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Images and Stories of the Origin(s) of the World and Humankind

3. and 4. November 2022

Abstracts of Participants' Papers

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Philosophical, Theological, and Religious Narratives in Ibn Taymīyah's *The Origin of the World* (العالَمُ حُدُوثٌ)

Abstract

The transmission of Aristotle's cosmogonic and cosmological narratives to the Arab-Persian culture created heterodox and orthodox reactions among medieval Muslim scholars, still present in Islamic faculties and social networks.

The reaction of the polymath Ibn Taymīyah (1263–1328) to these narratives, throughout his books, is paradigmatic, for along with his critical exposition of these alternate narratives he presents a religious refutation to the images of philosophers (*mutafalsifah*), theologians (*mutakalimūn*), Arab idolaters (*mushrikun al-'arab*) and Christians (*naṣāra*), according to his sources and arguments.

But a decade ago an Arabic treatise was published, still untranslated and for centuries unpublished, entitled *The Creation of the World* (*Huduth al-'alām*), in which Ibn Taymīyah postulates his Qur'anic and prophetic narration, while criticizing previous philosophical, theological, and religious narratives; the paper analyzes them from two principles:

1. The creation of the world from nothing ('an 'adam).
2. From The One (*al-ūāhid*) nothing is created but that which is one.

The paper demonstrates how theological and philosophical narratives explain the origins of the world among human sciences with diverse religious and cultural foundations, but with recurring epistemological patterns, while discordant among them.

It also shows how the epistemological critique and theological refutation of Ibn Taymīyah contribute to our philosophical and scientific discussions in interreligious and intercultural shapes, about the creation of the world, either *ex nihilo* or from the Creator (*al-Khāliq*).

Dr Robert J. Del Bontà
Independent scholar

Cyclic Indic Creations

Abstract

The Origin of the World can be placed under the heading of Creation and creation in turn can be defined as the act itself or the outcome of that act. One may think that the three major religions of South Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—might share the same creation myths. All believe in cyclical time; Europeans would take that to start with creation and end with destruction only to begin once again. That act of creation is true for Hinduism with several active creation myths involving different gods, but it is not true for the other two religions. For both the Buddhists and the Jainas the World, indeed the Universe, exists. There is no active creation.

Both the Hindus and the Buddhist believe there is a fiery destruction/dissolution, *pralaya*, before the universe begins again. For the Jainas there is no dissolution. For them time in part of the universe moves continuously in two halves: one half moves from a state of degeneration to a state of perfection, and conversely the other goes from perfection to degeneration. The full cycle is unceasing; there is no state of *pralaya* between the shifts. At the same time the Jainas have a very elaborate cosmology with highly detailed descriptions of the universe. There are also stories that relate to the early years when man must learn to cope in an environment that begins to degenerate from a perfect state — a state that can be compared to the Eden of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Prof. Dr Fritz Graf
Ohio State University

From Ovid to Gregory of Nazianzus: A Hermetic Creation Story and Its Tradition

Abstract

My contribution grows out of the puzzling observation that the cosmogonies in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Hermetic *Poimandres* appear related to each other. After a short analysis of Ovid's text as an example of a *diakrisis* cosmogony in which the world is created by the slow ordering of originally confused elements, I give a very brief history of this type of cosmogony before Ovid: it combines mechanical and theistic elements, the latter with a creator god (*demiurge*) who seems influenced by Plato's *Timaios*. I then analyze the cosmogony in the Hermetic treatise *Poimandres* as another example of the same type of creation story. As a provisional answer to the intriguing question how the text of the Roman poet and the unknown Egyptian Hermetic author might be related, I look at the use of *diakrisis* cosmogonies in late antiquity, especially in the first moral poem of Gregory of Nazianzus: this text by a Platonizing Christian author suggests that this cosmogonical model had a wide attraction in a Platonizing tradition.

The Story of Origin in Mesoamerica – What we Know from the Maya

Abstract

The Americas, and Mesoamerica in particular, are known for their own stories of how the world came to be. Starting with the Popol Vuh, the "sacred book of the K'iche Maya," copied in the late 17th century, this history and some principles of cultural understanding are traced and compared with what is known from the classical period (300 to 1000 AD) and hieroglyphic inscriptions.

