

Press release

“Mount Olympus: populated by gods, but devoid of humans”

Archaeologist Achim Lichtenberger presents first major scientific study of celebrated mountain in a century – How the mountain massif became a site for the projection of religious, political, and pop-cultural imaginings – Adaptation in Christianity – Second episode of the “Religion and Politics” podcast

Münster, 17 March 2021 (exc) On Mount Olympus: according to Greek mythology, the celebrated mountain massif was populated by gods; according to archaeologists, though, it was in real life almost entirely devoid of humans for thousands of years. “The highest mountain in the country has thus been from antiquity to the present day a site for the projection of an unusually large number of human imaginings and appropriations – religious, political, pop-cultural”, says archaeologist Achim Lichtenberger from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”. He has just published with Kohlhammer Verlag the first work on Mount Olympus in almost a century. “The gap between our knowledge of the geographical location and its place in our imaginative world is nowhere so great as with Mount Olympus”. Scarcely scaled in antiquity, the mountain was not climbed in the modern period until 1912. “Until it was opened up to mass tourism, Mount Olympus remained a geographically present but largely unknown place – similar to Hades, the underworld, which of course has no real geographical equivalent. This allowed an idea to emerge that has oscillated iridescently between a real mountain and an otherworldly seat of the gods”.

The spectrum of imaginings and appropriations ranges from the religious ideas of the Olympic gods, to its use as a political tool by the Macedonian kings (who sought thereby to gain recognition as Greeks), to the longings of tourists today. “Mount Olympus as the seat of the gods – Zeus, his siblings, and divine children – has been virtually omnipresent in mythology since antiquity”, Lichtenberger explains. “The idea of the seat of the gods became spatially detached and universally transferable, eventually spreading throughout the Mediterranean. Olympus, whose meaning is still not exactly clear, has become a key witness to Greek cultural history. It stands for Greek religion, which on the one hand is highly local, but on the other is situated within the larger referential frame of the pantheon”. The fascination continues and also encompasses everyday appropriation: Lichtenberger has found diverse examples such as the scratching post for cats called “Olympus”, and the mobile toilet cubicle bearing the same name. He also reports on his research on Mount Olympus in the podcast “Religion and Politics” (in German) for the current annual theme “Belonging and Demarcation”.

Political use of the mountain – own Olympic Games

Another form of appropriation is the political use of Mount Olympus: Macedonian kings developed the city of Dion (whose name means something like ‘city of Zeus’) in the coastal

plain of Pieria, northeast of the mountain, in the 4th/5th century BC as a sacred city on Mount Olympus. Their “cultural acceptance offensive” also included organizing their own Olympic Games, alongside those in Olympia on the Peloponnesian peninsula. By doing so, King Archelaus I countered the lack of recognition of the Macedonians as Greeks. Philip II continued these efforts by depicting Zeus on coins. Finally, the famous tragedian Euripides was brought to the Macedonian court in Pella – unlike the other two great Greek poets, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides then promptly began referring frequently to Mount Olympus in his literary works. “The Macedonian kings attempted through this cultural programme to put the Macedonian-Thessalonian Olympus back on the map of pan-Hellenic sacred topography”, says Lichtenberger. “This appropriation was intended to show the affiliation of Macedonian to Greek culture, while at the same time making a distinction from other non-Greeks”. In real geography, however, the Romans ended Macedonian rule at Mount Olympus in 168 BC.

Jerusalem as a Christian Olympus?

In eight richly illustrated chapters, Lichtenberger guides his readers through the various appropriations of the mountain: literary testimonies, first and foremost Homer’s *Iliad*, deal with the dwelling place of the gods in religious mythology. The supernatural place also dominates in pictorial testimonies, while there are barely any visualizations of the topography. At the same time, the region was always of strategic importance and the scene of warlike conflicts. Our dual interpretation of the mountain as a heavenly and actual place, and its use for political purposes, already began in antiquity.

This principle is also encountered in Christianity: Jerusalem is first a real city in Palestine and the place of salvation. The Apocalypse of John also announces a New, Heavenly Jerusalem, which will descend from heaven at the end of time. This duality is also reflected in real renderings of Jerusalem: the European Middle Ages saw the building in many places of replicas of the Holy Sepulchre of Jesus, and topographical echoes of Jerusalem can also be seen in architecture and urban planning. “We find here, comparable to the idea of Mountain Olympus, the same triad from earthly, to heavenly, to potentially everywhere”.

First scientific study in almost a century

The book *Mount Olympus: Seat of the Gods between Heaven and Earth* fills a research gap: neither archaeology nor classical studies, classical philology or ancient history have so far paid much attention to the mountain and its enormous multifacetedness – in contrast, for example, to Athens, Sparta and Olympia. With his book, Achim Lichtenberger has written the first work on Mount Olympus since 1923. (apo/vvm)

Note: Achim Lichtenberger: *Mount Olympus: Seat of the Gods between Heaven and Earth*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021.