Ἀρχή and origo: The Power of Origins

(Newcastle University, 2-4 May, 2019)

Origins have a particular power. Arguments referring back to the first beginnings and relating them to the present tend to be especially attractive. When we’re in a new place or confronted with new phenomena, we have a natural urge to learn about their origins. Stories of this kind – the so-called aitia – can convey a sense of education, of venerable antiquity, of continuity, of religious awe, or they can just be entertaining. In any case, they are as prominent nowadays as they were in antiquity.
In this interdisciplinary conference we want to shed light on the fascination with origins from different perspectives: how is the power of origins employed in historiography, in literature ancient and modern, in art, in religious contexts, in philosophy, or in political debate? We are interested in exploring a wide range of case studies, in order to reflect on our overarching question: what is it that holds the different forms of aitia together? How can we understand this phenomenon in general terms? What is it that makes the origin such a fascinating and powerful form of discourse?
The papers can focus on areas as diverse as rites / cult, language, ktisis-literature, inventions, religion, philosophy, travel literature, toponymics and onomastics et al. Possible overarching questions may include, but are by no means limited to the following:
• how does aetiology work as a creative process that collapses temporal categories (present/ past) or forges the past by explaining the present from the past?
• What are the aesthetics involved in creating an origin in different media?
• Which cognitive patterns are involved in this process?
• Which forms can the fascination with origins take?
• What do we know about the temporal and the philosophical notion of ἀρχή?
• Which role do rationalising tendencies play in the aetiological discourse?

If you are interested in participating, we would ask you to send us an abstract of circa 250 words by June 15, 2018. We would like to circulate the papers one month in advance of the conference and envision a 45 min. session per participant, in which she/he will summarize the pre-circulated paper in 10 mins., with 35 mins. of discussion to follow. An application for funding to cover (part of) the travel and lodging expenses is pending, but participants are also encouraged to enquire for funding options at their home institutions. We envision the possibility of publication.

Please send your abstracts to Athanassios Vergados (athanassios.vergados@newcastle.ac.uk) and Anke Walter (anke.walter@newcastle.ac.uk) by June 15, 2018.