

Temporal Structures of the Heroic

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VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED 5 JULY 2022

Table of content

1. Introduction
 2. *longue durée*
 3. Conjunctures
 4. Transformations
 5. 'Sediments of time'
 6. Prefigurations
 7. Research perspectives
 8. References
 9. Selected literature
- Citation

1. Introduction

Heroes and heroines, heroizations and heroisms are neither timeless nor can they be explained solely in terms of the present. The reference to the past and also to the future is constitutive of the heroic – it is a temporal phenomenon. The study of [heroic figures](#), [heroizations](#) and [heroisms](#) must therefore also include those temporal structures that are typical of the heroic and distinguish them from other social and cultural phenomena. In essence, three temporal structures can be identified that characterise the heroic in a particular way:

Firstly, the heroic is a persistent phenomenon of the *longue durée*. The existence of the heroic as well as of heroic behavioural ideals was apparently never fundamentally called into question in Europe since antiquity, at least until the beginning of the 20th century.

Secondly, the underlying heroisms and [heroization processes](#) always require reference to the past, to traditions and to [prefigurations](#). A hero or heroine does not suddenly appear out of nowhere. Heroic figures cannot be understood from a solely synchronic perspective, and their adoration and representation cannot be achieved without role models.

These diachronic relationships between the past, the present and the future are, thirdly, neither to be

understood as a linear sequence nor as a teleological development. The notion of temporal discontinuities is also of limited help in understanding heroic phenomena. The heroic is characterised less by ruptures and sudden realignments than by a recombination of older and more recent elements of meaning, in which the earlier and the later are each placed in a new relationship. Above all, the interactions between pre- and postfigurations, as well as the plurality and multi-layeredness of various overlapping temporal references, is characteristic of heroic phenomena.

One result of the work in the Sonderforschungsbereich 948 "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms" is therefore that the temporal structures of the heroic cannot be described as conjunctures^[1] or transformations of certain heroic figures, as we had assumed at the beginning of our research. Instead, non-linear concepts such as the *longue durée* of Fernand Braudel, Reinhart Koselleck's 'Sediments of Time' model or the concept of prefiguration as posited by Hans Blumenberg proved insightful. They undermine the naïve notion of a simple temporal succession or teleology and are particularly suited to grasping the temporality of the heroic as a complex, interdependent structure of juxtaposition and superimposition. However, these models only develop their full descriptive and explanatory power in combination: On one hand, they make it possible to understand the heroic as a phenomenon of long-term persistence, and on the other, to explain the reciprocal dynamics within this *longue durée* as a superimposition, amalgamation and hybridisation of elements of meaning from different temporal layers.

These concepts for analysing the temporality of the heroic are outlined below. For the purpose of transparency, the models of conjunctures and transformations initially used by SFB 948 will also be summarised. Even though some of the models presented can be traced back to historiographical concepts, they will not be used here to historicise the heroic, i.e. for explaining the actual historical processes as well as the social, cultural, spatial and temporal contexts in which heroization processes occur. Nor do they serve a narratological description of the temporal structures found in heroic narratives and other media. Rather, they can elucidate the relationship between the heroic and the phenomenon of time per se, and model the temporal structures that are characteristic of heroizations and heroisms beyond concrete historical circumstances, periodisations or narratives.

2. *longue durée*

Despite opposing tendencies and criticism, the existence of the heroic as well as that of heroisms as behavioural ideals has apparently never been fundamentally questioned since antiquity, at least until the beginning of the 20th century, in Europe and other culturally related areas. The heroic can thus be understood as a persistent phenomenon of the *longue durée* as conceived by Fernand Braudel. He defined *longue durée* phenomena as those phenomena that are not fundamentally altered in the long term in their substance or at least in terms of concepts. This includes not only the natural environment, but also certain political structures and other similar conditions.^[2] If one examines the heroic as a *longue durée* phenomenon, the conjunctures that were important for Braudel on a second level (the *moyenne durée*) play a decisive role (see below). At the borders between these conjunctures are times of upheaval, which are connected with media, social, political, and possibly also technological, mental or experiential changes. For Braudel, these upheavals take place on a third level, which also includes isolated, short-term events ('*histoire événementielle*').

