

Press release

The Fascination with Holy Places

Delphi, Rome, Jerusalem: renowned researchers investigate religious sites from antiquity until today – lecture series at the Cluster of Excellence starting 22 October

Münster, 15 October 2013 (exc) At the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the University of Münster, renowned researchers will investigate the fascination with holy places like Delphi, Jerusalem, Medina and Rome in the coming months. “Ever since antiquity, religious sites have lost nothing of their appeal to believers and nonbelievers alike”, says Prof. Dr. Reinhard Achenbach, Old Testament biblical scholar and member of the research association’s Board of Directors. “Tourist attractions such as the temples of the pharaohs, the Delphi oracle or the Vatican prove that.” At the same time, holy places were often embattled both politically and religiously, as is the case in Jerusalem today. As of 22 October, scholars from Archaeology, Egyptology, Islamic Studies and Theology will present their research and findings in the public lecture series “Holy Places”. Their lives’ work is closely linked to prominent religious sites. The Cluster of Excellence and the Centre for the History and Culture of the Eastern Mediterranean (Centrum für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Mittelmeerraums, GKM) will host the series.

“Holy places have always provided mankind with a meaning of life and an answer to existential questions”, according to the GKM’s speaker, Prof. Achenbach. “They were often created at distinguished natural sites, for example at springs, on mountains or in the desert. Religious communities linked mythical stories and magical rituals to them.” Even the oldest sacred sites of mankind, such as the Turkish mountain sanctuary Göbekli Tepe, served the cosmic orientation of the world. According to the theologian, the funerary temples in Egypt’s Abydos, for example, expressed hopes for the afterlife. Today, religious people are still looking for the meaning of life at holy places: “Jews travel to Jerusalem to pray at the Wailing Wall. Catholics go to Rome to be close to Church tradition. Muslims go on pilgrimage to Medina to be close to Mohammed and the revelation.” The first part of the lecture series will investigate the origins and transformations of holy places, the second part political interests, and the third part memory cultures of ancient sites.

Political battle for religious sites – the Mideast as an example

The political battle for religious sites characterises the history of religion and continues to this day, explains the Protestant theologian. Holy places are even destroyed in the power struggle between competing ethnic and political as well as religious groups. “In the lecture series, we aim to reveal these conflicting interests of religion and politics.” It needs to be asked, for instance, what the significance of Medina as a place of Islam’s

pacification culture is for today's culture of the Muslims, or why Rome still has such flair despite the secularisation in Europe. "And does the fact that Judaism's, Islam's and Christianity's places of remembrance are in Jerusalem not hold a solution to the Middle East conflict?"

According to Prof. Achenbach, holy places often served to legitimise rulers, as was the case with the holy city of Nippur in the Ancient Orient, which is today situated in Iraq. "Later, clans gathered around the sacred site for war, and kings had their rule confirmed by oracles and religious enthronement rituals. Even today, parliaments still open their sessions with services", says Prof. Achenbach. Christians, too, tried to erase the ancient Roman and ancient oriental religions. "This can only be recognised as a loss by looking at cultural history rationally. This is exactly why archaeologists today excavate what our ancestors destroyed."

When the Delphic oracle lost its importance

Despite high costs, the scholar regards the excavations and the preservation of holy places as indispensable. "Holy places are significant for the self-awareness of man. In spite of the increasing secularisation, they should be kept in cultural memory." Moreover, preserving sites like churches and synagogues that believers are still using in a religious manner today serves the freedom of religion. In addition, profaned churches are preserved in many places in Europe. This reminds one of the fact that these used to be religious places. Prof. Achenbach comments: "Maybe this reminds society that it is built on a tradition of values which it cannot safeguard without keeping the religious dimension."

According to the researcher, the lecture series will also illustrate how religions may come to an end and how their claim to absoluteness breaks. "Older holy places have often been reshaped by new religions. In Doliche in Asia Minor, Roman soldiers reinterpreted the figure of an Ancient Syrian storm god; they saw in him a special manifestation of the god Jupiter. In the course of the millennia, Jerusalem has become a sacred site for three world religions, and in Rome, Christianity replaced the ancient culture." Other places, on the other hand, lost their sacredness. "Because of Christianisation, for example, the Delphi oracle lost its role as one of the most important prophetic sites of the ancient world."

