

**Transcultural Entanglements and Global Perspectives in the Pre-Modern World. First Annual Conference of the Collaborative Research Center 980, 'Episteme in Bewegung'**

**Veranstalter:** Sonderforschungsbereich (SFB) 980 „Episteme in Bewegung“, Freie Universität Berlin

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Contrary to long-cherished views on the viscous nature of knowledge change in antiquity or the 'Orient,' epistemes were very much 'in motion' in the pre-modern world. That is a core assumption underlying the research program of the recently founded Collaborative Research Center (SFB) 'Episteme in Bewegung' hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin. The SFB's inaugural annual conference, convened by SEBASTIAN CONRAD and MILTIADIS PECHLIVANOS (both Berlin), approached this theme through of a set of phenomena with considerable transformative powers: transcultural (and potentially global) transfers and entanglements. As analytical tools, these concepts are borrowed from recent discussions in the fields of the transnational, global, and world history of the modern world. By bringing together recognized scholars from a wide variety of periods, areas, and disciplinary contexts, the conference aimed to foster a dialogue about the extent to which these concepts might be applied to the pre-modern past.

Following two welcome addresses by BERND SCHERER, director of the conference venue *Haus der Kulturen der Welt*, and by the SFB's speaker GYBURG UHLMANN (Berlin), Sebastian Conrad introduced a set of concerns to establish a common ground for the thematically diverse papers: What was the particular impact of trans-border interactions in pre-modern times? Did actors exhibit something like a global consciousness? In what instances was connectedness denied or outright prohibited? And how does a global perspective really add to current scholarship?

Fitting for an opening speech, MICHAEL BORGOLTE (Berlin) adopted a macro per-

spective in drawing the contours of a 'global Middle Ages.' The 'global,' as Borgolte acknowledged, in fact refers only to Europe, Asia, and Africa. Still, significant and comparatively stable long-range networks and connections were in place around 1300, centering on the Islamic world. Borgolte interpreted the mid 14th-century outbreak of the Black Death in Europe, which had originated somewhere in Central Asia, as a compelling symptom of the entangled character of the medieval world.

ALMUT HÖFERT (Zurich) ventured into the terrain of conceptual history in her paper on royalty and kingship as 'global concepts' in the medieval Islamic world. Höfert began with a critique of a culturalist historiographical tradition that saw European medieval concepts of kingship – the 'Christian, noble monarch' – as universal and fundamentally different from Islamic ones. She then turned to the concept of *mulk* (kingship) in the Book of the Crown (ca. 850) and Al-Tabari's Annals (early 10th century), showing that far from languishing in the particular, these concepts imagine a global and inclusive culture of royalty.

CHRISTOPH K. NEUMANN (Munich) fast-forwarded a few centuries in his paper on Ibrahim Müteferrika, a transcultural actor of the later Ottoman period. Müteferrika converted from Unitarianism to Islam and moved to Istanbul from peripheral Transylvania to become an influential diplomat and scholar at the Ottoman court. He is best known for establishing the 'first Turkish printing press' in Istanbul in 1727, but as Neumann demonstrated, his biographical background as well as his writings defy simple narratives of technological progress and Westernization.

In her paper 'Wisdom from India in pieces,' BEATRICE GRUENDLER (Yale) spoke on the *Kalila wa Dimna*, a collection of fables from India. The *Kalila wa Dimna* reached the Islamic world through a Middle Persian translation and a later Arabic edition by Ibn Al-Muqaffa' in the 8th century. Gruendler situated this process of translation and adaptation in the 'cultural porousness' of the time and region and pointed out its role in the formation of the literary genre of *adab*, practical knowledge for the educated person.

The following two presentations focused on

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the North Atlantic. First, JERRY BROTTON (London) set out to trace Islamic allusions – the Orient, the Turk, the Moor – in Shakespeare’s works. Given the 1590s’ fad of ‘Turk plays’ and the fact that Titus Andronicus was written in the wake of an Ottoman ambassadorial visit, it seems puzzling that such allusions are relatively scarce. Through a close reading of scenes from a number of plays, Brotton identified the figure of the ‘Turk’ as a ‘specter’ haunting the English-Christian imagination in a time of Ottoman strength.

The last paper of the first day then shifted the participants’ gaze to the mythical Western lands envisioned in the Icelandic *Vinland Sagas* of the 13th century. In the depiction of a land fantastically rich in resources and inhabited by exotic yet inferior natives, JEROLD FRANKES (Buffalo) saw the influence of a discursive tradition that had inherited Latin/Christian precedents. By integrating the Norse invasions of the 10th and 11th centuries into this proto-Eurocentric discourse, the Sagas legitimized economic interests and colonial exploitation after the fact.

