International Interdisciplinary Symposium within

Year of Heritage and DEAGENCY Project

The Difficult Heritage of Mass Graves: Experiences and Comparisons

Tuesday, 23. September 2025, at 9:00

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology,

Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Program Committee:
Assoc. Prof. Jaka Repič
Petra Hamer, PhD

Book of Abstracts:
Petra Hamer, PhD

CENTER MORTALIS

DEAGENCY

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UNIVERZA V LJUBLJANI
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Oddelek za etnologijo in kulturno antropologijo

Mednarodni interdisciplinarni simpozij z naslovom *Težavna dediščina množičnih grobišč: Izkušnje in primerjave* bo obravnaval vprašanja odnosa med obstojem, odkrivanjem in raziskovanjem množičnih grobišč in vzpostavljanjem »težavne dediščine« na območju Slovenije, Hrvaške, ter Bosne in Hercegovine in tudi širše. Glavni cilj simpozija je razširiti razumevanje množičnih grobišč skozi interdisciplinarno primerjavo izkušenj v različnih državah, s poudarkom na oblikovanju dediščine in kolektivnega spomina.

K sodelovanju smo povabili strokovnjakinje/e, raziskovalke/ce različnih disciplin (antropologija, etnologija, arheologija, zgodovina, folkloristika), ki bodo predstavile/i primere in perspektive raziskovanja ter razumevanja množičnih grobišč v različnih zgodovinskih obdobjih, pristope k oblikovanju težavne dediščine in kritičnega razmisleka o vlogi težavne dediščine v sodobni družbi.

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International interdisciplinary symposium titled *The Difficult Heritage of Mass Graves: Experiences and Comparisons* will address the relationships between the existence, discovery, and investigation of mass graves and the establishment of "difficult heritage" in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more broadly. The main goal of the symposium is to expand the understanding of mass graves through an interdisciplinary comparison of experiences across different countries, with a focus on heritage formation and collective memory.

We have invited experts and researchers from various disciplines (anthropology, physical and social/cultural ethnology, archaeology, history, folkloristics) to present different case studies and perspectives on the study and interpretation of mass graves across different historical periods. The symposium will also explore approaches to shaping difficult heritage and critically reflect on its role in contemporary society.

PROGRAMME

9:00–9:15 Welcome address

Boštjan Kravanja, Head of the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

Mirjam Mencej, DEAGENCY project leader

Petra Hamer, DEAGENCY project member

9:15–11:00 Panel I (Chair: Simona Kuntarič Zupanc)

Uršula Lipovec Čebron: Burying Dead Migrants: Practices in the Border Territories of the "Balkan Route"

Maja Petrović-Šteger: Housing the Dead: An Anthropological Reading of Middens and Processes of Self-, Community-, and Political Sedimentation

Matija Črešnar and Tamara Leskovar: From Biological Data to Cultural Memory: What Human Remains Contribute to Heritage and Memory

11:00–11:30 Coffee Break

11:30–13:00 Panel II (Chair: Michal Uhrin)

Uroš Košir: Archaeology of Mass Graves and the Difficult Heritage in Slovenia

Jaka Repič: Unearthing Memories: Agency, Affect and Aesthetics of Mass Graves and Human Remains

Anja Moric: The Silenced Heritage: Coping with a Difficult Past in the Kočevje Region

13:00–14:30 Lunch Break

14:30–16:30 Panel III (Chair: Tina Ivnik)

Jože Hudales: Attitude of the Local Population to “Their Difficult Heritage”: The Case of Mass Grave of Victims Killed in June 1945 in an Abandoned Coal Mine Shaft of Huda jama - Slovenia

Mirjam Mencej: The Agency of the Dead in the Post-Genocide Srebrenica Narratives

Anela Dumonjić: Returning to the Mass Grave: Against the Daytonesque Condition

Petra Hamer: The Aestheticisation and Memorialisation of Mass Graves in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina

ABSTRACTS

Uršula Lipovec Čebron, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Burying Dead Migrants: Practices in the Border Territories of the "Balkan Route"

Border deaths, also called migrant deaths and deaths in migration, are "premature deaths of persons whose movement or presence has been unauthorized and irregularized as they navigate or interact with state-made boundaries" (Last 2020: 21). As many researchers have shown (Albahari 2015; Cuttitta 2020; Kobelinsky 2020, etc.), these deaths are an integral element of contemporary border management and an inevitable consequence—but not an unexpected one—of migration policies (Tazzioli 2015: 5). Similarly to other parts of Europe where border deaths occur, also in the Balkans the migration policies of the European Union, with its visa regime and border controls, produce material and non-material obstacles that redirect irregularized migrants to dangerous paths, exposing them to extreme heat or cold, to unknown and difficult terrain, high mountains and rivers, etc. (Hameršak 2024: 212).

