

The Cluster of Excellence
Understanding Written Artefacts
at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)
cordially invites you to the workshop

Inscribing Domestic Space(s)

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 9:30 am – 5:45 pm CET

Friday, 12 December 2025, 9:30 am – 4:30 pm CET

Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Von-Melle-Park 3,
Carl-von-Ossietzky-Forum, 20146 Hamburg

Organised by Leah Mascia (Freie Universität Berlin)
and Kaja Harter-Uibopuu (University of Hamburg)

Registration:

<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/register/workshop76>

Since ancient times, domestic spaces were the stage of a variety of writing practices ranging from those dictated by everyday life needs to others witnessing the “social” and “communal” dimension of these settings. In almost every culture, from antiquity to modern times, written artefacts, which are extremely different in terms of materiality and function, concur in shaping the domestic landscape. Archaeological investigations conducted over the last centuries in various ancient sites, encompassing South America, the Italian peninsula, Egypt, Greece, Palestine, and Syria, have broadened our knowledge of domestic architecture, life within these spaces, and the role played by written artefacts in reconstructing the social and ritual functions of these settings. Ancient writing practices in domestic spaces recurrently find parallels in modern settings. Illustrative in this sense is the custom of placing protective spells on door lintels and house entrances already attested in Palestine and Syria in the Iron Age, a practice that still survives in modern times, for instance, in the Islamic and Jewish traditions. Over the last decades, scholarly interest in the social dimension of domestic settings has significantly increased. Alongside research that originated from the so-called “household archaeology” started in the 1980s, several studies have been devoted in recent years to written evidence found in domestic settings. However, a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of writing practices in domestic spaces aimed at tracing parallel and divergent phenomena still remains a desideratum.

This conference aims to start to fill this gap through the examination of household writing practices from a global perspective. To explore, by combining archaeology and manuscript studies, how, in different cultures and historical phases, written artefacts shaped and interacted with domestic contexts and their role in broadening our knowledge of everyday life practices performed within these spaces, from menial to cultic activities. In addition, it aims to investigate how written artefacts interacted with various audiences (households, passers-by, supernatural entities) and if the location of specific types of written artefacts in different areas of the house might reflect different functions. From votive inscriptions, poems, or simple tags (i.e. personal names) written on perimetral walls by guests and passers-by, doorway inscriptions protecting the household from the evil eye intervention, shopping lists scribbled on the walls of service rooms and bedrooms by individuals living in these settings, to inscribed mosaics located in communal spaces testifying the wealth of house masters. Furthermore, this event intends to address various research questions, from the definition of domestic spaces and the relation between private and “public” areas to a more reliable identification of “inscribed household objects”, thus revising the traditional label *instrumenta domestica*. This conference aims to open an interdisciplinary dialogue meant to offer a cross-cultural perspective on the social understanding of the household as inscribed space.

Programme

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 9:30 am – 5:45 pm

- 9:00 – 9:30 Registration
- 9:30 – 10:00 Welcome and Introduction (Leah Mascia and Kaja Harter-Uibopuu)

Session 1

Chair: Leah Mascia

- 10:00 – 10:45 Martin Saehlfhof (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – DAI Kairo)
Inscribed Domestic Spaces in Elephantine
- 10:45 – 11:15 Coffee Break
- 11:15 – 12:00 Ilaria Bucci (Durham University)
The Social Life of Walls: Graffiti and the Domestic Space in Hatra, Iraq
- 12:00 – 12:45 Claudina Romero Mayorga (University of Reading)
Tracing Inscriptions in Graeco-Roman Egyptian Terracottas: More than Meets the Eye
- 12:45 – 3:00 Lunch Break

Session 2

Chair: Kaja Harter-Uibopuu

- 3:00 – 3:45 Anna Lucille Boozer (City University of New York)
Domesticating Writing in Roman-Egypt: Archaeological Insights into the Written Word in and around the House
- 3:45 – 4:30 Peter Keegan (Macquarie University)
Inscribing the Domestic: Graffiti and the Social Landscape of Everyday Life in Pompeian Households
- 4:30 – 5:00 Coffee Break

- 5:00 – 5:45 Elisabeth Rathmayr and Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail (Austrian Academy of Sciences)
Inschriften in antiken Wohnbauten des östlichen Mittelmeerraums
- 7:00 Conference Dinner

