seiichi**  
Professor Emeritus at the Showa Women's  
University

Professor Seiichi has conducted extensive battlefield archaeology with a focus on Vietnam, recovering the remains of imperial Japanese soldiers for repatriation and internment.



**Oliver Moxham**  
Daiwa Scholar, Department of Archaeology  
University of Cambridge

Ollie is working on his PhD on wartime memory in the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre. He produced the Beyond Japan podcast which included a special issue on the 80th anniversary of the end of the war.

## Day 2 - Session 6

# Tools of Ontology

11:30-12:45



*Everyday Life in Yugoslavia, Štepanjsko naselje (Ljubljana), 1978. Source: National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia.*

*The canteen at the Litostroj factory (worker's identity, Yugoslav Revolution), 1948, Ljubljana. Photographer: Leon Jere. Source: National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia.*

## **(Post-)Yugoslav Memory as a (Co-)Constitutor of Ontological Security: The Materialities of Oral History, Socialist Solidarity, and the Potential for Subversion**

**Nina Žnidaršič** - Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law in Ljubljana, Slovenia

Through the lens of political theory and practices of remembrance in the (post-) Yugoslav context, this contribution examines forms of establishing interpersonal bonds and the ways in which an inter-subjective world is constituted through them. It analyses the horizons of ontological security in both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav contexts, considering changes in the prevailing ideology and the political-economic base that directly transform, reshape and influence the characteristics of interpersonal bonds and the (re)constitution of social reality. The central concept and theorisation are based on the notion of (socialist) solidarity, which, in the post-Yugoslav context, functions as a (political, collective) memory of a period of political alternatives and as a materialisation of Yugoslav interpersonal (collective) bonds.

The concept of (socialist) solidarity, linked to the ideological form of political friendship – in the sense of belonging to an idea and a time that no longer exist – and to social imagination, frames the collective (co-)creation of the world through the principles of reciprocity, political equality, and plurality. Its use is widespread and woven into the memory of the “Yugoslav generation,” and thus – especially in a spiritual and ideological sense – it is also passed on to younger generations. Younger generations may view the materialisation of solidarity as a form of subversiveness (“theory of the possible”) in relation to today’s social and (geo) political upheavals: that is, an interregnum that requires radical hope and radical reflection on alternative futures. In the post-Yugoslav context, the concept of (socialist) solidarity

illustrates a shared history (“intangible cultural heritage”) and a way of materially (collectively) creating a world that carries emancipatory power, can act as a form of resistance, and is a necessary alternative to (neo)liberal atomisation, which in an (anti)democratic sense creates weak, lonely, and insecure individuals.

The theoretical contribution thus proposes an understanding of oral history and the practice of (post)Yugoslav memory as a form of action (theory of action) that is not exclusively subversive, but also emancipatory. In Balibar’s words, it is a “counter-history” that carries (oral) heritage and decolonises imposed knowledge and practices that prevent reflection on collective and political alternatives. Oral history, precisely because of its use of speech, is ultimately a theory of action and illustrates collective, material worlds, which, in the case of socialist Yugoslavia, points to the (un)forgotten theory of the political possible. Oral history is thus approached not merely as a repository of memories, but as a practice of world-making and an everyday politics of ontological security through which solidaristic relations are rehearsed, reactivated, and made claimable in the post-Yugoslav present.

## Care, Optimism, and Ontological Security: Rethinking Heritage Protection in Turkey

Dr Işıl Gürsu - British Institute at Ankara

This paper examines the role of heritage protection in shaping ontological security in contemporary Turkey, arguing that protection is as likely to generate unease and moral tension as it is to provide reassurance and stability. While heritage is often framed as a source of continuity, belonging, and collective identity, protection practices frequently operate within a discourse of loss and emergency, producing fragile and contested forms of ontological security. Within this landscape, protection discourse is often underpinned by appeals to optimism, through which futures are imagined as manageable, repairable, and ultimately secure.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic engagement with archaeological sites and heritage governance processes, alongside quantitative and qualitative data from a nationwide public opinion study and an analysis of recent Conservation Council decisions, the paper explores heritage protection as a key arena in which care, authority, and responsibility are negotiated.

Legal frameworks, conservation plans, and master-planning practices commonly project confidence and control over uncertain futures, yet often remain disconnected from lived social realities. This disjunction exposes professionals and communities alike to emotional fatigue, ethical ambiguity, and a persistent sense of inadequacy, revealing the limits of protectionist optimism as a source of ontological security.