In this paper, I will present a part of five-year multi-sited ethnographic research on border deaths conducted within the research project ERIM (The European Irregularized Migration Regime at the Periphery of the EU—from Ethnography to Keywords, 2020-2024) that is still ongoing after the end of this project. On the basis of ethnographic material (mainly from the Slovene-Croatian border), I will analyze local practices of burying migrants, who are usually not identified. In the local communities, the occurrence of migrants' deaths is a rather new phenomenon for many inhabitants (e.g., employees in the communal services, volunteers, and activists), who seem to be challenged by it on an individual as well as a collective level. As in other similar cases along the so-called Balkan route, some of the migrants' burial sites could be regarded as mass graves, while local burial practices could be described as guided by exclusion and marginalization (Kovras and Robins 2017: 167) as well as provoking counter-commemorative practices (Stierl 2016), grief activism, or cemetery activism.

Maja Petrović-Šteger, Institute of Anthropological and Spatial Studies, ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Housing the Dead: An Anthropological Reading of Middens and Processes of Self-, Community-, and Political Sedimentation

Often invested with unique significance as carriers of defining forms of kinship, national identity and politics, human remains and the land that houses them often symbolise people's claims to territory, even motivating them to take sides in conflict. This talk explores the meaning of mortality and the relationship with ancestors, the deceased and other dead in Serbia, Tasmania and beyond, examining the connections between the treatment of land, the body and time.

Matija Črešnar, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Tamara Leskovar, Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

From Biological Data to Cultural Memory: What Human Remains Contribute to Heritage and Memory

Human remains are among the most eloquent archives of the past, uniquely positioned to connect biological histories with cultural memory. This talk surveys what different analytical approaches, such as osteological assessment, isotopes, ancient DNA, histology, microCT, and FTIR can reveal about identity, kinship, mobility, diet, trauma and disease, physiological stress, and post-depositional change. Rather than focusing on one context, we outline a comparative, cross-period view that shows how biological evidence transforms anonymous collections of bones into historically situated lives and communities. We argue that these data are not merely technical; they actively shape "difficult heritage" by informing decisions about commemoration, site management, and public narratives. By synthesizing methodological capabilities and limits, the talk proposes a decision matrix for when particular analyses are most informative, how to balance research value against intrusiveness, and how to communicate results responsibly. Ultimately, integrating biological data with archaeological, historical, and community perspectives produces richer, more accountable heritage.

Uroš Košir, Independent scholar, Avgusta, d. o. o.

Archaeology of Mass Graves and the Difficult Heritage in Slovenia

The 20th century has left us an abundance of heritage that can be described as difficult, dissonant, negative, and dark. This heritage is predominantly associated with battlefields, cemeteries, mass graves, execution sites, concentration camps, POW camps, prisons, and sites of natural and man-made disasters – places generally marked by suffering and death. Such heritage, often the focal point of so-called dark tourism, is also a subject of archaeological research within the framework of modern conflict archaeology, battlefield archaeology, forensic archaeology, contemporary archaeology, and other archaeological sub-disciplines and scientific fields that deal with materialities of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Slovenia is rich in dark heritage linked to the battlefields of the Soča Front from 1915 to 1917, military cemeteries and mass graves of deceased soldiers and POWs, and sites of civilian suffering and death. The interwar period was marked by Italian annexation and the suffering of Slovenians under fascism, while entire landscapes were transformed by the construction of defence lines of Vallo Alpino and the Rupnik Line, adding another layer of militarization to Slovenia's already palimpsest conflict landscapes. Most of the dark heritage is associated with the Second World War (1941–1945) and the post-war Yugoslavian era, characterized by the sites of German and Italian atrocities, and concealed individual and mass graves of victims of the National Liberation Movement, as well as later concentration camps and prisons of the communist regime.

Case studies of archaeological research into this difficult heritage range from the mass grave of fallen Italian soldiers at the end of the fighting on the Soča Front to the locations of the Romani victims, executed by the National Liberation Movement in 1942, and the mass graves of the post-war era such as those at “Cuzakov travnik” in Kamnik, Mostec or “jama pod Macesnovo gorico”.

Jaka Repič, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Unearthing Memories: Agency, Affect and Aesthetics of Mass Graves and Human Remains

Since the 1990s, hundreds of mass graves have been documented in Slovenia; more than 200 have been investigated, and over 100 fully or partially exhumed. The process of uncovering and acknowledging these sites—concealed until the 1990s—has gradually but profoundly affected the lives of individuals connected to the graves or the deceased, local communities where they were revealed, as well as redefined the broader field of memory politics. Excavations not only recovered human remains but also facilitated resurfacing of silenced memories, revisiting the past, and compelled a reshaping of relationships with the dead.

This presentation examines how personal and embodied encounters of mass graves influence certain artistic engagements, i.e. aestheticisation of mass grave sites, remains, and associated objects. Such works do more than represent; they interpret sensory experience, evoke affective responses, mobilize political and social action, and influence commemorative practices and broader memory politics. The material presence of graves and human remains as places of violence, research, and commemorations exerts agency within society, while transforming the dead into relevant social actors.

