

Editorial Note

Nachleben and the Cultural Memory of Ancient Egypt

Since its beginnings in the 1960s, research into the history of the reception of ancient Egypt has been dominated by detailed studies, which often had to prove themselves as a marginal topic in their specialist disciplines and had an afterlife in the footnotes only. It only became a relevant subject of interdisciplinary scientific discourse in the late twentieth century, when Jan Assmann's *Moses the Egyptian* (1998) and his concept of "mnemohistory" came out. Since then, Jan Assmann has shown the effectiveness of mnemohistory in numerous further studies. Many scholars have taken up his ideas and applied them to their research objects. Several conferences on the different aspects of the pre-Egyptological encounter with ancient Egypt and a suitable method of researching intensified the exchange between the participating scientists and made it clear that something like a scientific discourse on the topic is developing. *Aegyptiaca* wants to bundle these approaches and offer a forum for research.

In order to establish the journal further within the scientific community, a series of conferences will be held. The first of these took place in December at the Warburg Institute in London under the title "Nachleben and the Cultural Memory of Ancient Egypt". This volume of *Aegyptiaca* publishes the papers of this meeting.

Our general guiding questions were: What are the dominant research approaches, their epistemological interest and capabilities? Shall we let them be clearly distinguished from each other or can they complement each other, and how do they prove themselves in the analysis of our objects? Besides mnemohistory, what can Nachleben research in the sense of Aby Warburg achieve and what are the strengths of reception studies?

To address the subject, the following presumptions were presented in the invitation to the conference: History of reception, especially in the form of case studies, asks how a present refers to a past and what this reference to the past says about the corresponding present, perhaps also about the past itself. The recipient is often supposed to have a rather free access to his (pre-)history and a moderately constructivist model is applied: an author or artist intentionally deals with individual aspects of history on the basis of his or her socio-cultural conditions. Particularly in the English-speaking world, the interest in knowledge

often lies in the epistemology of the history of the science. If the dominant narrative is the emergence of Egyptology in the nineteenth century, reception-studies often understand the pre-Egyptological perception of ancient Egypt as the widely outdated pre-history of Egyptology in terms of Egyptomania.

Aby Warburg's concept of "afterlife" and Jan Assmann's "mnemohistory" seem to focus on the interaction or reciprocity of history and the person referring to history; history is understood less as a sequence of moments and events than as an organic process. The timespan between the act of reception and the object of reception is not only understood as an interim period to be bridged, which is skipped in the act of reception, but as a history of development and unfolding of historical semantics. In this respect, an act of reception is to a large extent the result of history itself, which has developed from the object of reception. The recipient is thus also influenced by the history to which the object of his interest belongs and not only by his immediate synchronous cultural-historical or social environment. If reception research emphasizes these synchronous conditions of the construction of a historical notion, diachronic development is understood as no less important in studies of afterlife or mnemohistory.

In the proper research, whether it be entitled "afterlife", "mnemohistory" or "reception-study", a "longue durée" of ancient Egypt, in which a diversity of understanding and interpretation of Egypt has unfolded, is combined with a microhistorical analysis, in which the image of Egypt is then concretized. In the studies that are attributed to reception analysis, the focus is on the latter; in mnemohistory, the interaction of the former and the latter is emphasized. The individual and his or her cultural-historical environment are at the centre of the reception studies; the line of development and the question of how the cultural-historical environment of an act of reception itself owes its existence to this history is dominant in mnemohistory.

However, the discussion of the method and the cultural-philosophical background should not be an end-in-itself. In the spirit of Aby Warburg's dictum "der liebe Gott steckt im Detail" the universal and the bigger picture should be sought in the concrete historical detail. In this respect, the decisive question was to what extent we could use the methods discussed to serve the sensitive analysis of cultural history, to enable surprising insights, to deliver convincing narratives and to make history understandable in as complex and differentiated ways as possible. In London this was about the interplay between historical object and an appropriate method. The one, I think, cannot be discussed reasonably

without the other (“Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind”).

Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann have written two independent contributions that complement each other: they trace the history of the Ouroboros, the snake that bites its own tail and symbolizes infinity. They demonstrate how the analysis of mnemohistory and cultural memory has proven itself in research practice. Aleida Assmann shows how the Ouroboros was incorporated into Western tradition under new auspices with observations from Edward Young’s *Night-Thoughts* up to the 2016 film *Arrival*. Jan Assmann asks about the meaning of the Ouroboros on the gravestone of the German Enlightenment philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. He traces the beginnings of this symbol in ancient Egypt, the transmission in late antiquity in hermetic and alchemical writings and their adaptation in early modern times to the debate on pantheism, which was then relevant for Herder.

