

Ringvorlesung Turkologie Sommersemester 2023 | Canon, heritage and the nation: Narratives of modernity between past and future in Republican Turkey (1923-2023) | 15.03.2023-26.06.2023| Wednesdays 18.30 - 20.00 CET | Hybrid Event, University of Vienna, Department of Near Eastern Studies (Hörsaal)

A Border of Heritage: The Land-Walls of Istanbul

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Abstract

The land-walls of Istanbul, originally part of the city's Byzantine fortifications, lost their function as a structure of security and defence only in 1908. Until then the gates in the walls had served as checkpoint for the entrance to the capital; when the Young Turkish government abolished the control system monitoring movements within the empire, the land walls turned into a monument that had lost the last vestiges of their former use. This monument, however, proved to be problematic: spatially unwieldy, socially suspicious, historically or ideologically ambivalent.

With 6.5 km length and a depth of about 70 m, the land-walls cannot be seen in their entirety from any place on the ground – they are fully visible only from the air. Their extent also meant that it was all but impossible to keep them in good repair and protect them from intrusion. Interventions regarded as illegal by people seen as improper were the rule rather than the exception as the walls constituted the nucleus of an area that continued to be an urban periphery even when the city had overgrown it. Over the years, the walls constituted the living-space for Roma, Kurdish labourers, undocumented migrants, petty and not so petty criminals. Surrounded by non-Muslim endowments, cemeteries, outlawed Sufi activities and urban agriculture, they were a touristic and archaeological site but, at the same time, neighbour to industry and Turkey's central hub of motor-coach traffic. Ideologically, the Byzantine past of the land-walls for many decades prevented their inclusion into the national and nationalist approach to commemoration and heritage so dominant in the Republic of Turkey. Bitter debates ensued about the way to deal with the monument. It is an open question whether the opening of the "Panorama of 1453 Panorama Museum" (*Panorama 1453 Tarih Müzesi*) has closed these debates for good.

The presentation will investigate the land-walls of Istanbul with the aim to determine where the line between heritage and past rejected is drawn in Turkey.

Christoph K. Neumann is director of the Orient-Institut Istanbul. After receiving his Dr.phil. from the same university in 1992, he has taught and researched at said institute, Boğaziçi University, at the Czech National Library and Charles-University in Prague, Istanbul Technical University and Istanbul Bilgi University. Between 2008 and 2022 he has been professor of Turkish Studies at LMU Munich, from 2011 to 2015 he was chairperson of the *The Society of Turkic, Ottoman and Turkish Studies*.

Neumann has published on Ottoman historiography, Ottoman social and cultural history, the urban history of Istanbul, political culture and memory in the Republic of Turkey and Turkish fictional literature. He has translated several novels and short stories from Turkish to German.