

### Editorial Note

#### Jan Assmann's transformation of reception studies to cultural history

This third edition of *Aegyptiaca* pays tribute to the scientific work of Jan Assmann. With his studies in Egyptology, the history of reception of ancient Egypt and cultural memory, he has given cultural studies an impulse that is inseparably linked to his name. His studies of Ancient Egyptian theology and religious history have stimulated the scientific discourse far beyond classical studies, generated interest in Egyptology and lent the subject a clearly audible voice in cultural studies. However, the impact of Jan Assmann's work goes far beyond classical studies and also beyond the study of the history of the reception of Egypt: his books are far more than historiographical studies; they are perfect examples of the extent to which the sensitive analysis of the deep structure of history contributes to an understanding of the present. Only when we understand how our traumas, our longings and the figures of thought and images that lend us our world orientation have come about, can we try to solve conflicts beyond banal friend-enemy or good-evil patterns. The fact that Jan Assmann's work has developed in this way is largely due to the fact that Jan and Aleida Assmann have inspired and scientifically challenged each other for decades. The Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels for the Assmanns is a well-deserved award for two scholars who have always remained true to the ethos and values of science and thus gained political and social relevance, which was the natural consequence of their work, although it was not their primary goal.

The fact that the field of research to which this journal is devoted is not ridiculed as marginalia of cultural studies is primarily due to Jan Assmann: both with his groundbreaking studies and with a methodological foundation through his reflections on mnemohistory. In *Moses the Egyptian* (1997), *Die Zauberflöte: Oper und Mysterium* (2005) or in his study *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (2014), he has shown the extent to which "Egypt as an argument" played an important role in key discourses in the West. On the traces of the image of Egypt, Jan Assmann was able to uncover connections, dynamics and interactions in cultural history which had largely escaped more discipline-oriented research.

Furthermore, Jan Assmann has created a solid methodical foundation with the concept of mnemohistory in the study of the history of reception of Egypt. Primarily, this consists of a change of perspective: it is about the past, how it was remembered, what significance it had for the individual as a distinct person and for the

social or cultural self-image. This is methodically a liberation in so far as the question of the appropriateness of the understanding of history itself becomes obsolete. It is no longer about gustatory enthusiasm or the precocious exposure of errors about ancient Egypt; attitudes that shaped segments of research over decades. On the trail of Assmann's analyses, research in this field is increasingly turning to historical, social, philosophical or theological analysis, which seeks to understand the significance attributed to Egypt in Western discourses.

The suspension of the question of the appropriateness of an image of history implies a cultural-philosophical and existential extension of the question. Assmann refers to Aby Warburg when he exposes the unavailability of history; history can haunt and persecute people, whether in repressed traumas or in unconsciously perpetuated longings. It is not only a reservoir of facts that man uses *ad libitum*; rather, it has its own power and dynamism. We are born into history; the later process of socialization or enculturation itself is already shaped and filled with history. Understanding history is an interaction of individual construction of meaning on the one hand and a tradition that precedes individual understanding, which offers the options, models or counter-images for individual appropriation of history on the other. Man as a social and cultural being has always been shaped by history and historically-transmitted images, figures of thought or narratives, whether one is aware of this or whether they affect one unconsciously.

Assmann's mnemohistory is therefore not the analysis of case studies that are explained as *pars pro toto* or pure historiography. Mnemohistory explores the interactions between history and the individual and the social self-image of the individual in their development dynamics. For the reception of Egypt this means tracing the diachronic continuities and discontinuities that overlap like excavation layers, like palimpsests or the levels of human experience.

It is obvious that Egypt is less dominant for Western culture than Greece, Rome and Israel. But Egyptian culture also has an analytical advantage in terms of mnemohistory: it forms the respective older past to which the centres of Western cultural history refer in different ways and are thus challenged to self-reflection. For the Greeks, Egypt was their own origin in which they also recognized the foreign; for the Romans it was an icon of overcome power, glorification of their own greatness as well as memory of its temporality; and for Israel it was an overcome trauma, which, nevertheless, again and again represented a temptation of the conquered through the wealth of its "meat pots". There are many such stories that are

connected in numerous ways and Jan Assmann has shown in his books how they develop over the course of history, build on each other, distinguish themselves from each other. Jan Assmann has made the history of Egyptian memory a cultural history of the historical and existential depths of the West.