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Anja Moric, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana; Institute of Ethnomusicology ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana

The Silenced Heritage: Coping with a Difficult Past in the Kočevje Region

This paper examines the difficult heritage of the Kočevje region, shaped by forced migrations, wartime violence, and contested memories. It focuses on silence as a strategy for dealing with this heritage, showing how silence has functioned both as a protective mechanism and as a form of avoidance in the public sphere. The issue is especially evident in relation to the mass graves in Kočevski Rog, which represent one of the most sensitive and silenced aspects of the region's – as well as Slovenia's – past. At the same time, artistic works and cultural practices in recent decades have sought to transcend silence

by opening alternative spaces of engagement, dialogue, and reflection. The presentation approaches these issues through ethnography at home and autoethnography, reflecting on how local fieldwork in Kočevje illuminates the entanglement of silence, memory, and heritage-making, and considers the ways communities live with and reinterpret difficult pasts.

Jože Hudales, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

Attitude of the Local Population to "Their Difficult Heritage": The Case of Mass Grave of Victims Killed in June 1945 in an Abandoned Coal Mine Shaft of Huda jama – Slovenia

The author will present mass grave in coal mine shafts of Huda jama ("Horrible cave") in the vicinity of Laško, Slovenia, where an abandoned underground Barbara pit was used as a mass grave for hundreds of victims of extrajudicial killings that took place in the last week of May and in the first week of June 1945. The presentation will address the changing opinion and attitude of the local population towards the mass graves since 1992. It will show how that mass grave has long been a contested issue for the locals as well as part of "their difficult heritage".

Mirjam Mencej, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

The Agency of the Dead in the Post-Genocide Srebrenica Narratives

In my presentation, I will discuss the role of the agency of those killed in the genocide of the Bosniak (Muslim) population in Srebrenica in July 1995. I argue that different categories of dead are produced by different places where their bodies are located, and that their agency plays different roles for the Muslim population in the Srebrenica region. Furthermore, I will show that narratives about the agency of the victims of Srebrenica's genocide, when communicated beyond the confines of the region, prove useful tools for conveying ideological messages in the post-war identity processes of the Bosniak ethnic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY, № 101095729)

Anela Dumonjić, Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, Austria

Returning to the Mass Grave: Against the Daytonesque Condition

The core research question this labour attempts to elaborate on is whether the mass grave is a space. If so, what ontoepistemic, phenomenological and existential consequences does that bear? Furthermore, which conditions – temporalities, affects, logics – enable its conceptualisation as space? In line with these concerns, the objective is to disrupt the reductive framing of the mass grave as not more than a storage for executed bodies, by weaving different theories and concepts together. For this purpose, the conceptual triad of materiality–spatiality–temporality forms the framework of analysis, whilst others roam and haunt the work as independent agents, such as soil – both as archive and as infrastructure – and Walter Benjamin's notion of divine violence. Methodologically, then, this endeavour entails an archaeology of power, a forensics of the interred, a genealogy of becoming and a decomposition of knowledge – or, in other words, theoretical analysis, conceptual mapping and spatial (mis)reading. It focuses on the mass grave as onto-epistemic and phenomenological unit of the non-/not-yet-subject and is ultimately preoccupied with elaborating on the possibilities of future subject-formations beyond the ethnonationalist framework, which come exclusively with/after the abolition of the law of the mass grave, that has instated a fictional separation between its inside and its outside. As regards the contribution of this research, its deepest desire is echoing the urgency of returning to the mass grave, for it is undeniably a site of simultaneous destruction as well as creation/liberation. Given the constellation of meticulously selected elements, it seeks to offer an unsettling methodology for excavating and subsequently working within the mass grave's regimes of legibility sunlight has not reached yet. Last, but far from least, this piece hopes to generate an anatomy of resistance against the daytonesque – to feel, see, touch, hear, think, read, write and do differently than the (neo)colonial order demands.

Petra Hamer, Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

The Aestheticisation and Memorialisation of Maass Graves in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The sense, and moral obligation, that "something must be done" to commemorate civilian victims and to "tell the truth" about the ethnic cleansing of non-Serb populations in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war has found expression in a wide range of artistic practices, produced by both local and international actors.

This paper considers art as a trigger, a response, and an outcome of the experienced presence of absence, drawing on Maddrell and Sidaway's conceptualisation of absence–presence (2010). Mass graves operate simultaneously as voids and as sites of profound resonance, where what is absent continues to shape the living. In this context, Alfred Gell's notion of secondary agency (1998) provides a framework for understanding how aesthetic forms acquire agency by mediating emotions, thoughts, and actions, thereby extending the influence of the dead into social and political life.

The discussion highlights creative interventions across painting, photography, installation, music, poetry, and literature, all of which arise directly from the atrocities of 1992. Their makers emphasise how personal histories and ethical responsibility compelled them to intervene, amplifying silenced voices and exposing breaches of humanity. Through these practices, the dead are rendered present, not only through traditional cultural media but increasingly through digital platforms, ensuring their continued resonance within contemporary memory work.

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