

CfP Semantic Ambiguities in Images of the Roman World (2nd century BC/5th century AD)

International Conference 18th to 20th February 2026; Kiel, Germany

ERC Advanced Grant FRAGILE IMAGES. The Fragility, Instability, Ambiguity, and Self-Reflexivity of Images in Roman Art (ERC Grant No. 101141247)

The ERC FRAGILE IMAGES invites for abstracts for its first conference on the semantic ambiguity of ancient images. The focus will be on images that are designed to be ambivalent, i.e. intentionally ambiguous (in the sense of Umberto Eco: “open” images). However, intentional ambiguities are deeply nested within general forms of unintentional ambiguity. The conference therefore addresses different forms of ambiguities, both intentional and generic:

- (a) The first section will discuss intentional ambiguities in the light of ancient literature and rhetoric.
- (b) The second section deals with intentional ambiguities, based on visual inconsistencies and contradictions. This can be the inconsistent use of attributes and pictorial schemes, ambiguous gazes, gestures and facial expressions, but also contradictory spatial dimensions or object worlds. The analytical aim is to identify the underlying reasons, purposes and functions of such inconsistencies: How does iconographic ambiguity affect the (iconological) meaning of images?
- (c) The third section focuses on the openness and indeterminacy of pictorial elements. In narrative images (mythological/‘historical’), these can be the secondary figures which often remain nameless. Non-narrative images such as images of architecture, nature or ‘still-lives’ are open ‘per se’ – they lend themselves to very different understandings. The analytical aim here is to understand the functions of open images – and the potential that arises from such indeterminacies. Do ambiguities empower images to become active agents?
- (d) The fourth section is dedicated to polyvalences and ambiguities on the part of the viewer, based on pictorial perceptions in an intercultural context. Here, we refer to Warburg’s concept of “Bilderfahrzeuge” (image vehicles). One and the same pictorial concept of pictorial scheme can take very different meanings depending on its spatial and cultural context – as can be seen most directly in intercultural contexts.

The conference focuses on images of the Roman world (2nd century BCE – 4th/5th century CE). We are looking forward to an intensive and inspiring discussion of the pictorial functions of semantic ambiguities in different spatial, social and cultural contexts.

We look forward to receiving your abstract (of max. 300 words) for a 25–30 minute paper and a short CV by **April 25th 2025** as one single PDF.

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