

A special exhibition about research projects – a new form of scientific communication

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Abstract

As part of a recent development, special exhibitions can now be funded by research money in Germany. In this context, an interdisciplinary research association which investigates ancient civilizations from the 6th millennium BC to Late Antiquity under the title of “Topoi – The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations” at Berlin, organizes its own special exhibition. It will display state of the art research temporarily to a wider public in summer 2012.

Introduction

A main task of university museums and collections has always been the linkage between research and a communication with the audience. As part of the large research group *TOPOI – The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations*, several universities in Berlin and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin are currently preparing a big special exhibition, which is designed to present their current scholarly results, at least temporarily, to a broader public.

It is a very recent development that the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the German Research Foundation, has opened the possibilities for special exhibitions to be funded by their granted research money. The funded exhibition should of course aim to display state of the art research. The Berlin exhibition project emerges directly from the ‘Excellence Initiative’ of the German Research Foundation and the creation of large interdisciplinary working groups in order to enhance the quality of German universities and research institutions. As a result, so called ‘Clusters of Excellence’ have been created as the biggest entities of scientific projects in Germany. In this context more and more grant applications include a public presentation of their current research in form of a special exhibition with the objective of imparting their knowledge to the communities.

Under the main title *Topoi*, an interdisciplinary research association currently investigates ancient civilizations from the 6th millennium BC to Late Antiquity in Berlin. More than 200 scientists from diverse disciplines – such as ancient history, philosophy, linguistics, Egyptology, classical archaeology, prehistory, ancient Near Eastern studies and so on – investigate the formation and transformation of space and science in about 50 research groups pooled in five research areas. The applicant institutions are the Freie Universität Berlin and the Humboldt-University of Berlin. There is an important group of further participating institutions, like the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften or the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI). A main partner is also the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz with its famous collections of antiquities mainly based on the Museum Island in Berlin.

As part of this project there is also a research group called *Museum* which aims to assess how and with what effects ancient spaces, spatial imaginations, and spatial concepts are constructed, transformed, and received in exhibitions and museums. These investigations include a comparative approach to the tradition of the presentation of ancient cultures in museums and its impact on knowledge and thought about the ancient world. The group also seeks to survey and compare recent strategies and technologies of presentation in order to develop an appropriate strategy for further exhibitions and presentations.

In addition a special working group is in charge for the concept and organization of the special exhibition, which will present some relevant fields and research topics to a wider audience. The

planned venue is June to September 2012 in the Pergamon Museum on the Museum Island, hence in a close connection to the permanent exhibitions of the classical antiquity and ancient Near Eastern collections. As the Freie Universität and the Humboldt University are short of own university museums in the relevant fields, the exhibition has to be based on a close cooperation between the different collections of antiquities belonging to the Staatliche Museen / Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the participating universities in Berlin. It is intended not only to strengthen the traditional alliance between the museums and universities, which dates back to their foundation in the 19th century, but in particular to present current scholarly results at least temporarily to a broader public. Thus, in the early days of the Humboldt University for example there was a close staff union in the archaeological fields and, for example, the professors for classical archaeology or Egyptology were at the same time directors or chief curators.

The exhibition

It is obvious that an exhibition on approximately 1,200 square meters cannot present each of the 217 research results and there are also some thoroughly theoretical questions which are not possible to be presented to a general audience. Therefore the decision has been made for the exhibition to focus on some main problems and themes which are representative, and not on the single research projects. The presentation under the title *Beyond horizon – Space and knowledge in the Ancient World* will start with an introduction and general overview on the period of time and dominions with which *TOPOI* is dealing, as well as a general overview on the relevant period of time and dominions, thus focusing on the Mediterranean region and central Europe.

The first room presents the general formation and transformation of space represented by the example of the Palatin Hill at Rome, beginning with the very first Casa romuli (Romulus hut) and the modulation of the several stages of construction during the Republican period (510–44 BC) and the Roman Empire (27–475 AD). A film and 3D-models display development and separate phases of the site.

Next to this the exhibition continues with the topic of discovery, use and control of space in a hall which shows results of some projects where archaeologists and geographers work hand in hand: they examined, for example, core samples which provided insights about the climate in a particular place during a certain period of time, and thus tell us whether a place was suitable for settlement or not or how the ancient civilizations dealt with the environment.