Friday, 12 December 2025, 9:30 am – 4:30 pm

Session 3

Chair: Leah Mascia

- 9:30 – 10:15 Martin Hansson (Lund University)
Household Inscriptions in Viking Age and Renaissance Scandinavia
- 10:15 – 11:00 Juan E. Campo (University of California, Santa Barbara)
The Dynamics of Presence and Absence: Using Scripture to Create Muslim Domestic Places
- 11:00 – 11:30 Coffee Break
- 11:30 – 12:15 Janet M. Purdy (The Art Institute Chicago)
Epigraphy as Protective Emblem: Inscriptions on Nineteenth-Century Carved Zanzibar Doors
- 12:15 – 2:30 Lunch Break
- 2:30 – 4:00 Round Table
- 4:00 – 4:30 Closing Remarks

Abstracts and Contributors

Martin Saehlfhof (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – DAI Kairo)

Inscribed Domestic Spaces in Elephantine

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 10:00 am – 10:45 am

Excavations in Elephantine by the German Archaeological Institute in cooperation with the Swiss Institute Cairo have yielded numerous written artefacts from clear domestic contexts. These range from short notes on ostraca to cult-related texts on wood and clay. This paper explores how such items were embedded in everyday household life and what they reveal about social, economic, and religious practices in domestic space.

Ilaria Bucci (Durham University, Department of Classics and Ancient History)

The Social Life of Walls: Graffiti and the Domestic Space in Hatra, Iraq

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 11:15 am – 12:00 am

The city of Hatra, a major religious and political centre of the northern Mesopotamia during the 2nd–3rd century CE, offers a remarkable corpus of pictorial and textual graffiti preserved in a variety of contexts. The extensive presence of graffiti within domestic buildings—concentrated in prominent or highly visible areas such as reception halls (iwans), adjacent rooms, and corridors—reveals that the practice of inscribing the domestic space was an integral part of everyday life in the local households. Here graffiti encompass a wide spectrum of messages, from utilitarian and economic to commemorative and religious, and include numerous images, especially of animals, hunting scenes, and deities. Their variety and placement addressed multiple audiences: household members, visitors, and the divine alike. Within individual rooms, one wall or area was often preferred for repeated marking, indicating that earlier graffiti attracted further additions and that such accumulations transformed these surfaces into dynamic *loci* of interaction and meaning.

This paper examines the distribution, clustering, and functions of graffiti in residential buildings in Hatra, situating them within broader questions of social interaction, the negotiation of public and private spheres, and the cultural significance of mark-making practices in domestic settings. It focusses in particular on the Building A in the city's northern sector—an elite residence excavated by the Missione Archeologica Italiana (1987–1995) that yielded around 240 graffiti on walls and objects such as vessels and sculpture. Special attention is also given to the relationship between graffiti and mural paintings, exploring how these traces interacted with the formal

decorative schemes of the house. By recontextualizing these marks within the material and social fabric of the domestic space, this study argues that Hatrene houses were not neutral spaces but active participants in social life. They accommodated spontaneous doodles, secular and religious images, records of daily transactions, and formulaic commemorations, creating a layered palimpsest of practices that blurred the boundaries between informal and formal, private and public, secular and religious. In this sense, Hatra's graffiti challenge modern categorisations of illicit versus sanctioned writing, and instead invite us to rethink domestic architecture as an "inscribed space" where material surfaces were continuously redefined by acts of writing and viewing.

Claudina Romero Mayorga (University of Reading)

Tracing Inscriptions in Graeco-Roman Egyptian Terracottas: More than Meets the Eye

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 12:00 am – 12:45 am

This contribution explores the epigraphic dimension of the so-called "Fayum terracottas" as written artefacts, reevaluating their role within domestic spaces and questioning the boundaries between object, text, and ritual. It argues for a more nuanced understanding of inscribed clay as a medium of personal, devotional, and artisanal expression across cultural and chronological divides. This coroplastic production, very popular in Lower and Middle Egypt between the 4th century BC and the 4th century AD, manufactured small, moulded statuettes representing Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, and syncretic divinities, as well as cult servants, animals, oil-lamps, etc. Traditionally interpreted as the material expression of domestic piety, most figurines remain unprovenanced: their portability invited antiquarians and dealers to buy them in large quantities to conform their own collections.

Despite their ubiquity in domestic contexts, they rarely bear inscriptions. According to some authors, only five per thousand are inscribed, although it is possible that many more contained painted letterings, now lost. These inscriptions—typically incised in Greek before firing—range from workshop marks to personal names, votive dedications, and enigmatic phrases. Some, like the signature ΑΠΡΔΙCΙ (Aphrodisis) found on figurines from both Karanis and Ashmounein, suggest shared moulds or distributed production networks, yet resist precise provenance.

This contribution suggests that the various forms of writing practices were deliberately used to codify these object's function and define the relationship between the household and its broader context, cataloguing them in three different groups: (1) Industrial/Economic; (2) Votive; (3) Protective/Magical. Rare examples also include hieroglyphic inscriptions – of dubious authenticity—and early invocations to Christian saints and martyrs. These artefacts, likely displayed in household niches or shrines, reveal how writing practices intersected with domestic ritual, identity, and artisanal production.