Among the renowned guest speakers of the lecture series are the Erlangen archaeologist Prof. Dr. Klaus Schmidt, who excavated the oldest mountain sanctuary at the Göbekli Tepe in Turkey; the Würzburg archaeologist Prof. Dr. Ulrich Sinn, one of the highest authorities regarding Olympia and Delphi; and the Swiss theologian and author of a standard monograph on Jerusalem, Prof. Dr. Max Küchler. The lectures will be given on Tuesdays from 6.15 to 7.45 p.m. in lecture theatre F2 of the Fürstenberghaus at Domplatz 20-22 in Münster. Representatives of Near Eastern Antiquity Studies, Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology, Ancient History, Classical Philology, Exegetics, Byzantine Studies as well as Religious and Islamic Studies will also speak. A specific

feature of the lecture series is that scholars can exchange ideas with the speakers in an interdisciplinary workshop. (ska/vvm)

Captions: picture 1: Protestant theologian Prof. Dr. Reinhard Achenbach (WWU/Peter Grewer), **picture 2:** poster of the lecture series

The dates of the lecture series

Ursprünge und Wandlungen

22.10.2013

Prof. Dr. Hans Neumann, Münster

Nippur – Die heilige Stadt der Sumerer

29.10.2013

Dr. Julia Budka, Wien

Abydos – Zentrum des Totenkultes der Pharaonen

05.11.2013

Prof. Dr. Klaus Zimmermann, Münster

Zwischen Tyros und Tanger – Die Religion der Seefahrer

12.11.2013

Prof. Dr. Reinhard Achenbach, Münster

Jerusalem in vorchristlicher Zeit: Gottesstadt im Völkerkampf

19.11.2013

Prof. Dr. Engelbert Winter, Münster

Das Heiligtum des Iuppiter Dolichenus auf dem Dülük Baba Tepesi (Südosttürkei) – Ein „Heiliger Ort“ zwischen Transformation und Kontinuität

Politische Interessen

26.11.2013

Prof. Dr. Ulrich Sinn, Würzburg

Auf der Suche nach den Wurzeln des Erfolgs – Die Rolle von Orakel und Wettkampf im Kult von Delphi und Olympia

03.12.2013

Prof. Dr. Klaus Schmidt, Erlangen-Nürnberg

Göbekli Tepe – Ein Bergheiligtum der Steinzeit

10.12.2013

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Hübner, Münster

Roma Aeterna – Eine heilige Stadt in vorchristlicher Zeit?

Erinnerungskulturen

17.12.2013

Prof. Dr. Johannes Hahn, Münster

Wie können Orte Christen heilig sein? – Konstantins „Entdeckung“ des Heiligen Landes und die Anfänge einer christlichen Sakraltopographie in der Spätantike

07.01.2014

Prof. Dr. Michael Grünbart, Münster

Entlegene Orte: Mönche, Einsiedler, Heilige und ihr Publikum

14.01.2014

Prof. Dr. Franz Alto Bauer, München

Byzanz – Konstantinopel – Istanbul. Von der Neuen Hauptstadt zum Heiligen Ort: Reliquienimporte nach Konstantinopel

21.01.2014

Prof. Dr. Hans G. Kippenberg, Bremen

Heilige Orte der Antike in der Gegenwart

28.01.2014

Prof. Dr. Max Küchler, Fribourg

Jerusalem – Al Quds

04.02.2014

Prof. Dr. Werner Ende, Freiburg

Medina – Stadt des Propheten und Camposanto des Islams

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of WWU Münster

Some 200 academics from more than 20 disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and from 14 countries do research in the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (WWU). They deal with the complex relationship of religion and politics across epochs and cultures: from the ancient pantheon and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the current situation in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 43 clusters of excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religions. The federal government and the state governments support the project within the scope of the Excellence Initiative with 33.7 million euros from 2012 until 2017.