

Press release

“In ancient Rome, insults in politics knew hardly any boundaries”

52nd Meeting of German Historians examines abuses and “hate speech” in all epochs – Ancient historian Martin Jehne: personal attacks were common among Roman senators – The people in the popular assembly were allowed to insult, but not be offended themselves – “Enormous division between rich and poor” – “Modern societies could need some Roman robustness in dealing with abuse”.

Münster, 24 August 2018 (exc) According to historians, political debates in ancient Rome were conducted with great harshness and personal attacks, which were in no way inferior to some of the hate speech on the Internet. “The attacks, also known as invectives, were an integral part of public life for senators of the Roman Republic,” explains ancient historian Prof. Dr. Martin Jehne of Technische Universität Dresden. At the 52nd Meeting of German Historians in Münster in September, in a section on abuses from antiquity to the present day, he will speak about the culture of conflict in ancient Rome. “Severe devaluations of the political opponent welded the support group together and provided attention, entertainment and indignation – similar to insults, threats and hate speech on the Internet today.” According to Jehne, the highly hierarchical Roman politics sounded rough, but was not without rules. “Politicians ruthlessly insulted each other. At the same time, in the popular assembly, they had to let the people insult them without being allowed to abuse the people in turn – an outlet that, in a profound division of rich and poor, limited the omnipotence fantasies of the elite.” Politicians and the public hardly took abuse at face value. Even if the comparison with today is partly misleading, says Jehne: “A certain Roman robustness in dealing with abusive communities such as AfD or Pegida could help to reduce the level of excitement and become more factual.”

According to the historian’s findings concerning ancient Rome, withstanding and overcoming insults can ultimately have a politically stabilising effect. The slander in the Roman Republic (509-27 BC) went quite far: “The famous speaker and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), for instance, when he defended his supporter Sestius, did not shrink from publicly accusing the enemy Clodius of incest with brothers and sisters,” says Prof. Jehne – a sexual practice that was also considered illegal in Rome. “Clodius, in turn, accused Cicero of acting like a king when holding the position of consul. A serious accusation, since royalty in the Roman Republic was frowned upon.” Thus, as the historian emphasises, there were hardly any limits in the political dispute. This differs from today, where intensive thought is given to the limits of what is permitted in debates on the street or on the web. “The Romans didn’t seem to care much. There was the crime of *iniuria*, which also included verbal offences – but hardly any such charges.”

“No murders to avenge honour”

According to the historian, the Romans of the city were proud of their biting, ruthless wit at the expense of others: “They considered this an important part of *urbanitas*, the forms of communication of the metropolitans, in contrast to the *rusticitas* of the country bumpkins.” They made a downright boast of the slander flourishing in the city in particular. “When you were abused, you stood it, and if possible, you took revenge.” Invective opponents often worked together again soon afterwards and maintained normal contact. The political climate remained

reasonably stable: murders to avenge honour were only committed in the exceptional situation of a civil war.

According to Prof. Jehne, the fact that the people were excluded from the harsh treatment of senators in political arenas, but were themselves allowed to insult and catcall the political elite, shows that the politicians of the Republic “undisputedly recognised the popular assembly as a political people”. Measured by today’s democratic electoral procedures, it was a maximum of three per cent of those entitled to vote, “but the senators saw in it the people as the decision-making authority for the community”. In the debate about the agricultural law in 63 BC, for example, Cicero tried to persuade the people to change their minds. “But should he not succeed, he promised to bow to the people and change his opinion.” Those who questioned the people as a decision-making body risked the crowd roaring up and storming the rostra. “However, this power of the people was only valid in official political communication arenas,” emphasises Jehne. “If members of the ‘common people’ did not make way for the senators and their entourage in the streets in time, they were approached rudely and by no means courted.”

“A little more serenity in current debates”

Since investigating abuses in the Roman Republic, Jehne is more relaxed about today’s debates in social networks. “The outrageous overstepping of the boundaries of the abusive communities such as Pegida or AfD, with which they want to integrate their supporters, are amplified in resonance by the exuberant media diversity. My research, however, has led me to considerably reduce my level of excitement at new abuses in the present – at any rate, it was not the abuses that caused the downfall of the Roman Republic.”

At the 52nd Meeting of German Historians in Münster, together with the Dresden historians Prof. Dagmar Ellerbrock and Prof. Gerd Schwerhoff, ancient historian Prof. Dr. Martin Jehne will head the section “Invective Divisions? Excluding and Including Dynamics of Abuses from Antiquity to Contemporary History” on Thursday, 27 September. In addition to the abuses in the Roman Republic, abuse between clergy and lay people in the Christian Middle Ages, abuses among enlightened philosophers as well as the situation in the USA in the 1960s and in colonial Africa will also be examined. The backdrop is the research at the Collaborative Research Centre 1285 “Invectivity. Constellations and Dynamics of Disparagement” at Technische Universität Dresden, where Prof. Jehne heads the subproject “Invectivity in arenas of ritualised communication in the Roman republic and imperial era”. (sca/vvm)

“Divided Societies” – 52nd Meeting of German Historians

The 52nd Meeting of German Historians at the University of Münster from 25 to 28 September will deal with “Divided Societies”. Some 3,500 scientists from Germany and abroad will exchange views on current research topics in more than 90 sections at Europe’s largest humanities congress. Guest speakers will be Wolfgang Schäuble, Christopher Clark, Herfried Münkler, Ulrich Raulff, Aladin El-Mafaalani and Birgit Schäbler. The Netherlands as guest country will be represented by parliamentary president Khadija Arib and author Geert Makb.

In numerous case studies, the sections will address the social, economic, religious or ethnic divisions challenging not only the present but also earlier epochs. Among the topics discussed will be, for example, refugee debates from antiquity to the present; the social, economic and legal exclusion of certain groups occurring in different epochs; the question whether the Peace of Westphalia is a model for the Middle East; economic divisions in Germany, for example between “Hartz IV families and helicopter parents”; or the political instrumentalisation of historical images in today’s divided societies such as Catalonia, Scotland and Kosovo.

Organisers are the Association of German Historians (VHD), the Association of German History Teachers (VGD) and the University of Münster (WWU). The convention dates back to the “First Meeting of German Historians” in Munich in 1893, is held every two years and is devoted to pressing questions in history and society. (vhd/sca/vvm)

Please note: Those who are interested and the press may register at www.historikertag.de.

Image: Prof. Dr. Martin Jehne (Photo: TU Dresden)

Contact at the Cluster of Excellence:

Martin Zaune

Centre for Research Communication of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”

Johannisstraße 1, 48143 Münster

Tel: 0251/83-23376, religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de

www.religion-und-politik.de

Should you wish to unsubscribe to the press releases of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, please send an e-mail to religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de.

Contact VHD:

Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands e.V.

Dr. Kristina Matron (public and media relations)

c/o Goethe University Frankfurt

Tel: 069 - 798 32572, presse@historikerverband.de

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 University of Münster, the cooperation partner of the 52nd Meeting of German Historians in Münster. 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 in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative with 40.1 million euros from 2012 until 2018.

The **Verband der Historikerinnen Deutschlands e. V.** (Association of German Historians) represents the interests of field of history to social organisations and state authorities, supports the international networking of history, advocates the promotion of young scholars, and organises the biennial Meeting of German Historians. The VHD currently has 3,300 members. The Meeting of German Historians is organised by the VHD and the Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands e. V. (German Association of History Teachers).