Anna Lucille Boozer (Baruch College and Graduate Center, City University of New York)

Domesticating Writing in Roman-Egypt: Archaeological Insights into the Written Word in and around the Home

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 3:00 pm – 3:45 pm

Roman Egypt has served as a critical source of both papyrological and archaeological evidence of everyday life in the ancient world. Until recently, however, studies of domestic life were riven by disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical barriers. In this paper, I build upon recent advances in papyrology and social archaeology that allow me to tear down the walls between these disciplines. In so doing, I explore the life cycle of writing in and around the Romano-Egyptian home. I draw from a range of case studies to explore this topic with a particular emphasis upon my excavations at Amheida (Roman Trimithis) in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis.

Peter Keegan (Macquarie University)

Inscribing the Domestic: Graffiti and the Social Landscape of Everyday Life in Pompeian Households

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 3:45 pm – 4:30 pm

This paper examines how quotidian needs and the social dimensions of domestic life shaped graffiti practices in Pompeian households, arguing that these inscriptions constitute vital material evidence for reconstructing everyday activities and spatial functions within ancient Roman domestic contexts. Analysis of graffiti in the domestic spaces of these ancient Roman towns demonstrates how inscribed texts responded to and actively constituted the domestic landscape, mediating between private household activities and broader communal networks. Drawing upon epigraphic evidence, we can see how graffiti location and content reflect distinct functional zones—from service quarters recording commercial transactions to cultic areas preserving devotional inscriptions. The materiality of these texts, inscribed on specific architectural surfaces and household objects, illuminates how different audiences (*familia* members, *clientes*, visitors and passers-by) encountered and produced written communication within graduated spaces of accessibility. By analyzing graffiti distribution patterns across atria, peristyles, cubicula, and service areas, this research challenges conventional public/private dichotomies, demonstrating instead a fluid continuum of social interaction. Ultimately, domestic graffiti emerge as crucial evidence for understanding the performative nature of daily life—from mundane economic calculations to religious devotions—revealing how writing practices both reflected and shaped the complex social geographies of Roman households.

Elisabeth Rathmayr and Veronika Scheibelreiter-Gail (Austrian Academy of Sciences)

Inschriften in antiken Wohnbauten des östlichen Mittelmeerraums

Thursday, 11 December 2025, 5:00 pm – 5:45 pm

Inschriften im Kontext von Wohnhäusern – ein lang vernachlässigtes Thema in der archäologisch-epigraphischen Forschung, dessen sich die beiden Vortragenden seit 2016 annehmen. Der Fokus der Forschung liegt dabei geographisch auf dem östlichen Mittelmeerraum und deckt chronologisch eine Zeitspanne von der hellenistischen Zeit bis in die Spätantike ab. Im Vortrag werden zunächst Methodik und Zielsetzung der kontextuellen Auswertung dieses epigraphischen Genres umrissen sowie geographische und chronologische Grenzen dargestellt.

Danach werden anhand konkreter Beispiele Zusammenhänge zwischen den Inhalten von Inschriften und ihren Anbringungsorten auch im Hinblick auf ein Publikum, das die Texte erreichen sollte, thematisiert. Herausgegriffen werden dazu Inschriften, in denen sich die Hausbewohner präsentierten, und solche, die dem Schutz der Bewohner dienen sollten.

Martin Hansson (Lund University)

Household Inscriptions in Viking Age and Renaissance Scandinavia

Friday, 12 December 2025, 9:30 am – 10:15 am

This paper examines the use of inscriptions in domestic early medieval and post-medieval households in Scandinavia. By analysing stone tablets and timber beams with inscriptions, images and dates, from Renaissance buildings (16th to 17th centuries) in Scania (present-day Sweden) questions concerning remembrance, identity and individuality are raised. The examples presented come from a secular context and many of the inscriptions can be said to have had memorial and apotropaic functions. Inscriptions like these were frequently placed above doors or fireplaces in manor houses or buildings owned by the urban elite. Often, the inscriptions commemorated achievements such as building projects, and/or had religious significance. In other instances, specific events were mentioned. Individuals from the urban elite and noble families, including both men and women, were commemorated.

These Renaissance inscriptions in buildings can be compared to inscriptions on Viking Age runic stones. Runic stones were erected much earlier in Viking Age Scandinavia, typically dating from the 9th to 11th centuries. Many runic stones were erected at farmsteads and can thus be interpreted in a household perspective. Runic inscriptions have also been found on household objects — ranging from weapons to spindle whorls — or have simply been scribbled on wooden or bone objects. This shows that the use of runes was probably quite common in Viking Age Scandinavia. Like the inscriptions found on Renaissance buildings, runic stones served as

memorials, featuring texts and images that celebrated the achievements of individuals. These inscriptions also held religious significance and may have possessed apotropaic functions. From a theoretical point of view regarding how inscriptions were used and for what purpose, the similarities are striking.