The invention of the first writing systems in the ancient Near East is of importance for the accumulation and transmission of knowledge in antiquity. Languages and texts play a key role in archiving and imparting knowledge, like cuneiform tablets in Babylon or papyrus in Egypt.

The next sub-theme is the observation of the sky. Knowledge about star constellations, phases of the moon and related aspects are attested on a very high level in many ancient civilizations and a number of objects, like circular ditches in Europe, papyrus scrolls or cuneiform texts document this expert knowledge. Further key objects like the famous *Berlin Gold hat* and a master copy of the *Sky disc of Nebra* illustrate the importance of sky observation and celestial phenomena also in preliterate culture.

The next room is dedicated to the major topic, measurement. Starting with a mise-en-scène of a Roman country road and presenting a copy of an antique measurement cart, a milestone and equipment like a groma, the principal Roman surveying instrument, it further exhibits weights, scales, linear measures, measures of capacity and time, like sundials or a water meter, in the relevant civilizations.

Another section represents the *Divine order of space* and deals with questions of the creation of the world, mythological ideas and the shape of celestial and earthly phenomena. A huge number of deities in different cultures are correlated to spatial issues such as sky, earth, sun, moon or water and weather. Good examples are Helios, Selene or Luna for the classical world or the Egyptian sun god Ra or the sky goddess Nut. The following smaller room displays the travel activities of deities and heroes like Gilgamesh or the Greek hero Heracles exploring the world through to its end. A copy of the Trundholm sun chariot is interpreted as a depiction of the travelling sun being pulled by a horse, while an Egyptian papyrus with the *Book of what is in the Underworld* illustrates the sun god Ra passing the twelve hours of the night.

The main room is devoted to the theme *Mapping the world*. Maps serve in general for the purpose of orientation and organization of knowledge. The chosen graphical layout and different forms of representations of knowledge are based on different prospects and various contexts. Displayed key objects are the oldest known map of the world from ancient Babylonia dating back to the 9th century BC and the Tabula Peutingeriana, showing the road network in the Roman Empire in an 13th century copy of an original map dating from the 4th century. For the ancient Egyptian culture, a facsimile of the *Turin Goldmine Papyrus* illustrates the oldest geological map dating back to about 1160 BC, next to different mythological maps painted on a coffin and papyrus focusing on the topography of the underworld.

Another subject labeled *Mapping body and soul* deals with a very different kind of space, the areas and parts of the human body. A focus in display lies on the work of the Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher Galen (129–199 AD), who was the personal physician to several Roman emperors. His opus magnum is the *methodi medendi* in 16 books. In addition medical instruments and texts demonstrate the approach of ancient Babylonia, thus meeting with aspects of religion and magic, whereas the Egyptians believed that a person has several components of a soul and physical body and that the heart was the seat of consciousness and mind.

Also curses and protections deal with the aspect of space, like the Greek (6.–4. century BC) curse panels made of lead. Their texts speak of tying up the enemy, or better parts of them. On the other hand many different kind of positive evocation magic is used for protection of rooms, areas or also the netherworld like watcher snakes and figurines places at each wall and Egyptian execration texts or proscription lists naming the enemies of the country. These inscribed bowls were subsequently destroyed to induce its magical protections.

Furthermore the orientation within a space is closely related to the knowledge of items, which were deciphered by trained specialists or priests. Thus certain parts of the body were closely related to oracle or the reading of signs and for the Babylonians the liver was a key organ, with a function as a microcosm in which the will of gods manifests itself. In addition astral signs were used for horoscopes or apotheosis, for instance with the famous Gaius Iulius Caesar.

A comprehensive field is, of course, cosmology, based on sky observation and overlapping with the divine order. At the same time it is connected to the interpretation of time and calendar systems. From detailed drawings of the sky, the zodiac system of the celestial sphere up to the Antikythera mechanism (150–100 BC), there are many stories to tell concerning this topic.

A rather less complex field are the sound spaces, illustrated by a number of original musical instruments like harps, lyras, flutes, rattles or wind instruments being used in ensembles. Further some reconstructed instruments show the ways and working of ancient notation and musical systems. Audio examples and films give the audience the opportunity to experience the sound itself and comprehend the importance of performances during processions.

The exhibition ends with the subject of the research group *Museum* and presents the reconstruction of ancient architecture and space in context of museums. 18th century cork models, different ideas for the reconstruction of mosaics or the Ishtar Gate, as well as current considerations in the process of a new display for the architecture collection in the Pergamonmuseum are emphasized in this room.

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