Die Amerikas und insbesondere Mesoamerika sind bekannt für ihre eigenen Ursprungsgeschichten von der Welt. Ausgehend vom Popol Vuh, dem "heiligen Buch der K'iche Maya", das Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts kopiert wurde, werden diese Geschichte und einige Grundsätze des kulturellen Verständnisses nachgezeichnet und mit dem verglichen, was aus der klassischen Periode (300 bis 1000 n. Chr.) und den Hieroglypheninschriften bekannt ist.

(Post-Darwinist) Stories of the Origins of Humankind

Abstract

In the nineteenth century, the theory of evolution challenged prevalent ideas about the origins of the world and of humankind. This caused many people to question their basic concepts of humanity and its past and triggered debates which continue to the present day. The theory of evolution also inspired some authors to explore a new literary subject matter in fictional texts that tried to imagine what human history long before the emergence of the first written records might have looked like. These texts, often referred to as 'prehistoric fiction', draw upon science to some extent. They can be categorised as a type of speculative fiction, since they (similar to dystopian or postapocalyptic narratives) use the principle of extrapolation to imagine what is unknown: in this specific case, the ways in which early human beings experienced the world around them cognitively and emotionally and interacted with it. In many respects, prehistoric fiction by authors like Jack London, H.G. Wells, William Golding and Jean M. Auel tells us more about ideas that were predominant at the times when these texts were written than about the remote past of humankind. This contribution seeks to examine what the planet and its inhabitants are made to look like through the eyes of various literary prehistoric characters in works by the authors mentioned above. In addition, it addresses the question which narrative and aesthetic strategies are drawn upon to make our ancestors and their world appear familiar (or unfamiliar) to us.

A Post-Apocalyptic Quest for Origins: Stories of Creation and Apocalypse in Guerrilla Games' *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017)

Abstract

The story of the critically acclaimed and commercially success computer game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), developed by Guerrilla Games for Sony Interactive Entertainment, combines a variety of seemingly disparate elements. Drawing on stock features of both utopian and dystopian storytelling (Farca 2022) and intertwining narratives of annihilation and creation, the action role-playing game (RPG) takes its players to a distant future in which different pre-industrial cultures are dispersed over an immense primordial wilderness that is roamed by animal-like machines. While players can identify the post-apocalyptic nature of the game's setting due to scattered remnants of human civilization as we know it, all knowledge of this civilization and its apparent downfall has been lost to the inhabitants of the fictional world. Consequently, the various cultures we encounter in *Horizon Zero Dawn* have developed different alternative mythologies and stories attempting to account for the creation of the world they inhabit.

In the unfolding story, the player of the video game assumes control of a young women called Aloy from a matriarchal tribe of hunters and gatherers. Unsurprisingly, Aloy's story takes the form of a quest narrative which to a large extent revolves around the discovery and gradual reconstruction of the history of the man-made technological catastrophe that has led to the downfall of advanced human civilization – a catastrophe that simultaneously constitutes the 'true' origin of the young woman's world. However, the game also devotes considerable attention to the visual and narrative portrayal of the premodern cultures of this storyworld and their different attempts to make mythological sense of their surroundings. For the design of those mythologies the developers of the game draw on both biblical imagery and various non-Christian creation myths.

My talk will engage with the interplay of stories of creation and apocalypse in *Horizon Zero Dawn* with a specific focus on the analysis of those fictional mythologies. This will include identifying recurrent motifs and patterns within those myths that are taken from different cultural and religious contexts. It will also include addressing the ways in which, for example, the normative ideas inherent in the mythology of Aloy's tribe are reflected in the tribe's aesthetic representation. Moreover, I will suggest that the fictional universe created by Guerrilla Games plays with the fascination with witnessing the "fundamentally unwitnessable"

(Snyder 2011, 479) in multiple ways. On the one hand, players actively participate in the ‘historical’ reconstruction of a future apocalypse. They witness, figuratively speaking, the end of (our) time. On the other hand, the story takes them, in some sense, back to the dawn of time, as the game requires the player to understand and navigate the quasi-neolithic culture of Aloy’s tribe.

Reflections of the Origins of the World in the Water Architecture of South Asia

Abstract

South Asian mythology is replete with narrations about the origins of the world. Such stories are usually religiously motivated and those of the Hindus and Buddhist show certain similarities. Indirectly related to modern scientific evidence, many accounts portray evolution as evolving out of water.