3. Conjunctures

The concept of 'conjunctures' of the heroic can be used to describe the condensation of the heroic in generational periods or epochs – in contrast to isolated, short-term events on the one hand and the relatively constant, long-term structures of the *longue durée* on the other. This refers to the changing degree of relevance of the heroic itself in certain times and spaces of experience, as well as the existence of certain, repeatedly occurring heroisms and heroic models, such as the war hero or heroic death, physical or intellectual heroism, the *imitatio heroica*, but also their rejection or ironisation (deheroization), in the sense of 'high' or 'low' conjunctures. The description of conjunctures also attempts to explain the historical dynamics of the relationship and competition between alternative or opposing models as the driver for the establishment of new or the rejection of old heroic models on a synchronic level, and at the same time the historical dynamics of repetitive structures of heroic figurations on a diachronic level. However, since the concept of conjuncture implies a somewhat linear, unidirectional development, it quickly reaches its limitations when describing historical phenomena that are characterised by multi-layered references and interactions.

4. Transformations

Heroic figures and habitus patterns themselves also change. These processes can be described as 'transformations'. This does not mean simply a change over time, i.e. not a history of heroes as a history of the transmission and reception of individual figures or types. Rather, transformations (in the sense of the concept of transformation developed by SFB 644 'Transformations of Antiquity') take place as bipolar, reciprocal processes between a field of reference and a field of reception shaped by actors.^[3] The object of transformations in the field of reference is a flexible repertoire of traditional heroic figures, models and products of the imagination, sometimes tracing back to antiquity. These are newly constructed, personally figured and formed via media in processes of appropriation in the receptive field according to the social, political and cultural context as well as the motivations of the actors involved. Thus, heroic figures are provided with new meanings or even completely reinvented: Transformations "lead to 'newness' in a double sense, namely to interdependent re-figurations both within the reference culture and within the receiving culture".^[4] These reciprocal transformations of figurations and forms of representation of the heroic are relevant as basic elements of a comparative study and as factors of a diachronic historical dynamic. The focus is not only on meanings of heroic figures in their context, but particularly on heroic patterns of behaviour within the framework of heroisms. This includes the question of the degree and relevance of the ambiguity of personal figurations such as hero(in)es.

5. 'Sediments of time'

A key result of research into heroization processes is the realisation that they cannot be adequately explained with notions of 'rise' and 'decline' or of an 'earlier' and 'later'. A description of transformations as linear processes can only capture parts of the phenomenon, because older and more recent elements of meaning overlap in the transformations of the heroic in the *longue durée*. Therefore, a more complex temporalisation model of 'sediments of time' will be outlined below, which can be understood as a refinement of the simpler model of transformations and conjunctures in the

longue durée. It is based on Reinhart Koselleck's concept of 'sediments of time', which was originally developed for the understanding of historical narratives and can be adapted for the phenomenon of the heroic.[5]

Heroization processes, the attribution of heroic qualities and the disputes about the acceptance or even necessity of heroic role models for a group, community or society are characterised less by ruptures and sudden realignments than by a reconfiguration of older and more recent elements of meaning, in which historically earlier and later are newly combined and thus placed in relation to one another. In phases of historical upheaval in particular, narrative patterns, character traits or representational conventions from long past eras resurface and are combined with new ones that have just emerged. This explains the numerous overlaps, amalgamations and hybridisations of elements of meaning that emerge in the study of heroizations and heroic figures.

If we transfer this observation of combinatorics to the theoretical-conceptual level of temporalisation, many heroization processes reveal a characteristic chronological 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous'. [6] This is evident, for example, in the heroization of soldiers in the First World War, where references to ancient competition and agonality, medieval images of knights and the duel were evoked alongside the display of industrialised 'war work'. Similar simultaneities are evident in the media and in artistic practices of heroization with regard to the appropriation of older traditions of representation in later epochs, such as, for example, the recourse to the epic in the English heroic plays of the 17th century. These combinations presuppose an interpretive knowledge of the respective publics and their familiarity with representational traditions but can also indicate new ways of canonising hero concepts. Without such banks of knowledge, the hero(s) could not be credibly conveyed. These constellations cannot be explained by reference to rhythms and conjunctures or simple successions. Rather, it is a matter of overlapping temporal layers in which the earlier always remains recognisable and retrievable in the later. The metaphor of the 'sediment of time' "refers to geological formations that differ in age and depth and that changed and set themselves apart from each other at differing speeds over the course of the so-called history of the earth." [7] Historical times in this sense are to be understood less as a diachronic sequence than as a phenomenon of multi-layeredness, polyvalent semantics and the simultaneity of levels of meaning that seem historically disparate. From this perspective, such an approach also marks an analytical counterweight to common epochal divisions and master narratives.

