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## Historical Cultural Sciences as a main field of research at the University of Mainz<sup>1</sup>

Reorganizing its domain of research this year (2008), the University of Mainz has focused its research potentials on establishing and strengthening main fields of research. One of these new fields is Historical Cultural Sciences. In this field, more than forty scholars from different disciplines but with a strong historical interest in cultural phenomena work together in researching projects. The University of Mainz initiated the creation of focus areas as a result of an intra-university process, which began more than 20 years ago. For the first time the university started promoting interdisciplinary research groups for the sciences as well as for the humanities. Based on a special program supported by small groups of scholars, which had a strong interest in interdisciplinary research, they were able to organize conferences, to prepare publications and to prepare applications for funds. In 2003 such an interdisciplinary working group was also organized for the scholars of medieval studies at Mainz University. As the field of medieval research is traditionally a field of interdisciplinary work at German universities, it was easy to organize such a cooperative effort. In 2005 several members of this group collaborated with medievalists from the University of Trier.

This group of scholars together with other colleagues from various historical disciplines founded the Research Center for Historical-Cultural-Sciences Mainz-Trier (Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliches Forschungszentrum Mainz-Trier). The institution was sponsored by the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate. Art historians, philologists, historians, philosophers as well as theologians and historians of science developed projects under the heading: "Spaces of knowledge" (Wissensräume). Although the concept of space has become a prominent theme in cultural historical research, little attention has been paid to the insight that cultural coping with knowledge constitutes a field to which the category of space is applicable. In a broad range of projects, the Center devotes itself to understanding the connection between knowledge and space.

The thematic focus on "spaces of knowledge" was an objective for eight sub-divisions of the Center: 1. Conditions of the constitution of knowledge spaces, 2. Space as an organizational mode for knowledge in literary texts, 3. The city as a space of knowledge, 4.

<sup>1</sup> The following text was presented on "Orientations" – Inaugural Conference of the International Society for Cultural History (Ghent/Belgium, August 27-31, 2008). See <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/isch/> for further details.

Byzantium as a space of power and space of knowledge, 5. Media and methods for the construction of knowledge spaces, 6. Technology and spaces of knowledge, 7. Spaces of knowledge of religious groups in the early modern period, 8. Linguistic knowledge spaces.

However, the members of the Research Center dealt not only with the idea of spaces of knowledge. They also shared the general conviction that questions of contents could only be discussed appropriately in combination with methodological reflections, so that there was also a strong interest in discussing problems of methods. This interconnection between research of contents and research of methods can be considered the focal point of the Mainz Research Center of Historical Cultural Sciences. During the last three years the Research Center organized meetings and various conferences. In cooperation with a well established German publishing house a book series was created to publish the results of the research: The title of the series reads: "Beiträge zu den Historischen Kulturwissenschaften". By the end of 2008 5 to 6 volumes will have been published. The books deal with questions of content as well as questions of methods.

Thanks to the financial support of the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate funds could also be given to excellent young scholars for their projects. To be present in the cultural life of both cities, the Research Center Mainz-Trier participated in public lectures and organized two exhibitions: one in Trier in 2007, the other in cooperation with the Gutenberg-Museum Mainz in 2008.

Historical Cultural Sciences as a main field of research, as it was founded this year (2008), is the succeeding institution of the Research Center for Historical Cultural Sciences at Mainz university. Together with two other main fields of research it represents the interests of the cultural and social disciplines at the university. The domain of science and medicine is represented by seven other main fields of research. All of them are supported with funding by Rhineland-Palatinate. This budget will be used to promote and support young scientists, to create start-up funds for externally funded projects as well as the financing of a small infrastructure. The Historical Cultural Science as a main field of research at Mainz University sustains the double orientation of the Research Center towards questions of contents and questions of methods.

However, unlike the Research Center, the Historical Cultural Sciences at Mainz University incorporate more scholars at the university, including nearly all researchers who deal with historical cultural topics. This is a very important factor for the humanities at Mainz University. Since its reopening in 1946, the sciences, including medicine, were the determining factor of the school. Therefore the designation of the Historical Cultural Sciences as a main field of research improves the recognition of the humanities inside the university. Additionally the Historical Cultural Sciences will gain influence in the administration of the univer-

sity. For instance, all main fields of research will presumably play an important part in search procedures for professorships, allowing this new field to bring some serious competition to other administration units at the University of Mainz, for example like the faculties.