To rethink the relationship between care, optimism, and security, the paper engages with heritage scholarship that challenges

preservationist imperatives, particularly Caitlin DeSilvey's notion of curated decay and Greg Kennedy's distinction between care that imposes control and care that establishes a reciprocal relation with the cared-for. From this perspective, care does not necessarily require arresting change or guaranteeing material survival. Instead, it may involve acknowledging fragility, finitude, and shared vulnerability across human and non-human worlds. In the light of recent examples from Turkey, the paper will argue that heritage has the potential to move away from being the object of safeguarding, and become a social space where collective anxieties are negotiated and solidarity may emerge.

## Neuro-Humanities and Digital Memory: A Pilot Study on Reconstructing Ontological Security for the Chagossian Diaspora

Elisa Corrà - Ca' Foscari University Venice & Krish Seetah - Stanford University

For over five decades, the forced displacement of the Chagossian people has served as a profound rupture in their “ontological security”—the essential sense of continuity and identity derived from a stable connection to home.

This paper presents the findings of a brilliant pilot study conducted in late 2025: developed in close collaboration with the Chagos Working Group and generously funded by The Stanford Institute for Advancing Just Society, “Mapping Memories, Reclaiming Home” explores how the intersection of Digital Humanities, Neurohumanities, and Neuroaesthetics can facilitate the reclamation of this security within a diaspora context. Moving beyond traditional archival methods, and benefiting from the vital support of the local government, this research focuses on the inner landscapes of the displaced.

By employing eye-tracking technology and neuroaesthetic analysis, the study captures the implicit emotional and cognitive responses of Chagossian participants to digital representations of their ancestral heritage. This approach allows us to quantify the “aesthetics of belonging,” identifying the specific cultural and visual markers that trigger a sense of resilience.

As a pilot investigation, the results are profound: they demonstrate that digital heritage can actively stimulate the neural foundations of ontological security, allowing the diaspora to “re-inhabit” their lost spaces through digital heritage ecosystems. By mapping the cognitive resonance of memory, we provide a scientific yet deeply humanistic

framework for communal well-being and reconciliation. This study proves that even in the face of geopolitical upheaval, the “security of being” can be digitally nurtured, offering a powerful tool for communities to bridge the gap between a traumatic past and a hopeful, resilient future.



Day 2 - Session 7

# Seeking Stability in (post-) Conflict

13:45-15:00



Polishchuk, Valentyna. "Memorial Heroiv Na Maidani Nezalezhnosti Peretvoryvsia Na Khaos. Ale Toho, Khto Pochne Navodyty Tam Lad, Ubiut". Za Yakymy Zakonamy Zhyve Mistse, Pam'iaty v Tsentri Kyjiva." Babel, August 2025.

## From Loss to a Sense of Stability: Building Ontological Security Through Grassroots Memorials in Ukraine

Nadiya Kachmar - Central European University

This paper examines how grassroots memorials in wartime Ukraine function as forms of “heritage from below” that contribute to ontological security under conditions of ongoing war on both individual and national scales. Drawing on qualitative research on grassroots memory sites created after the Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, the paper argues that grassroots memorialisation operates as an everyday practice through which individuals and communities establish the sense of belonging, collective grievance, and foster national

mobilization of the civil society amid persistent violence and uncertainty.

Engaging with theories of ontological security – primarily Giddens’s scholarship (1991); the concept of “heritage from below” by Robertson (2012); and the grassroots memorials Santino (2006), Peter Jan Margry & Cristina Sánchez-Carretero (2011), the paper conceptualises grassroots memorials as “heritage from below” that is being created through grassroots movement and managed within alternative discourses to those of the state. The paper further foregrounds these memorials not as mere symbolic representations of the past, but as lived, repetitive practices that organise time, materialise loss, and sustain relational bonds. Through routine acts such as tending memorials, these practices generate micro-temporalities that counteract the temporal rupture produced by war.

Additionally, the paper explores the tension between grassroots commemoration and institutional memory regimes in Ukraine. State-led heritage frameworks are often associated with state operational bureaucracy, promoting the official coherent state narrative, being distant from the events or people they commemorate (Young 1993), whereas grassroots memorials prioritize immediacy, affect, and the management of collective grief. In doing so, they provide forms of ontological security that are oriented towards lived experience and community resilience. By foregrounding grassroots memorials as practices of non-state security, the paper contributes to heritage studies and critical security studies by rethinking heritage as an existential infrastructure that stabilizes life in conditions of prolonged crisis.



