Preserving – appropriating – destroying

Handling the Old and the Foreign in premodern Europe

23-24 November 2017, Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte

The destruction and plundering of parts of the antique town of Palmyra by troops of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015 has given rise to discussions on the possibilities of reconstruction, as has already been the case after the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyian by Taliban forces in 2001. The hatred for the cultural and religious differences of the one group is faced by the appreciation of the historical and technical legacy of past societies of the other group – and maybe even by their denial to accept the loss of unique historic artefacts.

The handling of the 'old' and 'foreign' is determined by cultural settings and, at least partially, by pragmatics. Hence, the phenomenon as such is difficult to determine. Furthermore, 'old' and 'foreign' cannot always be defined easily. The real age of an object may differ from the estimated or perceived one; and even more, the appreciation shown towards the 'old' depends on social and temporal parameters and may thus change over time. The same holds true for the 'foreign'. Both, 'old' and 'foreign' are forms of description that may best be understood as social constructs, serving to determine objects or ideas in a specific historical situation. As ascriptions, they depend first and foremost on the labelling by individuals that afterwards are either accepted or rejected by others. Thus, the question is what was under which circumstances described as 'old' or 'foreign' in the first place. To what extent was, for example, the ancient knowledge on cosmology seen as 'old'? The same could be asked about spoils in medieval buildings. Moreover, was the Cufic inscription on the coronation robe of the German-roman kings perceived as 'foreign', and was it identified as an inscription at all?

These questions refer less to specific artefacts, bodies of knowledge or other abstract ideas, but rather to concrete ascriptions and practices associated with it, that vary from reverential museumisation or pragmatic use to purposeful destruction. With the three headwords preserve, appropriate and destroy three practices of dealing with what is perceived as old or foreign can be exemplified. Thus, actions form the centre of our interest, not artefacts, objects or ideas, but rather the way people dealt with them. Did preservation rules exist for specific objects or buildings? How was the handling of ancient pagan knowledge discussed by Christian authors in the early Middle Ages, or the adaption of Arab science in the High Middle Ages? In how far were books systematically destroyed, buildings torn down or used as a quarry? Based on case studies,

the conference seeks to reflect on the contemporary ascriptions as well as the different forms of handling with objects, ideas and abstract sources.

As it is common on conferences of the Brackweder Arbeitskreis, the papers can cover any premodern period or region. We invite papers from all disciplines. Case studies focussing on Rome are especially welcome, but no condition. Possible topics may comprise the handling of objects, be it images, buildings, documents, fabrics or other artefacts, as well as immaterial things such as memories, knowledge or language. In this sense, the three practices "preserving, appropriating and destroying" can also be understood metaphorically.

The conference aims particularly but not exclusively at junior researchers; the public is invited but due to organisational reasons we ask for a previous registration. The papers are limited to 30 minutes and can be held in English or in German. The Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte will cover travel costs (economy class) and accommodation in accordance with the provisions of the German Travel Expenses Act. Proposals for papers should be sent in the form of an abstract (about 300 words) and a CV by August, 15th, 2017 to christoph.mauntel@uni-tuebingen.de

Organisers

Dr. Christiane Elster   Dr. Christoph Mauntel

Bibliotheca Hertziana   University of Tübingen

Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte   RTG „Religious Knowlegde in premodern Europe"

Via Gregoriana 28   Liebermeisterstrasse 12

I-00187 Rome   72076 Tübingen

elster@biblhertz.it   christoph.mauntel@uni-tuebingen.de