The possibilities of approaching cultural history by these means are manifold: as contemporary cultural theory, as historical microanalysis, but also as a question of why ancient Egypt still seems so important and relevant to us in the third millennium and what it means for our existential and cultural self-image. Jan Assmann has never treated Egyptology like the study of the history of Egypt reception within narrow disciplinary boundaries and has sought the exchange with numerous discourses and scholars. The papers from his friends and colleagues gathered in this issue of *Aegyptiaca* illustrate the diversity of Jan Assmann's opus in form and content. From essay to scholarly treatise in theology, history of literature, philosophy, archaeology and cultural-historical tie in with his research.

Dieter Borchmeyer shows in his contribution how much Goethe's scepticism towards mystomania and secret societies also affected his image of ancient Egypt and what a central role the fraudster Cagliostro played for his comedy *Der Groß-Cophta*. The social and political upheavals at the end of the 18th century lent this image of Egypt a growing explosiveness upon which both the anti-Enlightenment delusion and an enlightened cynicism tried to capitalize.

In his contribution, the editor follows Jan Assmann on the traces of a pantheism understood as ancient Egyptian, which in Platonism and Hermeticism, however, developed rather as panentheism and also in the Freemasonry of the Enlightenment rarely combined the image of Egypt with a radical Enlightenment Spinocism.

Peter Gülke offers in his essay meditations on the numerous relationships between music and memory. Starting with Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, he reflects on repetitions, sounding and fading, postponement and fulfillment in the "most repetitive" of the arts, both in composing and listening to music.

Why negative theology was so attractive for monotheistic religions is explored by Jens Halfwassen in his article by tracing two stages of the appropriation of Platonism in these religions: the first leading to the relativization of the texts of revelation with regard to a spiritualized concept of God, and the second from the unity of God to the deity of the One.

Bernd Janowski examines the importance of the heart in Old Testament anthropology and notes that the biblical as well as the Egyptian man is not head-driven,

but "heart-directed". In a correspondence of the inside and outside of man he recognizes a fundamental tone of the Old Testament as well as the Egyptian speech of the human heart.

Laurenz Lütteken shows how Richard Strauss strove for a form of music-theatre in the wake of as well as in the differentiation to Wagner as well as what role ancient Egypt plays in this. Together with Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Strauss wanted to pave the way by means of a dark, mysterious and wild Egypt in the *Ägyptische Helena* in foreignness to a broken self-knowledge, whereby Egypt no longer stands for the monumental and metaphysical.

Martin Mulsow describes Johann Georg Wachter's theory of the development of alphabet writing from a "natural alphabet" against the background of his image of ancient Egyptian culture. Wachter attributed a central role to Coptic as the living memory of alphabet writing, which was to serve as a key to reconstructing the primeval language, such as understanding Egyptian hieroglyphics and even Chinese.

Konrad Schmid analyses the treatment of the Egyptian theme in the most prominent source of the Pentateuch, the priestly source, in which the depiction of Israel's exodus from Egypt reveals a marked hostility towards Egypt, and shows that it can only be understood against the historical background of the early Persian period.

Miguel John Versluys makes it clear that Jan Assmann's concept of mnemohistory should be supplemented by a history of "material culture", which is not only the background or illustration of intellectual history, but also has its own agency.

Thomas Macho makes thanatological considerations on the basis of films, exhibition practice or the ritual of self-mummification. Following Jan Assmann, he asks about the status of statues between body and image, between living and corpse.

The next issue of *Aegyptiaca* will be published in early 2019; the editor is looking forward to all contributions that will be submitted for review.

Florian Ebeling