In Indic religious traditions, water symbolises chaos, which divulges the world at the end of a cosmic cycle. In the following new creation, it represents the fertile element out of which new life develops. Creation can be an autonomous process, such as a seed or an egg, which reveals life. This first substance needs to be stabilised or fixed, to provide a secure and permanent starting point for creation to emanate from. Frequently, a divinity or divine being is involved in this affixing. It is a god who saves the goddess of the earth from the cosmic waters by placing her onto a lotus leaf, or who secures the first trace of floating matter with a spear or pole (*axis mundi*). In other stories, the water needs to be drained and an island or mountain needs to settle, as in the Buddhist creation story of the Kathmandu Valley. From this central point, creation radiates out into the directions. These legends about the beginnings of the world have been depicted in relief panels and paintings.

However, water-related creation narratives were also translated into architecture. Due to their immediate connection with water, many reservoirs express allusions to cosmogonic myths. They contain elements such as lotus-shaped platforms or central pillars, which represent the first floating substance, being fixed at the centre of the cosmic waters. The resulting multiplicity of creation is visualised in the form of radiating bridges and further architectural elements, surrounding the water's edge.

Dr Xavier L. Johnson
Earlham School of Religion, Earlham College

Meaning Making and African Atlantic Myths and Folklore

Abstract

Enslaved Africans brought with them mythology and folklore and used it to make meaning of their lived-experience in the Americas. Through often syncretized with aspects of the Christian religion, and the religions of the native people who first inhabited the southern United States and the Caribbean, the myths and folklore brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans and expanded on by their progeny remained distinctively African, while at the same time being distinguishably Atlantic and ever evolving.

This essay will explore the cultural context of portions of the African Atlantic, namely Cuba, Haiti, Bahamas, and the southern United States, and how the stories and images in the myths and folklore developed in these parts of the African Atlantic world offer a glimpse into how enslaved Africans retained and expanded African cosmogonies, theologies, and epistemologies, while at the same time offering a better understanding of how they perceived themselves, the world around them, and their place in it.

Prof. Dr Satyanad Kichenassamy
Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne

A Critique of the Notion of Absolute Beginning in Indian Philosophy and Iconography

Abstract

The manifestation of Śiva as an infinite column of light and fire, having neither beginning nor end, at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai in Tamil Nadu (India), is one of the most standard topoi of Tamil literature, abundantly referred to in iconography, literature, music and philosophy over a period of about fifteen centuries. It has been part of living culture, as well as the focus of scholarly interest in India, to this day. We summarize the basic narratives and iconographic themes associated with this legend, and show how the content as well as the discursive strategies of the authors of these narratives represent different aspects of a critique of earlier theories about the putative absolute beginning of the world, spelled out in philosophical terms in the Cittānta Caiva system. Related developments in other fields in India include the invention of negative numbers in mathematics, and the emergence of the nuclear family.

Prof. Dr Ralf Krumeich
Bonn University

Divine Genealogies and Multiple Creations of Human Beings: Images of the Origins of World and Humankind in Ancient Greece

Abstract

According to ancient Greek ideas and narratives, the world originated from the Earth (Gaia) and Sky (Uranos) and from a series of superseding divine genealogies (cf. especially Hesiod's *Theogony*, around 700 BCE); in the end, the Olympian deities (i.e. the latest generation) were successful. In terms of appearance and character, the Olympians and other Greek deities were imagined according to purely human standards – all of them remained anything but infallible or moral authorities. Remarkably (and different from many other cultures), mortal human beings existed from the beginning already. Only since the fourth century BCE, we know of mythological traditions and images regarding the creation of human beings by Prometheus.

This paper aims to discuss a selection of ancient Greek and Roman images visualizing the formation of world and humankind. Case studies will include the battle between the Olympians and the giants (gigantomachy) that has been an important topic of state and ruler representation for many centuries to come, Pandora as the first human woman created by the smithing god Hephaestus and Prometheus as another creator of human beings.

Evolving Origins and the Artificial Human in Science Fiction

Abstract

For most of human history, the origin(s) of the world and humankind have been told in religious and mythical narratives that often feature divine creation. With the rise of evolution as a scientific metanarrative, however, alternative explanations of the origin of the natural world and humanity have increasingly shaped human self-understanding. In that context, the motif of the artificial human provides an illuminating intersection between different discourses on the origin(s) and evolution of humanity. Since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the conception of a new kind of human being has been an ambivalent vision, often fuelled by the latest developments in science, technology and economy, and providing powerful images of human self-creation with its philosophical and ethical implications. Anglophone science fiction offers a wide range of such new beginnings, from dystopian scenarios of oppression to hopes for greater human agency through a 'participant evolution'. This paper introduces important strains in the science-fictional discourse on the human being as a construct and self-created Other that undermines fundamental ontological categories. Relating to key texts by Philip K. Dick (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*), Margaret Atwood (*MaddAdam* trilogy) and other writers, the talk pays special attention to the narrative pattern of an apocalypse as social and environmental critique and to authenticate new forms of human life as evolutionary necessity. Overall, the paper offers a critical discussion of the artificial human as leitmotif in science-fictional creation stories and the notion of *Homo sapiens* as possible origin of a new species.

