

Proposed Session: „Medieval Modes of Organizing the World – Continents as the „Natural“ Basis of Thinking in Latin Europe?“

Session abstract (250 words):

The idea of three distinct continents is ancient and biblical, and by both traditions seems to be deeply inscribed into medieval Christian thinking, not the least since the re-organization of the world necessitated by the Flood was done on its basis. But not only were the boundaries – geographical, cultural – of the separate continents defined quite differently if at all in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, a closer look at Latin European medieval attempts to describe a world order also shows that continents 1. weren't frequently used at all and 2. if they were the usage differed considerably from what has seemed obvious to modern historians. So we plan for the session a selective threefold approach to the problem: Tracing the idea of continents from pagan antiquity into the early Christian Middle Ages, looking at a Latin European late medieval attempt to structure the whole known world, and focusing on Latin medieval "Europa" in relation to the modern concept of the continent. The session is looking at a specific problem of medieval geographies from the point of view of medieval authors, framed by considerations how modern needs - which you may or may not call eurocentric – have shaped medievalists' approaches and their restrictive view on the geographies of the medieval world. Starting from the conviction that approaches to the medieval are shaped by the personal background (continental, national, cultural etc) of the medievalist it wants to discuss and problematize approaches by European historians in an American scholarly environment.

Chair: Dr Verena Berhan Krebs, University of Bochum

1. Daniel Syrbe (Nijmegen): Continents and Climates. The Traditions of Explaining the World in Antiquity

Medieval Latin European concepts of continents and their geographic and cultural shape derived from geographical models developed since classical antiquity. A closer look at antique concepts of continents and their perceived function for not only shaping the world but in particular for explaining the people inhabiting the different parts of the *oikumene* (= the inhabited world) can help to better understand medieval views. The paper will present geographical concepts and in particular the role of continents in these concepts; it will also address the transformations of these concepts in a long term perspective from classical antiquity (5th c. BC) to Christian late antiquity (6th c. AD). Due to the nature of literary sources the paper approaches, in a first step, geographical theories of antique writers from a broader perspective and in a second step narrows down the approach to the question of concepts of *Europa* and its relation to *Asia*. It will be argued that first the boundaries of continents were not seen as clear cut, and instead these boundaries and even the definition of what a continent is were contested (are there three continents, i.e. Asia, Europe, and Africa, or only two, i.e. Europe and Africa being just one continent?). From the viewpoint of ancient intellectuals climate theory – which related physical appearance and mentality of people to specific climate zones – was more important for understanding continents as a cultural landscape, and these climate zones were located across and thereby thwarting the continents.

2. Nadine Holzmeier (Rostock): How to structure the World? Global History and Geography in the *Chronologia Magna* of Paolino Veneto (14th c.)

This paper discusses a unique late medieval Latin European approach to global history, the *Chronologia Magna* composed by the Franciscan Paolino Veneto in the 1420s. Paolino not only had a reputation as a diplomat in the service of the republic of Venice, but also as a specialist for the history and geography of the Holy Land. He is an important and interesting example of a late medieval intellectual and his worldview who, in the context of his historiographical work, reflects on the interrelation between history and geography for understanding the world of his present. Therefore, in his chronicle Paolino aimed at presenting the history and spatial interrelations of the known world. For this aim, he organized his chronicle in a diagrammatic form, presenting political realms not only in a chronological sequence but also as spatial entities existing at the same time in parallel. For underlining the relevance of geography he attributes to history, Paolino also included maps in his chronicle, which show the geographical shape of the continents of the world in the form of a T-O map. Against his theoretical background, it is even more interesting to note that geographical divisions did not play a major role for Paolino's understanding of history. He presents, not the least, Latin European Christian kingdoms and their rulers in parallel to non-European, Muslim realms as part of the same global system. By doing so Paolino presents world history as an in every way global phenomenon.

3. Felicitas Schmieder (Hagen): Why medieval Europe?

This third paper will pick up the discussion of medieval concepts of continents by narrowing it down (again) to Europe. For the "future Europeans" *Europa* was of relatively little meaning. If they wanted to characterize their overall community, especially in a global context, they were usually talking of *christianitas*. But there are examples when *Europa* was used in a context that needed the organization of knowledge of the world. The paper will explore two of them: Alexander of Roes, writing 1288 in an eschatological context about a politically and culturally threatened *Europa*, and the late medieval (mostly 15th c.) *Mappae Mundi* which list *Europa* besides the other two continents that had been constructed since antiquity but focus on places in the world that are evidently not part of the world region they tag by this name. Both examples can suggest convincingly that on one hand medieval conceptions of *Europa* were (only) formulated when they were useful in a specific context. On the other hand they would differ in very specific ways from modern definitions of Europe in the world by using the medieval past. This problem of modern needs (always guiding our approaches to the study of the Middle Ages) versus medieval discourses should be consciously theorized at any time but its consideration is especially crucial in a time when the world around us demands to go beyond medieval history defined only by a European point of view, European questions, European needs.