If one applies this consideration to heroizations, then the particular tension between the idea of progress as a linear linking of unique events on one hand, and repetition and recognisability through structural analogies on the other, becomes visible. Just as speaking refers back to the recognisability of lexis and grammar in language, the specific heroization and its historical uniqueness presupposes a minimum of recurrence and analogy formation in order to be understood and mediated at all.

The relevance of the 'sediments of time' model lies in its descriptive power for the non-linear, yet always tradition-oriented structures of heroization processes and heroisms. The recourse to older elements of meaning, so the thesis could be formulated, binds heroizations back to the collective imagination with particular intensity and lends them additional semantic weight: Heroizations thus mask temporal distance and postulate continuity. This persistence over long periods of time distinguishes them from other cultural patterns of interpretation. In the combination and

simultaneous updating of different figures and stories, not least competing interpretive claims are asserted: The historical and/or mythological trove of heroes is large enough for different groups to find suitable, and frequently contradictory, role models.

6. Prefigurations

Hermeneutically, the approach of 'sediments of time' can be linked to the concept of [prefiguration](#) developed by Hans Blumenberg[8], which better illustrates the relevance of the 'sediments of time' model for the heroic. With the concept of prefiguration, Blumenberg refers to the inherent power of a certain historical stock of meanings that is drawn upon in a given situation. The reference to a certain model figure, or prefigurant, can thereby become "a singular instrument of justification in weakly motivated actions". The sometimes almost compulsive act of repeating the prefigurant – for example, a traditional heroic narrative – can have an intensified affirmative, seemingly magical effect on those who act, because the repetition "is connected to the expected creation of an identical effect".[9] Blumenberg does not discuss prefigurations as unidirectional, however, but as reciprocal processes: Even the prefigurant as the initial figure only acquires its meaning in the process of prefiguration.[10] It does not exist as a fixed entity, but rather first undergoes formation and attribution of meaning in its alleged imitation. The initial figure is thus also transformed by each imitation.

Prefigurations explain the appeal as well as the potential for identification, mobilisation and imitation that emanates from pasts that can be recalled in collective memory and postulated as significant. They are parts of structures of repetition, insinuate into the present something that has allegedly already existed, thereby reducing the complexity of the decisions to be made, provide them with legitimacy and make the actor the executor of a historical mandate – but they also change the evaluation of the allegedly imitated past.

7. Research perspectives

For a deeper understanding of the temporal structures of the heroic as well as suitable descriptive models, the following questions can be instructive:

- What is the relationship between historiographical periodisations of the heroic (such as the division of certain epochs) and superimpositions of different 'sediments of time'?
- What roles do latencies in the sense of strongly repressed 'sediments of time' play? How can different degrees of manifestation of 'sediments of time' be grasped?
- Does the superimposition of 'sediments of time' in the *longue durée* mark a form of temporality that is typical and specific only for the heroic? What other cultural and social phenomena exhibit similar temporal structures that would allow the models proposed here to be transferred?

