

The Power of Nature and Improved Nature.

Realities and fictions surrounding the ruler's body between the late Middle Ages and early modern period.

Conference organized by the subprojects 4 and 6 of the DFG-research group 1986 „The Role of Nature in Conceptualising Political Order: Ancient – Medieval – Early Modern”.

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Towards the end of the 16th century Michel de Montaigne pointed out an interesting discrepancy when he remarked, that throughout history, a lot of people have been admired by the world who were considered to possess no special qualities at all in the eyes of their wives and servants. According to Montaigne living in close quarters with someone acutely highlights their humanity and their all too human habits and physical deficiencies.

The conference on “The power of nature and Improved nature” wants to take part in this omphaloskepsis by examining the nature of rulers at the turning point between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. How was it possible to align the idea of an ideal conception - both male and female - with the contingency and imperfection of their bodies? Were deficiencies hidden or even medically corrected? Was the ideal adapted in response to these bodily shortcomings? Was there a difference between the treatment of the male and the female body? What significance did the realities and the fictions that surrounded the ruler's body have when compared to the other bodies of the territory, e.g. the bodies of their subjects or political body-metaphors?

The transition period around 1500 offers a wealth of possibilities for investigating these questions because the new forms of representation claimed a previously unknown form of verisimilitude. But the same verisimilitude intensifies the tension between an ideal and reality and can be seen as a major problem of authority and its representation.

The conference is subdivided into three heuristically different but systematically connected sections:

1. **Ideal**: The first section will focus on the various forms of auratization, mystification and reflection as well as on topics such as beauty, excellence, blood, procreation, virginity and panegyrics in texts and images.
2. **Deviance**: This section is intended to address explicitly the moral and physical defects of rulers and the way in which they have been either included in or excluded from the official image of the ruler. Examples of moral or physical defects are deformities such as humpback, dwarfism, obesity, body odour, lisp, stammer, alcoholism, disease and frailty as well as vanity, hybris, rage and psycho-pathological phenomena.
3. **Adjustment**: The third section deals with the possibilities and different forms of transformation available to make nature and the imperfections it brings with it perfect (or at least less obvious). Such as the recovering of (lost) beauty, cosmetics, the halting or slowing down of senescence, the restoration or increase of virility and physical strength and attempts at prolonging life.