

## From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism (Brussels, 11–13 Sep 14)

Brussels, Sep 11–13, 2014

Deadline: Jan 31, 2014

Conference organizers, Brussels

Renovatio, inventio, absentia imperii. From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism  
(International conference, Brussels, 11-13 September, 2014)

At the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Academia Belgica; conference organized by the Academia Belgica (Rome), with the support of the Belgian Historical Institute in Rome, and the Princess Marie-José Foundation

Organizational committee:

- Wouter Bracke (director, Academia Belgica, Rome)
- Jan De Maeyer (president, Belgian Historical Institute in Rome)
- Pierre-Yves Kairis (president, Princess Marie-José Foundation)
- Peter Stabel (president, Academia Belgica, Rome)

Confirmed keynote speakers:

Wim Blockmans (Leiden University), Christophe Imbert (University of Toulouse-Le Mirail), Martin Kohlrausch (KU Leuven), Christoph Schönberger (Konstanz University)

### PRACTICAL INFORMATION AND PROCEDURE:

Venue and date:

Brussels, 11-13 September, 2014

Procedure:

- Abstract proposals (max. 1 p.) for papers are to be sent, accompanied by an academic c.v. (max. 3 pp.: institutional affiliation, academic publications, academic degrees,...), to [empire2014brussels@gmail.com](mailto:empire2014brussels@gmail.com), before January 31st, 2014. Notification of acceptance: February 25th, 2014.
- Publication of the proceedings will take place after the selection and evaluation of the definitive papers, which are to be submitted not later than November 30th, 2014.

Description of the conference theme: Renovatio, inventio, absentia imperii. From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism

At the heart of the present conference will be the 'reception', 'Nachleben' or 'permanence' of the Roman Empire, of an idea and a historical paradigm which since Classical Antiquity has support-

ed the most widespread claims to obtain and consolidate power. The focus will be on 'culture', this latter concept intended in a broad sense, i.e. including not only the arts, architecture, literature etc., but also philosophy, religion and, most importantly, discourse. As such, a wide array of themes will be subjected to academic scrutiny. Whereas the main focus will be on Europe and North America, this conference will also reach out towards non-Western contexts, whether or not directly related to the Roman example.

A theoretical and sociological dimension will join, and ideally integrate, the discussion, by means of the involvement of methodological issues relevant to the conference theme. More specifically, the following question(s) will receive particular attention: what is our position as researchers, embedded in a contemporary, often Western, democratic and capitalist context; what about the notion of empire itself, its constituent elements and the kind of ideological prerogatives to which it is generally subjected; in other words, apart from the many historical variants and instances of reception of empire, through which filters can, and inevitably do we approach this topic? Because the world has changed ever more radically since the beginning of the 21st century: after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the events of September 11, 2001 have inaugurated a revived American 'imperialism', whereas at about the same time an essentially economic variant, driven by 'emerging' powers such as China, has increasingly contested existing power structures.

In light of such meta-historical awareness, the present conference will as much inform about the nature of the Roman Empire as it will about its historical legacy and, more importantly so, those who claim the latter inheritance throughout the most diverse epochs. Indeed, by discussing some highly contrasting views upon this topic, participants will explore issues that are of fundamental importance to the writing, creation and negotiation not only of cultural history, but also of history itself.

The conference will consist of a series of thematic sessions, each of which will offer viewpoints originating from the most varied temporal and geographical contexts. More particularly, proposals for papers related to the four following thematic axes are invited:

Session 1: Rome and its heritage. The legacy of the Imperium Romanum in European culture from Classical Antiquity to the rise of the European superpowers (1st century-19th century CE)

In ancient Rome, the idea of empire was carefully crafted in the late republican and early imperial period and it proved resilient throughout European (and later also American) history. Roman imperial performance became the cultural and political hallmark for the aspirations of medieval kings and emperors of the feudal era, for rising State power across the early modern period and for European colonial expansion from the sixteenth century onwards. Imagery and rhetoric mirrored the great classical authors and politicians. Roman architecture set the scene for demonstrations of power and ideology. If the *renovatio imperii* inspired early Western monarchs like Charlemagne, it was Roman law that catered for State centralization of the rising European States from the late Middle Ages onwards and laid the foundations for State power and the authority of the prince, as well as for the attitudes of kings and dukes during the Renaissance. But at the same time ideas of republicanism and resistance against power yielded by one level of authority also claimed descent from Rome. Indeed, as further exemplified by, most notably, the growing interest in the Roman Empire during the Enlightenment as well as under Napoleon I (see also Ingres etc.), the historical exemplum offered by the Roman Empire is of an extremely versatile and multifaceted

nature, and its applicability cannot by any means be confined to one single interpretation.