Clothed in Myths: The Journey of Naiṇī Mātā, a Serpent-Shaped, Western Himalayan Hindu Goddess

Abstract

In my research on nine Naiṇī or Nāginī sisters, serpent-shaped goddesses worshipped in a valley in the Garhwal region of the Indian Western Himalaya, their stories were told to me in various versions, and also performed during ritual reenactments. Most extensive was The Compiled Story of the Naiṇī Mātā of Rains (Naiṇī Mātā kī samkṣipt itihās), a version from a handwritten notebook used during the six months long ritual journey of the Naiṇī of the village Rains, 2016-2017. It is a creation myth full of references to the Mahābhārata epic, various Purāṇas, and other Sanskrit texts, but stands on its own as an original account of the origin of the world of mortals (Mr̥tyulok) – at least, of a specific part of it, stretching as far as the eye can see from mountains about 2500 meters high. As in Sanskrit mythologies, this local story implies that a sacrificial rite (yagya) is not only a reenactment of the creation myth, but itself an act of creation. Moreover, the journey entails lots of smaller ritual acts (parv), performed at places where the goddesses themselves are believed to have performed the same ritual acts of worshipping a specific rock, a spring, a tree or even a turf of grass. In this way, the stories are densely and deeply interlaced into human perception of the environment, into ritual aesthetics appealing to all senses and into the fabrics and power dynamics of local caste, village and family relations.

Dr Athira Mohan
Independent scholar

Creation Myths as a Decolonizing Strategy

Abstract

Creation myths are a prominent part of oral folklore, for wondering about the how's and why's of the primordial is at the root of civilization. Many cultures have different patterns of creation myths, most of them having religious elements in them is the factor which sets aboriginal myths asunder. I attempt to look into the patterns of similarity in the indigenous creation myths of Indian and Native American origin, with respect to how they could be seen as a decolonizing strategy.

The superior beings in aboriginal myths, whether thought of as Gods or cultural heroes, are either treated in a somber manner, or as the center of tales of buffoonery. Creation myths are often set in *illo tempore*, meaning at that time, where stories start by hinting at a time before the world was a place one is familiar with. Aboriginal stories incorporate several devices of the creation folklore, including the ex nihilo, creation through the land, creation by dismemberment trope, etc. An important point of contention which sets aboriginal folk tales separate from the modern tales is the manner in which the transitory nature of the land is highlighted.

For the purpose of my study, I have selected aboriginal tales of creation from two seemingly different cultures, that of Native American and Indian. *How Things Came to be- Inuit Stories of Creation* by Rachel and Shaun Quitsualik Tinsley feature a collection of Inuit folktales dealing with creation of earth, and *We Came From the Geese* by Ruby Hembrom is an indigenous Indian folktale of creation. In my paper, I propose to introspect the similarities in the rendering method of yarn narration used in the stories, and the various narrative techniques employed.

Prof. Dr Ludwig Morenz
University of Bonn

Failed Creation ... It Has to Be Repeated: A Mythologized Philosophy of History from Late 3rd Millennium Egypt

Abstract

The culture of Ancient Egypt generated various metaphors, myths, mythemes, mythememes of creation. Generally “Creation” was seen as good (or, at least, neutral) – an act of establishing order (e.g.: Maat) against chaos.

By the end of the 3rd millennium Egyptian state (and society) came into trouble, the first nation-state in world history collapsed. In that distinct socio-economic setting a new idea of “failed creation” was developed. It is expressed both for the first time und most clearly in the tomb inscription of Akhtifi, a nomarch living in the south of Egypt immediately after the end of the “Old Kingdom”.

