

Paper Number: 773

Ancient Terms and New Concepts: “The Face of the Earth” and “Gondwana-Land”

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In his remarkable book “The Face of the Earth” (1885-1909) the Austrian geologist Eduard Suess coined the term “Gondwana” for a hypothetical paleogeographic supercontinent that at the end of the Paleozoic era separated from South America, Africa, Madagascar, India and the Antarctica. Although Suess was not the first who used the term (from Sanskrit *gondavana*), his wording that implied a specific scientific concept became increasingly influential in its field and has been commonly used in geology up to today.

Initially the word “Gondwana” was created by the geologists Medlikott and Blanford in the context of the Geological Survey of India in 1872. As a technical term for defining sedimentary rocks it then had a different meaning. The fossils Medlikott and Blanford found in the Gondwana region of central northern India, the “Gondwana sedimentary sequences”, enabled geologists to (re)construct the paleogeographic continent subsequently named “Gondwana-Land” by the Austrian geologist Suess in 1885.

In my paper I will analyse this semantic transformation and the different meanings of the term “Gondwana” along the varying scientific concepts. It had been a long way from the paleontological knowledge developed by Brongniart to stratigraphic details defined by Medlicott, Blanford, Feistmantel and Sclater to Suess’s new concept and Wegener’s continental drift theory (1912). And it was an even longer way until Wegener’s ideas found acceptance after World War II.

For the title of his book Suess chose the German expression “Antlitz” which has a slightly different meaning than the word “face” used in the English translation. “Antlitz” refers to the pars pro toto relationship between the face and the whole body, to the deep connection between body and mind. It was used in translations of the Bible and in the elevated language of German poets such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe. For Suess the word “Antlitz” was important to convey his approach based on its etymological derivation: in the middle ages the word “Antlitz” also included the meaning of a “vis à vis” (das Entgegenblickende), embodying two dimensions of the relationship between the observer and the observed object: firstly the act of looking and secondly the ‘aura’ or radiance of the object. This underlined Suess’s concept of a global geology looking from the outside at the “face” of the globe.

The paper will address the use of the two ancient words – “Gondwana” and “Antlitz” – in connection with new scientific concepts from the perspective of conceptual history. In German speaking countries this is currently considered as a promising approach in the history of science. In comparing the transformation of these two words in terms of different meanings and theoretical foundations I will point out the dynamics of the narratives in the history of geology beyond the aspect of the history of isolated theories. The use of a specific language or specific terms can enhance ideas and concepts, which needs to be analysed as a domain of its own. If language is essential for the negotiations between

science and culture, then words and their connotations are pivotal for understanding the dynamics of the complex process of establishing knowledge.

