Sustainable Futures for Rural Heritage: Opportunities and Threats in Türkiye and the Netherlands

An online international symposium organized in the framework of the 2025 NIT Urban Heritage Lab Yazılıkaya Living Lab: Adaptive Futures for Rural Heritage

17 October 2025 | 10.00 - 16.00 [Istanbul Time]

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https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/m-X7wD3vTtiZlt6SoUfhAQ#/registration

The symposium is organized by
Sander van Alphen (NIT), Aysel Arslan (NIT), Fokke Gerritsen (NIT),
Gülşah Günata (NIT), Özgün Özçakır (METU)

NIT Netherlands Institute in Turkey

ODTÜ METU

Kingdom of the Netherlands

Sustainable Futures for Rural Heritage: Opportunities and Threats in Türkiye and the Netherlands

Many rural areas in Türkiye and elsewhere are multi-layered cultural landscapes shaped by millennia of human activity, yet currently facing significant risks related to environmental pressures, uncontrolled resource exploitation, depopulation, and fragmented management. These pressures threaten not only monuments and traditional buildings, but also the intangible practices, local knowledge, and communities that sustain rural life.

Focusing on the Phrygian Highlands and comparable rural regions, the symposium *Sustainable Futures for Rural Heritage: Opportunities and Threats in Türkiye and the Netherlands* will investigate the ways in which material and immaterial heritage of rural environments can be activated as a resource for sustainable development. The symposium brings together scholars and students from diverse backgrounds with an interest in exploring the potential and challenges of, among other topics, heritage-based tourism, agro-ecological economies, (re-)use of traditional buildings, and community-led cultural initiatives and place-based development. The symposium also addresses how to communicate the value of complex, multi-layered heritage landscapes to diverse publics—ranging from local residents to international visitors, and how to develop strategies that not only inform, but also engage and empower communities to become advocates of their heritage.

10.00 – 10.15 | OPENING SPEECHES
Fokke Gerritsen, *Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)*
Özgün Özçakır, *Graduate Program in Conservation of Cultural Heritage - Middle East Technical University (METU)*

10.15 – 11.15 | SESSION I
A WIDER PERSPECTIVE ON RURAL HERITAGE IN TÜRKİYE AND THE NETHERLANDS
Fragile Lands: Values, Challenges, and Sustainable Futures of Historic Rural Landscapes as Multi-Layered Living Habitats
A. Güliz Bilgin Altınöz (METU)
A New Approach to Locally Rooted Rural Development in the Netherlands
Vita Teunissen (SteenhuisMeurs)

11.15 – 11.30 | Coffee Break

11.30 – 12.30 | SESSION II
KEY ISSUES IN TÜRKİYE AND THE NETHERLANDS
At the edge of development: Ecological fragility, grief, and heritage economies in Taurus landscapes
Güldem Baykal Büyüksaraç (Istanbul University)
A Holistic Conservation Approach to Rural Settlements Integrating Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage
Özlem Karakul (Selçuk University)

12.30 – 13.30 | Lunch Break

13.30 – 14.30 | SESSION III
REUSING AND ADAPTING RURAL HERITAGE IN TÜRKİYE AND THE NETHERLANDS
Preservation and repurposing of historic farmhouses ('stolpen') in the province of North-Holland
Sander van Alphen, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)
Historic Rural Landscapes as Resources for Climate-Resilient Futures in Türkiye: What the Cases Tell Us?
Emine Çiğdem Asrav (Bilkent University)

14.30 – 14.45 | Coffee Break

14.45 – 15.45 | SESSION IV
PHRYGIANS AND THE PHRYGIAN HIGHLANDS
Phrygia and the Phrygians
Gülşah Günata, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)
Archaeologist and pioneer of rural heritage: Emilie Haspels in the Phrygian Highlands (1937-1958)
Fokke Gerritsen, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)

15.45 – 16.00 | Concluding Remarks

Fragile Lands: Values, Challenges, and Sustainable Futures of Historic Rural Landscapes as Multi-Layered Living Habitats

A. Güliz Bilgin Altınöz, Middle East Technical University

Agricultural activities in the Plain of Troy. Source: CHOISEUL-GOUFFIER, Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de (1822). Picturesque Journey to Greece. Volume 2, 2. Caryatid, INHA digital library, NUM FOL RES 474 (3), p. 347. (Online, accessed October 2, 2025, https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/idurl/1/5805)

Historic rural landscapes, shaped by the continuous interaction of people, nature, production, and the built environment, represent fragile yet enduring habitats. Rooted in agriculture, local production, and traditions, they embody distinctive cycles of rural life, reflected in their tangible and intangible features. Generational continuity enriches these settlements not only through physical stratification but also through accumulated layers of meaning, memory, and knowledge. As multi-layered living habitats where livelihoods are interdependent with the natural and built environment, they embody significant economic and socio-cultural values.