Literature: L. Morenz, *Anchtifi von Hefat: Manns-Kerl und Messias?*, Berlin 2022

Samantha Reilly
Doctoral Candidate, Boston University School of Theology

Creatio-Ex-Mud:
The Shape of Clay Creation in the Ancient Near East

Abstract

If we are to attach any image to creation in the Ancient Near East (ANE), it must surely be one of divine fingers digging into clay, pressing and working form until flesh emerges. From Sumerian myths to Babylonian epics, from Yahweh to Enki—ANE origin narratives repeatedly figure creation as an act set in mud, with gods constructing bodies haptically, through dirt and slip. And, though scholarship has indeed attended to these etiologies, it has been only with heuristics which prioritize post-clay-being over clay-creation itself. This paper aims to return to the creative act, to carve out the contours of the ANE by feeling the grooves of *creatio-ex-mud*. It will not only ask why ANE creation is marked time and again by the movement of god-finger into creation, but also: why clay?; why must being begin hollow?; what does it mean—for both god and creation—to be held, interpenetrated, and then let go? Hermeneutics of concavity, of phenomenology, and of divine-human being/being-with will guide this paper as it moves through three specific clay-myths: Yahwist Genesis, Enki and Ninmah, and Atrahasis. The clay-creation in these traditions betrays a particular way of forming/being, as well as a particular, aesthetic relationship with the divine. Clay, for its own part, proves creative, co-eventing, and risky. As this paper spends time in the mud of these stories, one thing becomes increasingly clear: the *shaping*—of self, of community, of form, of storying itself—does not end when god puts down the clay.

The Creation of the World and of Man as an Apologetic Argument of Contemporary Feminist Quranic Exegesis

Abstract

In the so-called second wave of feminism in Islamic-influenced societies of the Middle East from the 1960s onward, Muslim protagonists argued almost exclusively with reference to religious texts in order to demand equal rights for women and to reject a male-dominated, traditional Qur'anic exegesis that provided justifications for the discrimination of women in state and society in inheritance, marriage, and divorce laws. In contrast, from around 1880 onward, feminists of the first wave had used the terms and demands of European nationalism to fight for an extension of women's rights, such as the right to vote, fair remuneration for professional activities, and improved divorce laws.

Feminist Qur'anic exegesis at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century argues primarily with recourse to the Qur'an and the hadith (traditions) in order to justify the equal rights of women. One of the most important reference texts is the Koranic narrative of the creation of the world and of man, which, from a feminist point of view, virtually forbids the legal discrimination of women. Based on the creation of man and woman according to the Quranic account, apologetic argumentation simultaneously emphasizes the superiority of Islam, which, in contrast to the biblical account of creation, does not know any subordination of woman through her creation from the "rib" of man.

In my contribution, I would like to analyse the discourse on equality of some contemporary Muslim feminists with reference to the creation account and shed light on the significance of questioning the male monopoly on Quranic hermeneutics, which has so far remained largely untouched.

The Impact of Naṭarāja's Drum: The Visualisation of Naṭarāja's Role as Creator Through the Architecture and Iconographic Programme of the Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram

Abstract

In popular perception and early western research, the Hindu god Śiva was associated with destruction. This view was derived from his role within the *trimūrti*, a group of three deities within which Brahmā functions as creator, Viṣṇu as preserver and Śiva as destroyer. However, in śaiva belief, Śiva embodies all aspects. This is likewise valid for Śiva's manifestation as Naṭarāja, the 'king of dancers' who is venerated in a vast temple complex in Chidambaram (South India). According to the teachings of the Śaivasiddhānta, the Naṭarāja icon embodies the god's five deeds (*pañcakṛtya*): creation, preservation, destruction, unveiling and release. The creative aspect finds its expression in the small drum, *ḍamaru*, which through its sound creates the universe. Nevertheless, further connections of Śiva/Naṭarāja and creation stories have so far been neglected in research.

However, the late Cōla period conception of the Naṭarāja Temple complex and its iconographic programme can be interpreted as a visualisation of Naṭarāja's creative aspect. The temple complex is the first site where the temple towers (*gopuras*) are arranged in the four cardinal directions. Thus, the temple forms a three-dimensional *maṇḍala*, a symbolic representation of the world with Naṭarāja in the centre. The iconographic programme inside the passageways of the *gopuras* depicts the creation of the dance as described in the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, a manual on performing arts. The female dancing figures further partake in a general fertility and procreation symbolism. Therefore, the late Cōla period conception of the temple can be seen not only as a visualisation of the origin of dance, but also as a depiction of creation in general.