8. References

- 1 In using 'conjuncture' as an abstract concept classifying duration, we follow Fernand Braudel, who distinguishes 'events', 'conjunctures', and the 'longue durée'. Cf. Braudel, Fernand: On History. London 1980: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 29-30; Santamaria, Ulysses / Bayley, Anne M.: "A Note on Braudel's Structure as Duration". In: History and Theory 23.1 (1984), 78-83.
- 2 Braudel, Fernand: Das Mittelmeer und die mediterrane Welt in der Epoche Philipps II. 3 vols. Frankfurt a. M. 1990: Suhrkamp (French original Paris 1949); esp. vol. 1: 518; vol. 2: 15, 739-740; vol. 3: 13-15, 453-460; cf. Braudel, Fernand: "Geschichte und Sozialwissenschaften. Die longue durée". In: Honegger, Claudia (Ed.): Schrift und Materie der Geschichte. Vorschläge zur systematischen Aneignung historischer Prozesse. Frankfurt 1977: Suhrkamp, 47-85 (French original in: Annales E. S. C. 13 (1958), 725-753).
- 3 The Sonderforschungsbereich 644 "Transformations of Antiquity", which existed from 2005 to 2016, based its work on a concept of transformation which it defined as follows: "*Transformations* are complex processes of change that occur between a *sphere of reference* and a *sphere of reception*. *Transformations* are effected by *agents* (who do not necessarily have to be human beings) belonging to the *reception sphere*, who, by selecting, adopting, or otherwise incorporating an aspect of the *reference sphere*, modify the *reception sphere* while at the same time construing the *reference sphere*. This close connection between modification and construction is an essential characteristic of transformation processes, which can occur both diachronically and synchronically. Such processes therefore lead to something 'new' in two senses, namely to mutually dependent, novel configurations in both the *reference culture* and the *reception culture*. This relationship of interdependency, of reciprocity, will be denoted in what follows by the term *allelipoiesis*, a neologism formed from the Greek roots *allelon* (mutual, reciprocal) and *poiesis* (creation, generation)." Bergemann, Lutz et al.: "Transformation. A Concept for the Study of Cultural Change". In: Baker, Patrick et al. (Eds.): Beyond Reception. Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity. Berlin/Boston 2019: De Gruyter, 9-25, 9, DOI: [10.1515/9783110638776-002](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110638776-002); see also Böhme, Hartmut / Rapp, Christof / Rösler, Wolfgang (Eds.): Übersetzung und Transformation. Berlin 2007: de Gruyter, VII-IX.
- 4 Bergemann et al.: "Transformation", 2011, 39.
- 5 Koselleck, Reinhart: "Sediments of Time". In: Koselleck, Reinhart: Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories. Transl. and ed. by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann. Stanford 2018: Stanford University Press, 3-9; cf. also in German: Koselleck, Reinhart: "Geschichte, Geschichten und formale Zeitstrukturen". In: Koselleck, Reinhart: Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten. Frankfurt a. M. 1989 [1973]: Suhrkamp, 130-143, 130-135.
- 6 Leonhard, Jörn: "Historik der Ungleichzeitigkeit. Zur Temporalisierung politischer Erfahrung im Europa des 19. Jahrhunderts". In: Journal of Modern European History 7.2 (2009), 145-168; Landwehr, Achim: "Von der 'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen'". In: Historische Zeitschrift 295.1 (2012), 1-34.
- 7 Koselleck: "Sediments of Time", 2018, 3.
- 8 Blumenberg, Hans: Präfiguration. Arbeit am politischen Mythos. Berlin 2014.
- 9 Blumenberg: Präfiguration, 2014, 9.
- 10 Cf. Blumenberg: Präfiguration, 2014, 11.

9. Selected literature

- Bergemann, Lutz et al.: "Transformation. A Concept for the Study of Cultural Change". In: Baker, Patrick et al. (Eds.): *Beyond Reception. Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity*. Berlin/Boston 2019: De Gruyter, 9-25, 9, DOI: [10.1515/9783110638776-002](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110638776-002). (German: Bergemann, Lutz et al.: "Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturellen Wandels". In: Böhme, Hartmut et al. (Eds.): *Transformation. Ein Konzept zur Erforschung kulturellen Wandels*. München 2011: Fink, 39-56.)
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Citation

Sonderforschungsbereich 948: Temporal Structures of the Heroic. In: *Compendium heroicum*, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2022-07-05. DOI: [10.6094/heroicum/zshe1.0.20220705](https://doi.org/10.6094/heroicum/zshe1.0.20220705)

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/zshe1.0.20220705
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Category	Theory
Subject Headings (LOC)	Time--Philosophy , Time--History , Heroes , History--Periodization
Index	<p>Authors: Sonderforschungsbereich 948</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Fernand Braudel, Reinhart Koselleck, Hans Blumenberg</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: Europe, Great Britain</p> <p>Time and Events: Antiquity, Middle Ages, 17th century, 20th century</p>

Compendium heroicum

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Sonderforschungsbereichs 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
an der Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg

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System der Freien Universität Berlin
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Gefördert von der Deutschen
Forschungsgemeinschaft

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