The first keynote address was delivered by GAYATRI C. SPIVAK (New York). Spivak warned of the political implications of any attempt to conceptualize the pre-modern past as a ‘menagerie’ of cultures in entanglement. As scholars in the humanities, she argued, we must be aware of our role as ‘organic intellectuals’ complicit in producing capitalist globalization. In acts of ‘affirmative sabotage,’ we should strive to employ our intimate knowledge of languages and cultures to train our own and our students’ imagination, making visible the differences and oppositions frequently masked by the consumption of ‘authentic’ cultures.

The second day started out with a paper by EMILY APTER (New York) that considered the theoretical and political issues of periodization in literary history. Building on the concept of ‘Eurochronology’ proposed by Arjun Appadurai and Chris Prendergast, Apter pointed out the Eurocentric assumptions inherent in categories like ‘epic’ or ‘renaissance.’ To overcome these, she proposed a transcultural approach to world literature that would rely on the ‘untranslatable’ – a conscious mapping and mining of conceptual dif-

ference across languages.

AAMIR MUFTI’s (Los Angeles) paper on ghazal poetry pondered a different angle of the intricacies of ‘world literature.’ To complicate clear-cut literary categories and affiliations, Mufti introduced the example of the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali (d. 2001), who composed traditional-form ghazals in English that oscillate between intimate feeling and global politics. Drawing on Edward Said’s thought on Orientalist knowledge production, he defined the beginning of modernity for the ghazal not through its acquisition of genre, but through its insertion into (Western) literary history.

In his presentation on Beowulf, ANDREW JAMES JOHNSTON (Berlin) concentrated on the function of ancient Roman remains in the poem as ciphers for the fate of empire. Beowulf draws inspiration from Virgil’s Aeneid and other classical literary works, but in contrast to Virgil’s championing of the Roman imperial project, it is fraught with doubt about the viability of Anglo-Saxon expansion. This ambivalent stance was lost when Beowulf was transmogrified into a peculiar piece of ‘world literature’ – the English national epic – in the 19th century.

ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH (Berlin) directed the audience’s attention to the origins of Islam. In her paper, she took up the deep-rooted argument that the Qur’an was a mere continuation or copy of the Biblical tradition and reworked it in the context of the ongoing reconceptualization of Late Antiquity. Through a close reading of Sura 90, she demonstrated that even while superseding Christian dogma, Qur’anic discourse was deeply embedded and actively participated in a shared Late Ancient ‘epistemic space.’

RICHARD R.K. SORABJI (Oxford) continued to explore Late Ancient entanglements in his paper on the school of Ammonius in 6th century Alexandria. First, Sorabji presented findings from recent excavations on the school’s architecture and modes of instruction. Lauding the school’s and more generally the period’s cosmopolitan character, he then painted it as a site of spatial, temporal, and cultural translation: between Pagan philosophy and Christian orthodoxy, Roman and Arab intellectual networks, the Greek, Syriac,

and Arabic languages, and between Aristotelian and 'post-Aristotelian' science.

The last presentation of the conference, delivered by JÜRGEN RENN (Berlin), switched back to the macro lens, bringing into its purview the history of knowledge on a planetary scale. In a veritable tour de force, Renn's paper ran the gamut from Cuneiform writing via Micronesian nautical technologies to the Copernican revolution and the Jesuits in China. Renn linked these diverse case studies through a narrative that imagined a developmental trajectory of an irreversible global spread of innovations.

In the second keynote address, WANG HUI (Beijing) spoke on China's place in world history, thus setting a counterpoint to the regional focus of the majority of papers. The bulk of his talk was devoted to a thorough analysis of the intellectual phenomenon of the Song period (960–1279) commonly known outside East Asia as Neo-Confucianism and its remodeling of earlier Confucian understandings of the state and the well-ordered society. Wang gauged not just the import of the Song transformation in terms of the beginning of an 'Early modern' period in China, but also, and more importantly, the possible use of Neo-Confucian concepts for rethinking Western modernity.

As the conference concluded without a closing round table, I wish to devote the remainder of this review to highlighting some of the recurring themes and possible points of interest for further research emerging from the individual papers and their Q&A rounds.

On the most basic level, all presenters by virtue of accepting the invitation to the conference tacitly agreed with its central assumption, namely, that transcultural entanglements did in fact exist in the pre-modern world to a meaningful degree. The papers showed marked differences – if not disagreements – in outlook and evaluation as to their particular form and impact. Still, the conference made it abundantly clear that micro and macro approaches will have to work in tandem to substantiate any claim to a global dynamics of cultural exchange.