### **The fields of activity and research projects of the “Historical Cultural Sciences” of Mainz**

The variety of disciplines working in the fields of Historical Cultural Sciences provides the starting point for the development of shared questions for research. While many other institutions within the fields of cultural studies are either shaped by a particular approach (for example through literary criticism) or by a timed perspective, the Mainz research interest of the “Historische Kulturwissenschaften” (Historical Cultural Sciences) is not arranged around an explicit disciplinal, topical or temporal focus.

The Mainz research interest derives its profile from the cooperation of disciplines with different temporal and spatial focuses from Pre-History to modern times. Archaeological subjects like Classical Archaeology, Christian Archaeology and Byzantine Art-history, Pre-history and Proto-history, Ancient Near East Archaeology, Biblical Archaeology as well as sections of Egyptology are involved. The departments of Ancient History, of Classical Philology, of Philosophy, the History of Law or Jewish Studies furthermore deal with the classical antiquity.

Science of Books, Byzantine Studies, Christian Archaeology, Church History, History of the Canon Law, Older History of Literature, Historic Linguistics, Classical Philology, the Faculty of Philosophy, Medieval History, Eastern European History and Comparative Regional History of the Department of History, Dramatics, Jewish Studies at the Protestant Faculty, Art-history and Cultural Anthropology are all concerned with researching the European Middle Ages and Early Modern Times.

However, the main focus lies by no means on Europe only, for Egyptology, Ancient Oriental Studies, Ancient Near East Archaeology, Byzantine Studies and Oriental Studies all respectively deal with regions in North-east Africa and Western Asia, too. The research activities in the fields of Historical Cultural Sciences therefore, as it is required of a modern cultural science, by far exceed the European continent.

Within the projects of the “Historical Cultural Sciences” at the University of Mainz, many different disciplines are included: some work linguistically, philologically and in literary criticism, others like historical disciplines apply a source-oriented, interpretative hermeneutic approach. Furthermore we have the archaeological disciplines, but historic-iconographic approaches and the History of Law or ethnological disciplines are represented as well.

In order to enable a cross-epochal and interdisciplinary kind of work, a guiding theme had to be found on which the research efforts could be focused. Our starting point for the development of this guiding theme is the assumption that semantics, traditions, ideas, symbols or communication processes have a particular meaning. On the one hand, they are transmitted through an inter-subjective perception and interpretation of the world, and on the other hand through material and social integration in media, artefacts and communication patterns.

By using these media and communication patterns (talking, acting etc), men try to interpret themselves, their environment and their fellow men's behaviour in order to give meaning to their own reality. They are given sense determined by others or create sense themselves to be able to act within this world. The genesis of sense is not only dependent on different media and discourses; above all, it is not to be understood as a permanent *creatio ex nihilo*, but it is usually built on traditions, which are constantly interpreted and re-written and therefore subject to complex historical changes. Sense-constructions are therefore a component and a result of cultural practice. The construction of sense becomes comprehensible, for example, in the creation of texts and works of art and in the linked reception and transformation of the submitted meanings. Since sense belongs to the most relevant factors for acting, the research of cultural conditions for the genesis and creation of sense is part of the continuing tasks of a historical-cultural research. Especially in a historical perspective a variety of different fields of activities are disclosed, which are textual-, image-, or contextual-oriented in their approach of this topic.

Based on these considerations, the research interest of historically working disciplines at Mainz University, "Sense-construction as cultural practice: Historical perspectives," has been developed. It has been planned to work on the guiding theme of sense-construction as social practice in different research groups. We currently have four of these groups:

1. The specific field of research "Sense-construction as Cultural Practice: Historical Perspectives" encompasses projects of History, Art-history, American Studies, Philosophy, German Studies, Dramatics and History of Sciences. The projects will deal together with questions like,

- Historical creation of sense as a means to form an identity and to gain recognition of created meanings
- Loss of sense – Destruction/Reversion of meaning
- Influence of the European context on the creation of sense
- Invention of tradition in order to create sense.

2. A group of researchers principally formed by fellows of Egyptology and Ancient Oriental Studies, who work on "Association with Gods in the Old World"
3. A project conducted by historians, which is concerned with the meaning of "Sense-construction for Political Integration" in early modern and modern territories and states
4. A postgraduate-programme "Textprofiles – Microstructures of Literary History" developed and organised by fellows of Literary Studies.