Despite their enduring significance, historic rural landscapes face critical challenges arising from structural, socio-cultural, environmental, and spatial changes that generate new dynamics. These dynamics erode their integrity and accelerate processes of abandonment, commodification, or unsustainable transformation. Decisions and interventions made without understanding the interplay between people, nature, production, and the built environment undermine these relationships, leading to the loss of physical fabric, character, spirit, and even viability. Without sustaining rural life and livelihoods, safeguarding historic rural landscapes as heritage places becomes impossible: there is no conservation without living communities.

This presentation examines the values, complexities, and vulnerabilities of historic rural landscapes as fragile lands situated at the threshold between survival and disappearance. It presents them both as repositories of memories, traditions, and knowledge transmitted across generations, and as dynamic physical environments where multiple temporal layers coexist, often in tension. The presentation concludes with reflections on possible responses for the conservation and sustainable futures of historic rural landscapes as multi-layered living habitats, emphasizing the need for integrated, dynamic, and creative strategies that reconcile heritage conservation with resilience, continuity, and vitality.

A New Approach to Locally Rooted Rural Development in the Netherlands

Vita Teunissen, SteenhuisMeurs

Map of the village Ten Boer in 1744, showing both buildings and land use. Source: Groninger Archieven.

The Netherlands is a densely populated country where one encounters multiple dialects, landscapes, and communities within an hour's drive. There is no such thing as no man's land: every plot of land has an owner and a purpose. In the post-war efforts to scale up and modernize agriculture, local patterns were often overlooked. Today, a multitude of climate-related challenges, public programs, and farming regulations hover over the countryside. The result is a growing distance between cities and rural areas, between decision-makers and farmers.

No farmer is the same, no community alike. In this lecture, Vita Teunissen of SteenhuisMeurs presents a method that combines archival research into soil, water, and settlement with in-depth conversations with farmers, governments, and nature organizations. The differences between sand and peat landscapes, between collective traditions and individual enterprises, continue to shape the present. By uncovering these historical patterns, new trust can be built. This approach demonstrates that regional development is not only a technical or ecological challenge, but above all a cultural one.

At the Edge of Development: Ecological Fragility, Grief, and Heritage Economies in Taurus Landscapes

Güldem Baykal Büyüksaraç, Istanbul University

Darıbükü village and Kasımlar Dam Lake (Isparta, Sütçüler), June 2024, by Güldem Baykal Büyüksaraç.

Conservation in Türkiye maintains a top-down, pragmatic form, one that is highly sensitive, if not subordinate, to domestic politics, the contingencies of heritage diplomacy, and above all, the demands of development capital. Against this backdrop, Büyüksaraç takes issue with the neoliberal development paradigm, examining its implications for rural communities' relationships with heritage, based on her research in western Taurus landscapes, increasingly fractured by ecological crises and depopulation. She explores how heritage loss and the grief it begets are entwined with ecological fragility, a process that leads to small-scale initiatives aimed at engaging with and reclaiming local heritage. As much as they respond to environmental loss, highlighting the value of what remains, these are livelihood practices driven by the pursuit of economic gain. Engaging with heritage, thus, is a potential strategy for sustaining life amid rural decline across Anatolia, and particularly in the Taurus settlements.

The economic aspect of heritage practices foregrounds a key question of this presentation: How can we juxtapose local heritage engagements alongside developmentalist state and capitalist interests in heritage, to reveal their frictions? In addressing this question, Büyüksaraç turns to the complex relationship between heritage-based local livelihoods, on the one hand, and broader economic and power dynamics, on the other – a shift in her recent studies toward critically situating community-based heritage practices within not only capitalist logics but also broader structural inequalities. By avoiding romanticising initiatives that engage with heritage or their reduction to modes of commodification, this approach seeks to highlight the tensions, compromises, and creative adaptations that characterise heritage economies in rural contexts facing decline and dispossession.

Traditional Dwelling in Değirmenaltı Village, Hüyük, Konya by Özlem Karakul.

A Holistic Conservation Approach to Rural Settlements Integrating Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Özlem Karakul, Selçuk University

Rural architecture is the product of a construction process shaped by natural factors – such as environmental and climatic conditions – alongside traditional cultural practices and expressions transmitted through the knowledge and craftsmanship of local builders. Understanding the interaction between the cultural and physical characteristics of rural architecture is essential for developing effective and holistic conservation strategies.

The physical components of rural architecture – including the built environment, construction materials, and settlement patterns – are classified as tangible cultural heritage. In contrast, the associated traditions, ways of life, and cultural practices represent intangible cultural heritage. Whereas earlier conservation efforts focused primarily on physical structures and their immediate surroundings, contemporary approaches have shifted toward holistic frameworks that integrate both tangible and intangible dimensions.