#### Session 2: Radically changing perspectives on a historical category: the Roman Empire in the contemporary era

Since the French Revolution, which, in a process of 'nationalization of the masses' (Mosse), posited the interests of the people at the core of political and societal debate, the heritage of ancient Rome has been the object of intense negotiation. In this period of high stake discussion concerning the boundaries and legitimacy of individual and collective power, nations and empires were created. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, ancient Rome was a historical predecessor from which lessons could be learnt, examples drawn. Whereas on a sociological level, Roman republicanism inspired much fervour, arguably the idea of empire has subsequently been responsible for most of the key defining moments in world history: from instances of aggressive nationalist politics in the nineteenth century to the twentieth-century rise and fall of popular, fascist and communist power structures, from the definitive sanctification of the USA as the only real Western superpower in 1945 to its virtual omnipotence during recent years, from colonialism to post- and neo-colonialism, Roman imperialism has lost none of its relevance, whether as an historical exemplum or, alternatively, as an ominous caveat. This session intends to further explore the current, and indeed also future, fate of the Roman Empire, offering as it does various assessments of how contemporary civilizations have claimed, shaped and also radically rejected, the cultural heritage of Rome in their struggle for power and legitimacy.

#### Session 3: The imaginary empire. Performance and representation of power

In the visual arts, the reference to the Roman Empire has always maintained a certain relevance, whereby the exaltation of imperialist-monarchic power has continued unabatedly in subsequent epochs, starting with the medieval Byzantine, Carolingian and Holy Roman Empires. At the same time, pagan figurative models were adapted in order to meet the ideological requirements of Christianity, a process which led to vociferous debate regarding the status of imagery, as well as, ultimately, to instances of iconoclasm. Consequently, the Renaissance has intensified the interest in Graeco-Roman antiquity, in search of a pureness which was often more the product of imagination than a tangible reality. Through a certain interpretation of Vitruvius, attempts were also made to rival with Roman imperial architecture, as a testimony and legitimisation of power and authority. Culminating in the so-called *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, the appropriation of antiquity has indeed remained a core issue in art history throughout the centuries. Various explorations and transformations of the highly realistic formal language of Roman art, the sublimation of the arts by totalitarian States and Empires (from Charlemagne to Napoleon, from Stalin to Hitler and Mussolini), modern interpretations of artistic theories have been founded on the myth of Greek but also Roman antiquity. It is to the exploration of such themes that this session is dedicated, whereby participants will trace their presence in the visual arts, music, and literature.

#### Session 4: Empires without Rome?

In contrast to European (and American) empires, the idea, and performance, of empire as inspired by ancient Rome was less obvious outside the Western world. Yet some imperial development in the Islamic world (the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates in the Middle Ages and the Ottoman empire from the fifteenth century onwards) built on art, images and administrative concepts of

the Imperium Romanum (and its direct successor in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Byzantine Empire). In other parts of the world, classical Rome was only heard from a great distance or was even a foreign concept. This session wants to explore how the idea of empire was lived in China, the Indian subcontinent, and in the Islamic World. Did Han, Tang, Sung, Ming or Qin China develop different concepts or performances of empire or were Mongol tribal organization or Mughal India with its Islamic foundations influenced, through their contacts with Abbasid, Fatimid, Mamluk or Ottoman empires, by older Roman ideas? And finally, when in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries European colonial power invaded these very different empires, did the European, and therefore Roman, concept of empire transpire in local culture, i.e. traditions of representing and performing imperial ideology? Alternatively, this session will also allow for discussion concerning empire 'without empire': in an era of unprecedented global economic crisis, in a world that has become a 'global village', globalization and international financial capitalism have been characterized as the most recent translations of empire, of the interplay between personified 'financial markets' which herald the advent of a reinvented kind of empire.

Reference:

CFP: From the Roman Empire to Contemporary Imperialism (Brussels, 11-13 Sep 14). In: Arthist.net, Dec 12, 2013 (accessed Dec 20, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/6612>>.