CALL for PARTICIPATION

Materialities of Challenges – Challenges of Materialities.
Understanding the materialities of threats, scarcity, surplus and coping in premodern communities

Early Career Researchers Workshop of the top-level research area “40.000 Years of Human Challenges”

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The early career researchers’ group of the top-level research area “40.000 years of human challenges” of the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz is organizing an international workshop on the relationship between materiality/materialities and challenges. This workshop is particularly aimed at early career researchers (PhD students and Post-Docs) in the fields of archaeology, social sciences, cultural studies, anthropology and psychology.
A travel allowance of up to EUR 300,00 will be granted by the research area “40.000 years of human challenges”.

+++ Because of the present crisis situation, it may be necessary to host, alternatively, a digital workshop on the same dates.
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From early prehistory, humankind faced and is still facing a variety of challenges. These can range from natural disasters, climatic changes, scarcity or surplus of resources, social differences, epidemics, conflicts, wars and social transformations. Depending on the nature of the challenge and its social context, communities have developed a variety of coping strategies in order to minimise the possible damage. Thus, all of the challenges that can be investigated in the discipline of Ancient Studies are characterized by their materialities. We understand materialities to be relational, plural, open, natural and social configurations of the way entities materialize in the world. Materialities are, thereby, not mere properties, but rather processes of ‘becoming-in-the-world’. Materialities are the ways of the materials as well as their appearances and figurations as natural, social, physical, divine and phenomenological.

Materialities materialise in the world, be it in their threatening, dangerous and impressive nature, as well as in forms of coping, e.g. as tools and installations, buildings, settlements and even landscapes. On the other hand, in the course of coping with challenges, they leave behind very distinctive and sometimes new material traces and thus also new materialities, e.g. innovative ceramics production, alloys of metal, materialising institutions.
In our workshop we will ask which forms of materialities, respectively, are perceived as threats, which are used as resources for coping practices and how and when materialities themselves become a challenge. We will focus on both forms of materialities and will discuss how can we detect a relationship between threats and coping practices/strategies.

We would like to address this by means of four areas for discussion which should complement each other:

**Session 1) materiality of threats – threats to materiality**

Threats that become challenges are often characterized by an unavoidable materiality. Natural events in particular can be of such an impressive and threatening materiality that ‘corporeal violence’ can be added to the ‘phänomenologischen Gewalt der Dinge’ *(phenomenological violence of things).* At the same time, challenges threaten the material existences of people and their communities, as they endanger both the corporeal being and the material environment (or environmental conditions) of existence. This ranges from creeping processes of decay, ageing and contamination to rapid destruction. In this field of tension, it is therefore a matter of conceptualising the connection between threats and materialities.

In this session we want to follow these main research questions:

1. How do threats materialise in the physical world and what materialities do they entail?
2. How does a threat and its materiality affect human practices? Which specific materialities threaten and endanger human bodies, and which human sociality?
3. How are materialities endangered and destroyed by crisis management? Which ones, for example, are worthy of protection and preservation?

**Session 2) materiality of scarcity – scarcity of materiality**

Challenges often arise from a scarcity of resources. Not all resources have a material character, yet their scarcity can nonetheless be material. Declining animal populations or failed harvests are just as much an expression of material and materiality, as physical deficiency symptoms or even architectures of deficiency-management and/or -policy (think, e.g., of the Berlin Wall). But the materiality of scarcity can also be expressed in the poor execution of architecture itself, the lack of suitable burial objects and their resulting replacement, or in a shift away from ‘physical materiality’ towards ‘symbolic (metaphysical) materiality’.

In this session we want to follow these main research questions:

1. How can we detect and analyse scarcity in the archaeological record?
2. How can we approach the perception and conceptualisation of scarcity among different kinds of community (e.g., hunter-gatherer, complex hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist)? Can there be a scarcity of materiality with a surplus of material?
3. Often, scarcity is associated with economics, what other type of scarcity could potentially exist among premodern societies?

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4. How does scarcity affect material culture and its materialities?

Session 3) materiality of surplus – surplus of materiality

Challenges do not only arise from scarcity, but also from too much materiality. Too many people in a house or a micro-region are just as much of a threat as environmental events such as storm surges or melting ice-caps. In such situations, confrontations with materiality arise, which, when frequent, become challenges. This mass of materiality can virtually crush people, lead to stress (disruptions) or require new forms of crowd management or new social rules respectively. At the same time, too many things also lead to an increasing alienation from them. What amount of materiality can we give the appropriate attention to, at what point does it drift into insignificance and casualness and at what point do we get overwhelmed by it?

In this session we want to follow these main research questions:

1. How can we approach the perception and conceptualisation of surplus among different kinds of community (e.g., hunter-gatherer, complex hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist)? Can there be a surplus of materiality with a scarcity of material?
2. How does surplus affect the material culture and its materialities?
3. Is a surplus of materialities always related to hierarchical societies?
4. Often, surplus is associated with economics, what other type of surplus could potentially exist in premodern societies?

Session 4) materiality of coping – coping with materiality

How is coping with challenges expressed in material terms? All coping practices that can be studied in Ancient Studies include material aspects, since they are carried out by bodies and tools in the material world. But how do these aspects express themselves concretely and how can comparable materializations of coping be grasped? Furthermore, the question arises whether material challenges are dealt with differently from non-material challenges. Are there forms of coping that explicitly correspond only to material threats and how can we trace the material effects of those coping practices? In this section, we will investigate the extent to which materialities of challenges correlate with materialities of coping and whether and how connections can be depicted.

In this session we want to follow these main research questions:

1. How do materialities get changed or modified by an ongoing or ‘completed’ challenge? Which coping practices can be traced across centuries and accompanied cultural changes?
2. Are the effects of coping always to be considered positively, or can they in return create new threats or challenges, respectively?
3. Some material remnants bear witness to coping practices. How can we identify the challenge?

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We are planning this to be a workshop in the true sense of the word, with most time dedicated to discussion and without the presentation of long papers.

If you wish to actively participate in our discussions and as a kick-off speaker (max. 10 min) please send us a brief abstract (200-400 words) of your proposal and a short CV by **August 1st 2020** to felix.levenson@uni-mainz.de. Please do not forget to indicate which session would suit you best.

For further information see [http://matcha.hypotheses.org](http://matcha.hypotheses.org)