

Foreword

The cover of this book shows the drawing of a boat. Without any contextual information, the drawing inspires different interpretations about what the vessel represents: without cargo, passengers or equipment on board, its connotation remains unclear. When transcript proposed the cover to me, and when I discussed it with colleagues, one ventured that the drawing seems like a patrol boat meant to detect something suspect. Due to this notion of enforcement that she sensed, she advised not to use it. Others took the drawing for a refugee boat and thus found it well-suited to the title of this book. The ambiguity that the drawing of an empty vessel of a certain shape and size is able to evoke led me to decide on it.

The actual vessel, on which the drawing has been modeled, came to be publicly known when it fell victim to an arson attack: on the night of November 9, 2018 it was set on fire and virtually destroyed at its location in Wittenberg, Germany. To this day, the police presume it to be a politically motivated act of violence based on both the historical date and that they found Germanic runes from the right-nationalist network Reconquista Germanica inscribed on the boat.

The vessel had come to Wittenberg as an exhibit during the Reformation anniversary in 2017. A student group from Salzburg and their anthropology professor had organized a shipwreck from Sicily and installed it in Wittenberg as the “antithesis” to the exhibition’s topic “gates of freedom.” Wittenberg’s mayor described the vessel’s role and function for Wittenberg as inspiring public discourse on the treatment of migrants and refugees in Europe. Following the arson attack, reports emphasized that the boat had brought its passengers – 244 women, men and children from Eritrea – unscathed from Libya to Sicily.

The watercraft: a monument or even memorial, a shipwreck, an object of art, a hero, an innocent carrier of refugees and a target of a politically motivated act of violence. The cover drawing shall evoke the ambiguities, the flexible meaning and oscillating reference of the visual and verbal metaphor of a small boat.

In order to analytically understand a phenomenon, the question cannot be limited to the nature of what we see but also has to analyze the nature of how we do our seeing. I thank the preview editors' team at transcript for the cover proposal and for thereby bringing the occurrences in Wittenberg to my attention.

Freiburg, August 2019