Eleanor Dobson unearths in her essay “Cross-Dressing Scholars and Mummies in Drag: Egyptology and Queer Identity” the fluidity of gender identity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture. She discovers unstable norms and a society in flux, that hint not only at the “queerness” perceived in the ancient Egyptians, but also among the individuals who encounter and engage with ancient Egypt themselves.

I try to understand the differences between reception research and mnemohistory with the help of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of “history of effect/ Wirkungsgeschichte”. Gadamer turns the “in-between” of the object of reception and the recipient, or of the one understanding and the one to be understood, into a realm where understanding occurs. The history of reception seems to mostly suppress the “in-between”, but this method can more effectively describe breaks and innovations such as the emergence of scientific Egyptology. Mnemohistory is dedicated to the “in-between” and can better analyse and describe transformation processes and lines of development in the *longue durée*.

Mordechai Feingold takes a critical look at the mnemohistory as told by Jan Assmann in *Moses the Egyptian*. In his historical course through the history of the interpretation of Acts 7,22 he wants to show that Moses’ initiation into the Egyptian mysteries could only be understood as a preliminary stage and thus the meaning of revelation and the originality of Moses’ teachings could be preserved.

In an analysis by Agostino Scilla's *La vana speculazione disingannata dal senso* (1679), Carlo Ginzburg asks whether the Western concept of ancient Egypt can also be described with the help of mnemohistory, if it is not oriented towards the mysteries and the hidden wisdom, but towards the sensual, the concept of nature of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Caroline van Eck would like to expand Warburg's concept of afterlife not only for images and texts, but also for objects and materials. In this context she examines the *Nachleben* of the Candelabra in restoration, supplementation or new creations. It shows that "Erbgutverwaltung" could be material, idealistic and personal.

In an analysis of Panofsky's studies on the reception of the Late Middle Ages in contrast to the reception of Renaissance, Ulrich Rehm shows how much reception concepts are inspired by the *zeitgeist*. The examination of history here was also an examination of the problems, threats and challenges of one's own time, in particular the threat posed by Nazi Germany.

Johannes Helmuth outlines the work carried out between 2005 and 2016 by numerous researchers in the Berlin collaborative research unit "transformations of antiquity". The focus is on the term "Allelopoiesis" developed there, which is intended to make it clear that not only an active recipient receives a passive antiquity, but that this encounter with antiquity can only be described as an interplay.

Martin Mulsow raises the question "who was Hermes Trismegistus" in order to investigate the relation of mnemohistory, as conceived by Jan and Aleida Assmann, to another form of the writing of history, a form which he calls "real transmission history". He describes a form of double helix, which must also describe all stages of an "in-between".

In his essay on the Wisdom of Solomon, Joachim Schaper explores how the Exodus motif was transformed from a motif of collective liberation into one of individual salvation. He thus traces the *Nachleben* of a central biblical motif in Hellenistic Judaism, a *Nachleben* that in turn gave birth to a new understanding of personal salvation which had a significant effect on early Christianity.

Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann describes in his paper the "metaphorology" by Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) as a form of reception theory. With its help he can elucidate the conception of Egypt by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and also

show why his model of a “*philosophia perennis*” as frame of interpretation for Egypt was largely fruitful, and where it broke down due to overload.

Edward Chaney had given an initial stimulus for this meeting and made a very important contribution to its success. His paper “Thy Pyramids built up with newer might’: Shakespeare, ‘Mr. W.H.’ and the Elizabethan Obelisks” will be published in the fifth issue of *Aegyptiaca*.

The Warburg Institute is the perfect place to enter into an open dialogue as to whether and how research into the reception of pharaonic Egypt can be more than a collection of case studies by taking up the concept of memory; perhaps even a form of “*Kulturwissenschaft*” in the sense of Aby Warburg that allows us to reflect on the importance of the past for our culture and our self-conceptualisation. Thanks to all the members of the Warburg-Institute, for their hospitality and especially to Bill Sherman for the fruitful collaboration.

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The next issue of *Aegyptiaca* will be published in early 2020; the editor is looking forward to all papers that will be submitted for review.