

09.12.2021: Prof. Dr. Bernd Schneidmüller

**"Authentic and Different – My Approach to Cultural Heritage and Medieval Artefacts"**

Link to the digital short tour:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X\\_Pt\\_G6Qtjg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_Pt_G6Qtjg)

Keywords: cultural heritage, Middle Ages, worldviews, materiality, exhibition techniques, authenticity



Prof. Dr. Bernd Schneidmüller speaks in his lecture about the "Erdteilleuchter" ("Continental Candelabrum") from the Staufer period, which he previously introduced in a video. It is a medieval representation of the world in the form of a gilded candelabrum. The three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—are represented by personified female figures, and this form is unique for the Middle Ages.

The concept of "continent" is often understood only in geographical terms, yet the six continents we recognize today are constructs of cultural heritage. The familiar labels "Asian," "European," "Australian," etc., and their meanings are seldom critically questioned. Schneidmüller explains that the construction of continents stems from inherited Greek knowledge, which was further developed and imbued with biblical meaning in the Middle Ages. Thus, different worldviews emerged from the foundation of Mediterranean culture, though they vary from one another.

The Middle Ages always regarded the world as a "whole," without giving Europe special emphasis. This is evident in the design of the Erdteilleuchter, which allocates half the space to Asia but only a quarter each to Europe and Africa. The realization that Africa was much larger in area was only reached by Europeans in the 15th century. It was not until the late 16th century, during European expansion, that Europe was elevated as the "Queen" of the world.

In the 7th and 12th centuries CE, the three continents were linked to the three sons of Noah—Shem, Japheth, and Ham—who, according to Genesis, gave rise to all later peoples of the Earth. In the 12th century, Honorius Augustodunensis attributed an additional "social quality" to each brother, which was projected onto the continents: Asians, as descendants of Shem, were regarded as the "free," Europeans (descendants

of Japheth) as the “warriors,” and Africans (descendants of Ham) as the “slaves.” This classification persisted, in part, into the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly influencing the European notion of knighthood. These worldviews are still preserved in numerous medieval maps.

During the High Middle Ages, maps were always oriented toward the East—the direction believed to be the origin of humanity according to Latin medieval thought. In biblical tradition, paradise was both the origin and the ultimate destination of humankind. Hence, our modern word “orientation” derives from “Orient,” from Latin *oriens* (east). This eastward orientation of maps faded from use in the later Middle Ages with the invention of the compass and the northward alignment of maps.

Returning to the *Erdteilleuchter*, Schneidmüller raises the questions: “What do objects do to me when I look at them?” and “Do we need knowledge about an object in order to truly understand it?”

In this context, he notes that Heritage Studies often focus on defining cultural heritage—who it belongs to and how to handle so-called “shared heritage.” But beyond that, we should also ask how cultural heritage—i.e., material objects—affects and changes us.

Toward the end, Schneidmüller discusses exhibition concepts, which have evolved significantly in recent decades. Having worked in museums for about 30 years, he describes the fascination of exhibits as rooted in their “authenticity.” Visitors are particularly interested in the genuineness and uniqueness of artefacts within their historical context. Thus, exhibitions must find ways to communicate an object’s story and significance outside its original context.

Referring to his own research, Schneidmüller mentions a 2022 exhibition in Mannheim on the “Normans” as a hybrid culture in the context of “shared heritage.” He emphasizes that modern “shared heritage” theories increasingly connect with other disciplines, such as Medieval Studies.

### Discussion:

The discussion begins with a question concerning the concept of “authenticity” and moderate constructivism: “How can we approach authenticity without thinking only in iconic or linguistic signs, and to what extent do emotions influence perception?”

Schneidmüller stresses that artefacts should not only be viewed as “human-made,” but also interpreted through the perceptions and emotions they evoke.

This leads to the question of whether an object’s authenticity can affect one’s own sense of self—for instance, by evoking intimacy or closeness.

The Erdteilleuchter can be interpreted in two ways: on one hand, it reflects medieval knowledge and worldviews; on the other hand, even without such background knowledge, one may focus on the aesthetic qualities of the goldsmith's craftsmanship and one's personal emotional response to it.

Its uniqueness is emphasized again—no comparable piece exists—though knowledge of the three continents and their personifications was widespread.

The shift in the 16th century that “stylized” Europe as “Queen of the World” marked a break with earlier, more holistic worldviews. Schneidmüller reiterates the earlier idea of a unified world and points to European “sites of memory,” especially Jerusalem as the “origin of Christian salvation,” noting that few such places lay within Europe itself.

Another question addresses the tension between the aura of the original in museums and the role of copies in cultural heritage—a subject of many current debates. Could tactile experiences through replicas of archaeological artefacts provide further insight into “understanding the object” without diminishing the aura of the original, which is often untouchable? Schneidmüller agrees, citing Heidelberg University's plaster cast collection in Classical Archaeology as an excellent means of introducing students to originals. Nevertheless, he argues that in a world of “copy and paste” and “fakes,” the original's importance should still be emphasized, even if both forms can coexist.

A further comment draws on a 12th-century Slavic tradition that also expressed a holistic worldview. The world was originally a unity, then cultural constructs arose—leading in modern times to notions such as identity and alterity, wrapped in narratives for contemporary audiences. Schneidmüller adds that each of these historical layers represents its own cultural construct, enriching and appropriated over time, which makes historical research so fascinating.

The discussion concludes with a question about the relationship between knowledge and emotion: “Do objects evoke emotions because of our prior knowledge, or can they move us even without it?”

Since reactions are always personal and individual, it is often impossible to determine whether one's response to an object is impulsive or conditioned. Ultimately, both education and humanity are deeply interconnected and, as Schneidmüller notes, stand in strong tension with one another. Authenticity, however, can also be curated or staged: for instance, the Capenberg Barbarossa Head has at times been displayed as an original and at other times as a copy—distinctions the general public can rarely detect.