Who was able to see and understand the messages communicated by these monuments and buildings? Despite the large chronological gap between the two phenomena and the fact that they are found in completely different societal circumstances, do they signify similarities or differences in the use of inscriptions in a household perspective? Were the stone tablets from the Renaissance an adaptation of a much older tradition?

Juan E. Campo (University of California, Santa Barbara)

The Dynamics of Presence and Absence: Using Scripture to Create Muslim Domestic Places

Friday, 12 December 2025, 10:15 am – 11:00 am

This contribution to the workshop entails a comparative study of Arabic inscriptions displayed in Muslim domestic places in a variety of different cultural and historical contexts. These include Ottoman era mansions in Cairo, an eighteenth-century palace in the Comoros Islands, and pilgrimage murals painted on contemporary rural and urban Egyptian houses and apartments. It will describe the nature of these inscriptions, which are predominantly religious in nature, and argue that they ritualize domestic “space,” transforming it thereby into domestic “place.” Beginning with a brief survey of religious spatiality (sacred space) as a category in the history of religions and identifying trends in scholarship concerning the meaning and function of Arabic inscriptions in Islamic architecture, the paper argues that interpretation of the inscriptions must begin with consideration of the local context within which they have been produced. Inscriptions in Ottoman mansions express the values and concerns of established Egyptian Arab elites living in a flourishing Islamic imperial center of transregional commerce. The Comoros palace inscriptions were produced by an immigrant Arab minority elite holding a tenuous position on the periphery of the Indian Ocean world of commerce and cultural exchange. In the case of the Egyptian pilgrimage murals, the context is that of inscriptions produced by or for Egyptian farmers and townsmen in commemoration of fulfilling one of the religious requirements of Islam at a time of widespread change and the emergence of secular modernity.

In addition to contextualization, interpretation, will explore the dynamics of presence and absence as embodied by the inscriptions. The concept of “presence” draws from the work of scholars such as David Morgan, Robert Orsi, and most recently Marshall Sahlins, who argue that images engage viewers by their physical presence, i.e., their materiality. This presence, moreover, when understood in religious terms, is felt by the viewer in terms of the transcendent, or that which is implied by the image, but is *not* actually present. The dynamic relation of presence and

absence gives the object, in this case the house inscription, a power to give meaning to the space in which it occurs, making it a place. Creation of the inscription, placing it in a house and displaying it can therefore be understood as a ritual process. The paper will posit the workings of this ritual process and the range of meanings it produces in the different inscriptional contexts.

Janet Marion Purdy (The Art Institute of Chicago and University of Chicago)

Epigraphy as Protective Emblem: Inscriptions on Nineteenth-Century Carved Zanzibar Doors

Friday, 12 December 2025, 11:30 am – 12:15 am

At the height of its cultural and economic prosperity, late-nineteenth-century Zanzibar was the site for a creation and florescence of a multivocal visual vocabulary, arguably reflected in the most iconic way in the corpus of ornamentally carved wooden doors produced there by artisans who hailed from eastern Africa, India, Persia, and all over the Indian Ocean world. Islamic epigraphy and abstracted Arabic texts carved into their surfaces are a hallmark feature of their historic and elegant compositions.

Brief mentions in nineteenth-century foreign accounts erroneously describe the texts that appear on domestic doorways as identifying markers, meant to highlight dates of creation or patrons' names. However, a systematic survey of the inscriptions and their translations reveals that they are actually spiritual texts, passages from the Qur'an, and other protective references meant to mark a liminal space that delineates public from private, or security from physical and spiritual dangers. An overview of the visual inventory of these inscriptions underscores the historical and cultural integration of religious and spiritual meanings of protection embedded into the everyday lives of residents, homeowners, and visitors in these secular spaces. Through the lens of this syncretic form of Islamic epigraphy along the Swahili coast of eastern Africa—a site defined itself by diverse and complex global interactions—these texts may be interpreted and understood as local vernacular and also serve as visual representations of the palimpsest of intangible global systems that cross religious and cultural boundaries throughout the Indian Ocean world and beyond.

Considering diverse external audiences, their meanings shift depending upon political, religious, and cultural viewpoints. In this role as protective emblems, the texts are also considered and compared with those appearing on mobile mediums—jewelry, amulets, textiles, and manuscripts—and especially in the context of this workshop—related archaeological surveys of epigraphic practices throughout the broader region.