Dr Saran Suebsantiwongse
Silpakorn University

The Creation of the Worlds: Births and Rebirths as Narrated and Depicted in the Tebhūmikā, a Buddhist Manuscript from Sukhothai

Abstract

Tebhūmikā is a book written by King Dharmarāja I (also known as Li thai), a king of the Sukhothai dynasty, now in the modern-day Thailand. The book describes the theory evolution of living beings based on the Theravada Buddhist belief. Depending on their past sins and merits, all beings are born into three major planes of existence, namely *kāmabhūmi* (the plane of desire), *rūpabhūmi* (the plane of form) and *arūpabhūmi* (the plane of formless). In turn, each of the plane consists of sub-planes, which are the abodes of creatures ranging from the *pretas* (the hungry ghosts) in different “hells” to the formless *Brahmas* (highly evolved formless beings) in various “heavens”. These planes are situated around the Mount Sumeru, which sits at the centre of the universe.

The stories of the Tebhūmikā are so vivid; hence, it is justifiable why most manuscripts of the text contain many colourful illustrations, which were reproduced many times during the Sukhothai dynasty as well as in the subsequent periods. Apart from outlining the stories of the creation of the worlds, births and rebirths as narrated and depicted in the Tebhūmikā, this paper seeks to shade some light on the connection between the statecraft and the Buddhist belief in the 14th-century Thailand and how the text may have been used as a didactic device by the kings to rule his subjects according to the Buddhist precepts. Furthermore, the paper seeks to highlight the strong ties between the art and literature in the pre-modern Thailand and the ways in which they were used to educate the people in the society. Finally, the paper looks at the royal patronage involved in the productions of the text including the court’s influence on the styles, forms and techniques used in the creation of the painted manuscripts.

Hannah Weber
University of Bonn

Creation in the Kojiki and Nihongi and Hesiod's Theogony: Yin and Yang and Divine Parentage

Abstract

The Japanese religious landscape has been shaped by a distinctive syncretism of the ancient folk religion Shinto, Chinese Taoism and Confucianism as well as Buddhism. In the case of Shinto mythology, which has only been canonized in writing during a time where this cultural and religious exchange had already been in place, these influences present themselves as early as during the retelling of the origin of the universe. The Shinto creation mythology therefore reflects both the indigenous Japanese worldview as well as some fundamental concepts of Taoist cosmogony. It revolves around the yin and yang dualism of heaven and earth, father and mother.

The motif of creation through a sky-father and an earth-mother is sometimes referred to as a divine-parentage creation myth and is fairly common within polytheistic traditions. Hesiod's Theogony presents a similar approach to the origin of the cosmos, in which Uranos and Gaia as sky-father and earth-mother play the biggest part in creation. Hesiod's Theogony and the Japanese Shinto creation myth both combine their cosmogony with the birth of the gods, which establishes a connection between divinity and nature.

I want to illustrate the similarities and differences between these two independent manifestations of the same mythological motif and take a look at the purpose that the two mythologies serve in their respective contexts, relating to ideas of morality, gender and ritual practice.

This analysis will draw on the talking points and conclusions that I have found during my bachelor's thesis on the same topic, which I have concluded in 2020 at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. I am currently pursuing a master's degree in Asian Studies with a focus on Religious Studies at the same University.

Visual Modes of Chinese Cosmogonies

Abstract

Dozens of creation stories can be found in Chinese literature from the Han dynasty onwards, and many of these reflect much older myths about how our world came into being. Some of the primordial forces or principles mentioned in literature—Heaven 天, the Great Beginning 太始, the Way 道 or Pangu 盤古—were never represented visually. Other cosmogonic forces were represented by symbols: *Yin* and *yang* 陰陽 often take the shape of tiger and dragon, and the way their working produces the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) is reflected in the symbols of the eight trigrams *bagua* 八卦. The creators of mankind and civilization, Fuxi and Nüwa 伏羲女媧, are half human mythical beasts, while Taiyi 太一 and Laozi 老子 are ancient Chinese figures that were deified as creational gods in later times and represented in full human form.

My talk will explore different visual modes of these Chinese ideas about creation: Throughout its long history, the indigenous Daoist religion deployed abstract diagrams of creation and protective talismans. Anthropomorphic figures of Daoist deities emerged only when it became necessary to withstand the competition of popular Buddhist images. In Daoism, mountains play a seminal role in cosmosgenesis: They are perceived as places of procreation, as axis mundi, and as gates to the other-world. Such ideas are represented in Chinese landscape paintings, where we often find mountain landscapes pervaded with the creational force of *qi* 氣.