The 'other' of the dynamics of entanglement is, of course, not disconnected stasis, but 'rootedness'.<sup>1</sup> While the heightened interest in

connections in recent historical research must surely be welcomed, connections are not a good thing in and of themselves – they might be driven by expansionism (Frakes) or facilitate the spread of epidemics (Borgolte). A major task of future research in the wake of the 'transcultural turn' will be to devise new ways of balancing and evaluating both modes of relating to place and culture.

That is probably why denials and prohibitions of connectedness were declared one of the conference's major concerns. Interestingly, most papers did not address these aspects prominently on the level of historical analysis, but primarily diagnosed them as a characteristic of modern historiography. Borgolte, Mufti, and Neuwirth in particular grappled with the Orientalist legacy of knowledge production on the Islamic world, which affects not just academic debate, but also contemporary politics, for instance in the form of the misguided question of whether or not 'Islam' belongs to 'Europe'.<sup>2</sup>

Other papers also took up the wider societal and political implications of research on pre-modern entanglements. Wang showed how the search for a Chinese 'Early Modern' period is inextricably intertwined with the search for China's place in the world today<sup>3</sup>, and Spivak raised the question explicitly: What are we trying to achieve with our research, and how can we be waylaid by forces outside our control in the quest for relevance?

Periodization is an aspect of historical inquiry where politics crystallizes visibly, and many speakers partook in the perennial process of revisiting established temporal boundaries and their underlying rationales. The conference demonstrated the potential of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term was suggested by Stephen Greenblatt in Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural mobility: A Manifesto*, Cambridge 2009, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> See Angelika Neuwirth / Günter Stock (eds.), *Europa im Nahen Osten – Der Nahe Osten in Europa*, Berlin 2010. For a recent survey on the shared history of Europe and the Islamic world, see John Tolan / Gilles Veinstein / Henry Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World: A History*, Princeton 2013.

<sup>3</sup> On the academic and political implications of Wang's seminal work *Xiandai zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought), see Yongle Zhang, *The Future of the Past. On Wang Hui's Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, in: *New Left Review* 62 (2010), pp. 47–83.

study of transcultural entanglements to catalyze new ways of thinking about the where and when of Late Antiquity, the Medieval, the Renaissance, the Early Modern, and last but not least the most fundamental divide between the modern and the pre-modern.<sup>4</sup>

The issue of time was also raised on a deeper conceptual level. Johannes Fabian's influential 'Time and the Other' was brought up several times while discussing the distorting effects of modern historiography on its pre-modern, non-Western objects.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, Fabian's 'co-evalness' met with some skepticism due to its possible homogenizing effect. With her suggestion that we on no account live in a 'uniform, synchronized' time, Apter pointed towards the need for more complex ways of thinking about time in historical research.<sup>6</sup> This, too, is an area that might profit from considering transcultural approaches. To take up Wang's line of thought: Is there anything to be learned from the Neo-Confucians' concept of 'the propensity of times' (*shishi*)?

The catchphrase of the conference, 'transcultural entanglements and global perspectives,' harbors yet another set of conceptual difficulties. Most papers avoided confronting these directly, but some employed alternative concepts, speaking of Late Ancient 'cosmopolitanism' (Sorabji) or the 'liminality' of Iceland (Frakes) and Mütferrika (Neumann). These terms are certainly no less controversial than the 'global,' but they may provide alternatives to the contentious attribute in conceptualizing pre-modern forms of transcultural contact and consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Presenters were most outspoken in their criticism of the global dimension when it came to 'world literature' (Apter, Mufti, Johnston).<sup>8</sup> All urged a very cautious approach to the topic and an awareness of the pitfalls of European categories and, as one discussant remarked, 'theorizing from the center.' What is needed is a dialogical relation with the 'literatures' under scrutiny. This amounts to a call for a more inclusive conversation with voices from around the globe.<sup>9</sup>

A similar argument could be made about conceptual history in general. Many of the papers pursued something like 'transcultural conceptual history,' most explicitly those of

Höfert, Gruendler, Sorabji, and Wang, and it is here that the need for and promise of interdisciplinary and international cooperation became most apparent. The limitations of a Koselleck-style *Begriffsgeschichte* have been on the table for a long time, but not least due to the immense set of skills required for such a

<sup>4</sup> The study of pre-modern European history, above all, seems to have received fresh stimuli in recent years from the rethinking of periodization schemes based on transcultural entanglements. See e.g. Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo*, Oxford 2002; Klaus Ridder / Steffen Patzold (eds.), *Die Aktualität der Vormoderne: Epochenentwürfe zwischen Alterität und Kontinuität*, Berlin 2013; Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford (forthcoming); Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, Cambridge (forthcoming); and the formation of 'Late Antiquity' studies in general, cf. Wendy Mayer, *Approaching Late Antiquity*, in: Philip Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, Malden 2012, pp. 1-13.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York 2002 (1983).

