

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Practice

Lecture cum Seminar

Thursday, April 21, 2011, 16.00 – 19.00

Freie Universität Berlin, Raum JK 24/122d, Habelschwerdter Allee 45

Travis L. Smith

(University of Florida, Zukunftsphilologie Fellow 2010/11)

Reassessing the Textuality of the Sanskrit Purāṇas

Chair: **Islam Dayeh** (Freie Universität Berlin)

Purāṇa is an exceptionally versatile genre of Sanskrit literature, freely ranging over subjects as varied as royal genealogy, cosmology, theology and ritual practice, all of which are presented in an accessible, narrative format. Individual Purāṇas purport to reproduce the suprahistoric conversations between various gods and sages, transmitting this divine "ancient lore" (*Purāṇa*) into the human realm by means of the stock character of the Purāṇic bard-narrator, who is often known only by the caste-marker, "Sūta." Though they have been theoretically organized into a broad textual canon of 18 "great" (*mahā-*) Purāṇas and a shifting number of "minor" (*upa-*) Purāṇas, the presence of the Sūta figure seems to suggest that Purāṇic textuality is a late and haphazard imposition upon an originally and fundamentally oral bardic tradition. Indeed, Purāṇa texts are extremely messy, with rampant excising, interpolation and editing taking place in the manuscript transmission of almost all individual Purāṇas, resulting in wildly varying recensions, and an extreme proliferation of texts and variants, whose production spanned at least a millennium (roughly the 6th to 16th c. CE). Yet some scholars have shown that, for all its oral pretensions, classical Purāṇa remained a thoroughly textual form. How then are we to understand its chaotic textuality? The present talk attempts to understand Purāṇa's fluid textuality as one of the fundamental characteristics of the genre, and discusses some of the implications of this perspective on the historical contextualization of Purāṇa texts.

Travis L. Smith is an Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Florida. He studied at Williams College and Antioch University (B.A.), and conducted graduate work in Sanskrit language and South Asian religions at the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University (Ph.D.). His current book project, "Presenting the Past in the Sacred City: the Vārāṇasī Māhātmya Traditions of the Sanskrit Purāṇas" explores the literary form of the māhātmya – religious "glorification" of a sacred place – as applied to the ancient pilgrimage city of Varanasi, India. Constructed around narrative presentations of the city's legendary past, the māhātmyas praise the city as sacred and eternal, while reinforcing traditional norms of social and religious practice. A literary and historical study, the project links the theological and sociological discourse in the texts to the changing patterns of patronage and social dynamics within Varanasi history, highlighting the often dramatic theological and political maneuvers that each text uniquely articulates in retelling and updating the traditional lore of the city.

Lecture-cum-Seminar

The Lecture-cum-Seminar series is a central element of the scholarly program of the Zukunftsphilologie project. It is conceived as a working seminar of 3 to 5 hours. The lecture (ca. 45-60 minutes) is meant to introduce the audience to the research problem and provide the general analytical and theoretical framework for the topic. This is followed by a practical seminar, wherein the speaker demonstrates his or her case by reference to texts in the original language and in English translation. It is hoped that this Lecture-cum-Seminar series, a combination of theory and a direct engagement with texts, will enable scholars to examine the comparative aspect of the problematic without neglect of the local and singular nature of the texts examined.

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship

The project Zukunftsphilologie endeavours to promote and emphasize primary textual scholarship beyond the classical humanistic canon. In an age of advanced communication, intellectual specialization, and unprecedented migration of knowledge and people, the discipline of philology assumes new relevance. Zukunftsphilologie aspires to support research in neglected varieties of philology with the explicit aim to integrate texts and scholarly traditions from Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as from Europe itself.

Zukunftsphilologie refers to the polemic between the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche around the method and meaning of classical studies. As a project it sees itself as part of a growing trend towards a more global intellectual history. It is inspired in particular by the work of Edward Said and Sheldon Pollock.

In order to promote historically-conscious philology, Zukunftsphilologie will foster research in the following areas: genealogies and transformations of philological practice, philology's place in the system of knowledge (e.g. its relation to science, theology and jurisprudence), and philology and the university. Furthermore, Zukunftsphilologie aims to support critical reviews of historical and philological practice. In revisiting important „philological wars“, the goal is not to merely evaluate the argumentative worth of these debates, but to reflect on the wider cultural and political context in which these „philological wars“ emerged and how they have shaped our knowledge of the past.

The project Zukunftsphilologie is co-directed by Angelika Neuwirth, Manan Ahmed and Islam Dayeh (all Freie Universität Berlin) and is associated with and located at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School for Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Zukunftsphilologie is a project at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

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For more information please see:

www.forum-transregionale-studien.de

<http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/promotionsprogramm/kooperationen/Zukunftsphilologie/index.html>