The conservation of rural settlements requires a holistic approach that is grounded in the documentation and sustainability of the interrelationships between tangible and intangible heritage. Accurately identifying and interpreting the interrelations between these values is crucial for advancing holistic conservation strategies. In this regard, the documentation and assessment of intangible cultural elements alongside physical structures contribute to a more comprehensive and sustainable conservation process. Holistic conservation is inherently complex, demanding an understanding, interpretation, and maintenance of the dynamic interplay between multiple forms of heritage.

This presentation emphasizes the need to perceive historic environments not merely as collections of physical structures but as integrated systems shaped by the interplay between cultural values and spatial configurations. The proposed holistic approach will be illustrated through selected case studies from rural settlements.

Preservation and Repurposing of Historic Farmhouses (‘stolpen’) in the Province of North-Holland

Sander van Alphen, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)

Stolp farmhouse in Hoogwoud by Mart Groentjes (2013)

Stolp farmhouses (stolpen) are among the most characteristic rural buildings of the Dutch province of North Holland. Originating in the 17th century, their design combines living, working, and storage under one pyramidal roof. Once numbering over 10,000, fewer than half remain today, and less than 20% are formally protected as monuments. Many have been lost to fire, agricultural scaling up, neglect, and spatial developments such as housing and infrastructure development.

MOOI Noord-Holland, an independent non-profit organization for heritage, architecture, and spatial planning, has developed a comprehensive Stolpen Policy to address these challenges. The approach includes inventory and valuation of remaining stolpen, policy instruments for designation as monuments, and advisory services for restoration, reuse and landscape design. At the same time, adaptive reuse has emerged as a crucial tool for safeguarding stolpen. Successful transformations include housing, care facilities, and cultural centers, showing how heritage can be integrated into contemporary rural life.

This presentation highlights how regional identity, policy frameworks, and adaptive reuse strategies intersect in the preservation of stolp farmhouses. It argues that the Dutch experience offers relevant lessons for rural heritage in Türkiye and beyond: the importance of systematic inventories, recognition of regional identity, the need for adaptive new uses, and the role of heritage as a driver for community resilience and sustainable rural development.

Tahtacıörencik as a living example of climate resilience, sustained through traditional practices within a preserved cultural landscape by Emine Çiğdem Asrav.

Historic Rural Landscapes as Resources for Climate-Resilient Futures in Türkiye: What the Cases Tell Us?

Emine Çiğdem Asrav, Bilkent University

Historic rural landscapes are living archives of human-nature interaction, where communities have long adapted land use, settlement patterns, and resource management to ecological conditions over centuries. They embody harmonious relationships that fostered cultural identity, biodiversity, and resilience through traditional knowledge and experiences, offering valuable insights for addressing today's global climate crisis.

In Türkiye, with its diverse ecological regions – from the arid steppes of Central Anatolia to the fertile Aegean valleys, the humid Black Sea mountains, and the Mediterranean coasts – rural communities historically developed distinct strategies to cope with climatic variability. Settlement-scale and architectural solutions included terraced housing and agriculture, seasonal migration and pastoralism, water-harvesting systems, and the strategic use of local materials. Techniques for managing heat, solar radiation, ventilation, airflow, and humidity were embedded into building forms and settlement patterns, ensuring comfort, efficiency, and continuity. These practices sustained livelihoods and shaped cultural landscapes, each reflecting place-specific adaptations that integrated cultural traditions with ecological processes.

Today, however, accelerating climate change is disrupting these long-established systems. Rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, floods and droughts increasingly undermine both ecological stability and cultural continuity. Coupled with rural depopulation, land-use change, and economic pressures, these forces erode the resilience once embedded in rural heritage. Yet, the cases also reveal pathways of adaptation: enduring traditional practices, community-based resource management, and locally grounded knowledge that remain highly relevant for rethinking conservation and planning.

By examining selected case studies, this presentation highlights both vulnerabilities and enduring capacities, arguing that historic rural landscapes must be seen not only as endangered heritage but as active resources for building climate-resilient futures.