<sup>6</sup> The idea of 'multiple temporalities' seems to be garnering increasing interest: Helge Jordheim, *Against Periodization: Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities*, in: *History and Theory* 51,2 (2012), pp. 151-171 re-examines Reinhart Koselleck's *Zeitschichten* (Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik*, Frankfurt am Main 2000). On co-evalness/simultaneity, see Achim Landwehr, „Von der Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen,“ in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 295 (2012), pp. 1-34.

<sup>7</sup> On the use of 'liminality' in exploring historical change, see the special issue of *International Political Anthropology* 2,1 (2009). On cosmopolitanism, see John M. Ganim / Shane Aaron Legassie (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages*, New York 2013. Bringing 'knowledge' into the equation further complicates the situation – see Kapil Raj, *Beyond Postcolonialism ... and Postpositivism: Circulation and the Global History of Science*, in: *Isis* 104,2 (2013), pp. 337-347.

<sup>8</sup> Many of them have contributed to current debates on the use of the concept, e.g. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Rethinking Comparativism*, in: *New Literary History* 40,3 (2009), pp. 609-626; Aamir Mufti, *Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 36,3 (2010), pp. 458-493; Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, London 2013.

<sup>9</sup> With an eye to interdisciplinarity, an engagement with the field of musical history/ethnomusicology, where similar debates have been staged about the viability of the concept of 'world music,' might prove instructive, cf. Timothy Brennan, „World Music Does Not Exist,“ in: *Discourse* 23,1 (2001), pp. 44-62; Martin Greve, *Writing against Europe: Vom notwendigen Verschwinden der 'Musikethnologie'*, in: *Die Musikforschung* 55,3 (2002), pp. 239-251.

project, an updated, globalized version is still very much in its infancy.<sup>10</sup>

For all the difficulties involved, the conference showcased a range of well-grounded case studies and revealed exciting new avenues in studying transcultural entanglements in the pre-modern era, whetting the appetite for the research findings the SFB itself is to generate in the coming years.

#### **Conference overview:**

##### *Panel I: Global Trajectories*

Michael Borgolte (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): The Global Middle Ages? Answers for a New Historiography

Almut Höfert (Universität Zürich): Royalty and Kingship as Global Concepts in Medieval Arab and Latin World Orders

Christoph K. Neumann (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München): Liminality or 'Global' consciousness: Ibrahim Müteferrika as Author

##### *Panel II: Transregional Entanglements*

Beatrice Gründler (Yale University): Wisdom from India in Pieces

Jerry Brotton (Queen Mary, University of London): Shakespeare and Islam: An Unholy Alliance?

Jerold Frakes (State University of New York, Buffalo): Marvels of the East and the Paradisical Otherworld in the Nordic West: The Vínland Sagas

##### *Keynote Address 1*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Columbia University, New York): Afloat in the Global

##### *Panel III: Challenging Chronology*

Emily Apter (New York University): Eurochronology and the Politics of Periodization

Aamir Mufti (University of California, Los Angeles): The Ghazal among the Nations

Andrew James Johnston (Freie Universität Berlin): Beowulf as World Literature

Angelika Neuwirth (Freie Universität Berlin): Locating the Qur'an in the Epistemic Space of Late Antiquity

##### *Panel IV: Circulation of knowledge*

Richard R. K. Sorabji (Wolfson College, University of Oxford): Philosophy from 6th Century Alexandria via Greek, Persian and Syriac to Islam

Jürgen Renn (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin): The Globalization of Knowledge in History

##### *Keynote Address 2*

Wang Hui (Tsinghua University, Beijing): Three Sets of 'Antithetical' Concepts in Narratives of Chinese History: Empire and Nation-State, Fengjian and Junxian, Rites/Music and Institutions

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<sup>10</sup> A disciplinary delimited project is Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris 2004. For proposals expressly 'global' in scope, see Carol Gluck / Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (eds.), *Words in Motion: Towards a Global Lexicon*, Durham 2009; Samuel Moyn / Andrew Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*, New York 2013.