

Research Project

Life in the Grid. Urban Nature in City Utopias, c. 1600-1750

Project funded by own resources

Project title Life in the Grid. Urban Nature in City Utopias, c. 1600-1750

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Departement Geschichte / Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit (Opitz-Belakhal)

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Status Active

How should human and non-human beings live together? How should the soil and resources be distributed in a model society?

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the place through which utopian answers to such questions were developed and tested was often the city. The project therefore explores urban nature in early modern literary and built ideal cities; interpreting the city as a socio-natural site where human practices and material arrangements of humans, artefacts, organisms, and things intermingled.

It is my assumption that literary urban utopias not only formulated radical alternatives to their current socio-political order, but also explored human's relationship to nature. In Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas solis* (1619) and Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1623), for example, a preservationist approach to the non-human environment seems to emerge, integrated into a cosmic harmony. The main focus of the project is on two cities that were built according to plan and also to ideal notions of a good social and architectural order: Freudenstadt in the Duchy of Württemberg (founded 1599) and Philadelphia in the newly founded North American colony of Pennsylvania (founded 1682). The two cities illustrate decisive transformations of the socio-ecological fabric in the early modern period: In Freudenstadt, the duality of both religious as well as resource-economic motivations for founding cities can be traced. This rather curious combination of factors can be assumed for many early modern city foundations in Europe. Philadelphia, on the other hand, testifies to the reshaping of North America in the grid pattern in the course of British colonisation.

In the first step, the project will focus on the conceptualisations of human-environment relations in the cities' planning phases. These notions will then be aligned with everyday life in the first decades after the founding of the cities: The communal pasture and forest areas in both cities, which were in a constant state of transition, will serve as a starting point for observing the planned as well as unplanned coexistence of humans and non-human beings. Common land also appears as a site of resource conflicts, e.g. over irrigation systems.

The project aims to bring environmental history, infrastructure history and the history of ideas more strongly into dialogue and thus to connect discursive and material constellations in methodological terms. It is to be shown that urban utopias formed a contradictory missing piece for the understanding of the relationships between people and their non-human environments in the early modern period:

They can be used to trace both the colonial appropriation of people and nature, which was decisively shaped in this era, and the creation of counter-worlds.

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