

## Media contact

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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

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Heidelberg, 11 February 2008

## ***International Conference: “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual”***

*(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)*

**Classical Studies and Ancient History Demonstrate the Dynamics of Rituals: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and presents ground-breaking research.**

The Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Ritual Dynamics” (SFB 619) at Heidelberg University is holding an international conference on “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual” from 29 September till 2 October 2008. Experts from around the world have been invited to Heidelberg to discuss their current findings and convey them to a wider audience. With this conference, SFB 619 aims to expand and consolidate its interdisciplinary approach. That rituals, contrary to the long-held belief, are quite capable of dynamic change, that their dynamics can even be witnessed in Antique sources, and that they even adapt to the possibilities and demands of the global era – has all been clearly demonstrated by the findings of SFB 619 since it was founded in 2002.

SFB 619 is the largest research centre worldwide dedicated solely to the subject of rituals, how they change, and their dynamics. The centre performs pure research with the aim of developing theories with cross-cultural validity, and developing explanatory models for the socio-cultural significance of ritual action, as for instance in the legitimisation of power or creation of identity, in crisis therapy, or the maintenance of order. Currently, nineteen projects are being conducted by over 90 researchers from the fields of Anthropology of South Asia, Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern History, Assyriology, Classical and Modern Indology, Comparative Religion, Egyptology, the History of East Asian Art, the History of South Asia, Islamic Studies, Medical Psychology, Musicology, and Theology. The interdisciplinary teamwork will be focused on twenty-one panels, lasting in some cases several days. Over 250 experts will present brief outlines of their research findings at the conference and put them up for discussion, including the renowned archaeologist and scholar of ancient history Professor Angelos Chaniotis (Oxford), as well as specialists from the realms of ritual research, such as Professors Ronald Grimes (Nijmegen/Ontario), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), and James Laidlaw (Cambridge).

Angelos Chaniotis, Professor at All Souls in Oxford, will chair the panel “Ritual Agency”, which will focus on the notion of agency, which has become a key to grasping the complex social processes in which rituals undergo or resist change. To this end various kinds of agency will be examined, such as personal or individual, collective,

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virtual, and even non-human and superhuman. Not only will the dynamic relationships and negotiations between individuals and groups, ritual experts and decision-making bodies, and 'authors' and recipients of ritual traditions and innovations be discussed, but also their origins and legitimacy, the persuasion strategies, intentions, self-stagings involved, and the efficacy of various representatives of agency. Also to be examined are the ways different forms of agency overlap and interact, and the role of social structures and hierarchies. The timescale for the topics extends back as far as Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, while the topics will cover the construction of religious identities and elites, innovations and new inventions, and even the codification of existing ritual traditions or the establishment of new rituals.

The panel "Rituals of Healing in the Ancient Near East" will be chaired by Stefan M. Maul, Professor of Assyriology at the Institute for Cultures and Languages of the Near East, University of Heidelberg, together with Bernd U. Schipper, Associate Professor for Biblical and Religious Studies at the Department for the Study of Religions and Religious Education at the University of Bremen. This panel focuses on the interplay between rituals and magical knowledge in the Ancient Near East. Individual papers will cover such as topics as healing rituals and ritual experts in the Ancient Near East, rituals in the Hebrew Bible, and rituals in the New Testament against the backdrop of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East.

Central focus of the panel "Ritual and Visuality" chaired by Dr. Petra Rösch, collaborator on the SFB 619, and Dr. Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, curator of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin, will be the interaction between the visual and ritual spheres in sacred images and architecture. Nowadays images and visual signs are developing increasingly into a global language and assuming great importance in global communications. For this reason the issues thrown up by this topic demand a multi-disciplinary approach. The image as a central component in rituals, or the sacred structure or building that surrounds it, were often at the centre of the research, as for instance in Christian art historical studies.

But do we really know the factors that turn an image into an object of worship or a ritual agent? What are the visual qualities of sacred architecture and how does it shape or let itself be shaped by ritual actions? And will a broader cultural perspective help us to find answers to these questions? The panel "Ritual and Visuality" proposes to interpret images as dominant symbols that are found at the centre of rituals, both triggering and shaping them, regardless of whether they are objective - such as Christian relics, Greek libation bowls, or Mesopotamian steles - or imaginative - such as Buddhist visualisations or Christian visions. By looking at Ancient Egyptian ritual manuscripts, the structure of south Indian temple complexes, and much more, the panel wishes to show that the settings are not merely a frame for ritual action, but actively shape them.

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Similarly the new "Open Panel" created by the SFB 619 to cope with the overwhelming diversity of topics and disciplines will tackle central issues relating to Classics Studies, as in papers on Pythagorean and Scythian funeral rituals, or the iconography and political function of the phratries. Apart from topics relating to Classical Studies, the conference will also serve as an opportunity to present the latest approaches in the research, such as ritual economics, ritual design, and scientific rituals, as well as new focuses, such as intercultural ritual transfer and the link between rituals and the new media. New to many of the disciplines involved will be the insight that quite familiar procedures or actions, or even performative artworks can be viewed as rituals. Important new impulses will be sought here from those who straddle the sciences and ritual practice.

In order to underscore the social relevance of ritual research and heed its educational remit from the university, SFB 619 also wishes to communicate the topics of its research over and beyond the academic framework, particularly through its accompanying programme.

The official period for registration begins on 15 February 2008. All those interested can find the relevant information at [www.rituals-2008.com](http://www.rituals-2008.com) and sign up for the conference newsletter.

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