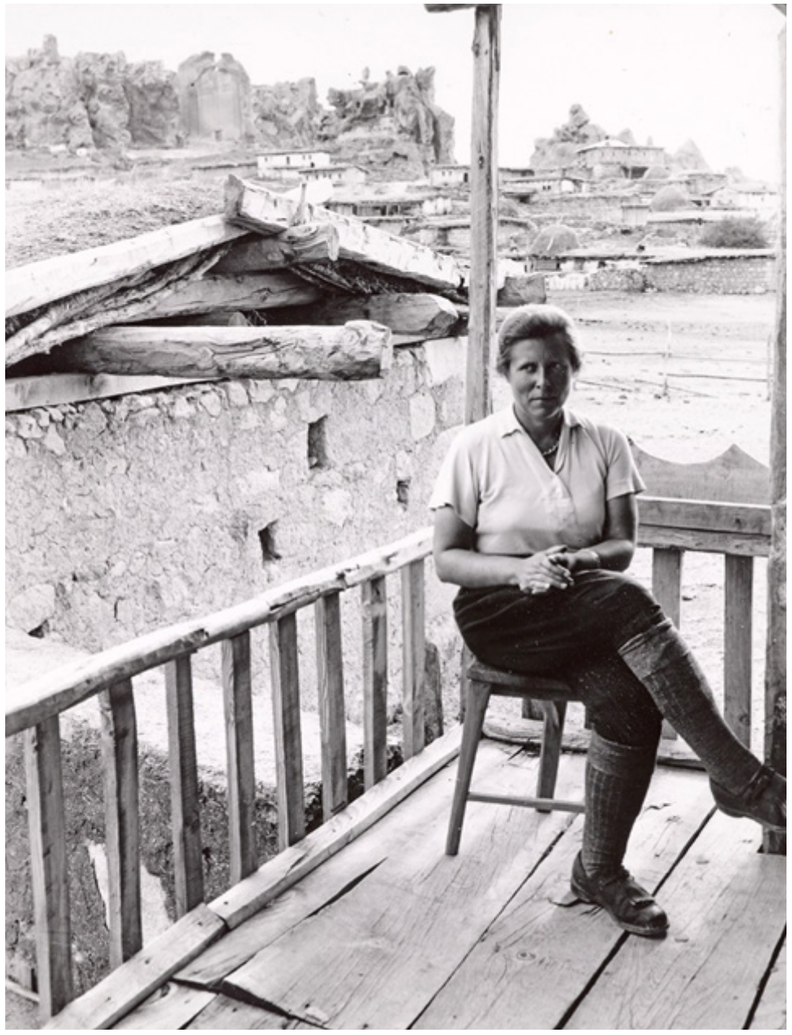
Phrygia and the Phrygians

Gülşah Günata, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)

The Midas Monument at Midas City. Photo by Brian Rose. Friends of Gordion Newsletter, October 2019, Fig. 31.

As the Phrygian Highlands (Mountainous Phrygia), inscribed on the UNESCO Tentative List since 2015, form the focus of the 2025 NIT Urban Heritage Lab, this presentation offers a contextual overview of Phrygia and the Phrygians.

Situated in the central-western Anatolia and defined by the striking volcanic landscape of the Phrygian Highlands, Phrygia was home to one of the most distinctive cultures of the early first millennium BCE. The Phrygian Kingdom, whose territory overlapped with the former Hittite domain, emerged after the upheavals of the Late Bronze Age and reached its political zenith at Gordion, the royal capital. Their strategic position between the Aegean and the Near East enabled the Phrygians to act as cultural intermediaries while cultivating a strong regional identity. Archaeological evidence, primarily from Gordion and Midas City – an important religious center located just west of Yazılıkaya village – demonstrates both innovation and continuity. Monumental tumulus burials and rock-cut sacred structures with ornate façades, stepped altars and niches, alongside timber architecture and characteristic objects such as fibulae, reveal deep connections to Anatolian traditions as well as participation in broader Mediterranean networks. The Phrygian religion, especially the cult of the Mother Goddess, and the Phrygians' enduring presence in Greek cultural memory highlight their role in shaping the dynamics of Iron Age Anatolia. By situating Phrygia and the Phrygians within this wider historical and cultural framework, the presentation emphasizes their significance as a crossroads of traditions and their living heritage landscape of lasting importance.



Emilie Haspels in the village of Yazılıkaya with the Midas Monument in the background, 1937.
Source: Allard Pierson Museum, University of Amsterdam

Archaeologist and Pioneer of Rural Heritage: Emilie Haspels in the Phrygian Highlands (1937-1958)

Fokke Gerritsen, Netherlands Institute in Turkey (NIT)

The Dutch archaeologist Emilie Haspels (1894-1980) conducted pioneering research at Yazılıkaya and Midas City in the 1930s. Although World War II disrupted her work, she returned to the region in the 1940s and 1950 to document and study the rock-cut monuments dotting the landscapes between Eskişehir, Afyonkarahisar and Kütahya. Her book The Highlands of Phrygia. Sites and Monuments (1971) is still an important reference work and demonstrates that she was an excellent archaeologist.

In this paper I will focus on other writings by Haspels and on her photographs. From notes that she kept throughout the years and later prepared for a memoir, we can understand how Haspels became deeply interested in the various communities living in the region, their lifestyles, agricultural practices, and their tangible and intangible heritage. Her photographic archive, now in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam also shows a strong empathy for and deep bond with the region and its people.