Kremen, Tetiana “Fiksatsiia Zhyvoi Pamiati. Yak Liudy Vshanovuiut Zahyblykh Cherez Stykhiini Memorialy, Popry Povilnist Derzhavy.” *Dont Take Fake Magazine*, June 1, 2025

## Heritage as reconciliation: performing post-Korean War identity in museums

Geonyoung Kim - University of Cambridge

This paper explores how heritage promotes reconciliation, using the case of the Korean War. The Korean War (1950 – ongoing, Armistice Agreement signed in 1953) left the Korean peninsula divided into two Koreas. Since the war, South Korean society, having transitioned through authoritarianism to democratisation, has developed a national identity based on its evolving relationship with the conflict. Throughout this process, museums have acted as crucial heritage spaces where various actors, including the national government and civil society, construct, negotiate, and visualise Korean War heritage. These practices either perpetuate anti-communist identity or promote changes for reconciliation. Museums, in this sense, enable heritage as reconciliation by facilitating a change in identity that is just enough to alter negative perceptions of adversaries for reconciliation, while maintaining a sense of security intact.

Based on archival research, this paper examines how museums representing the Korean War have constructed South Korea's national identity, incorporating profound post-conflict elements. This occurs through various heritage practices in museums, including but not limited to indoor exhibitions. I argue that museums have been used to perform evolving national identities, shaped under shifting heritage discourse, from an Authorised Dictatorial Discourse during the authoritarian

regime (1961–1988), to an Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) that emphasises anti-communist identity, and more recently to an AHD that focuses on South Korea as a just society. These shifting heritage practices facilitate reconciliation by enabling heritage performance in museums, which in turn are moulding ontological security in a post-conflict society.

## Epistemic engineering and compensatory certainty: heritage value regimes and affective governance in contemporary China

Sijia Yao - The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, UCL

Since 2020, archaeological discoveries at Sanxingdui have been publicised as divergent from Central Plains material culture and imbued with a mythologised aura. Within the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006), these finds are mobilised as material proof of the “pluralistic unity” of Chinese civilisation, consolidating alongside UNESCO World Heritage ambitions and tourism-led land redevelopment. Sanxingdui thus operates not merely as a heritage project but as a symptomatic site of socio-political transformation in China.

Drawing on archaeological and governance texts and on-site ethnography, this paper argues that Sanxingdui is simultaneously (1) a site of epistemic engineering, where archaeological uncertainty is rendered legible as civilisational certainty through technocratic intervention, and (2) a site of lived uncertainty, where villagers endure indeterminacy around displacement, compensation, and future security. In this counterintuitive heritage case, identity-stabilising claims at the national scale are secured through processes that destabilise local ontological security. Read together, these dynamics disclose a value regime that renders heritage monetisable as a political-economic resource while subordinating local memory, ecological relations, and livelihoods to administrative expediency.

The paper introduces compensatory certainty to capture how abstract assurances of nation and civilisation compensate for, and legitimate, everyday insecurity. Under broader conditions of precariousness shaped by economic vulnerability, psychological strain, and social uncertainty in contemporary Chinese society (Hillenbrand, 2023), civilisational narratives

promising a stable, essentialised collective identity, and with it a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991), become vehicles through which insecurity is absorbed and redirected. Following Browning and Joenniemi’s account of ontological security as often pursued via the securitisation of identity (2016), the paper problematises “ontological security” as a technology of identity governance. In doing so, such narratives enable exclusionary politics, moral hierarchies of belonging, and the displacement of social responsibility onto symbolic pride, compromising heritage’s potential to function as a shared public good.

# Cambridge Heritage Research Centre

The Cambridge Heritage Research Centre brings together academics conducting heritage research in a wide range of disciplines. Through our research we seek to address issues facing contemporary society, advance a critical understanding of heritage, and shape policy and practice through engagement with heritage education, museums and archives, policy makers and international heritage organisations.

“*Cultural heritage is a central element in the narratives that a society constructs and presents about itself, its origins, character, and future projects, delineating boundaries of belonging and defining who lies outside them.*”

**Dr Dacia Viejo Rose**

Director of the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre

Find out more about our research and opportunities to collaborate

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