

controlled by the highest level of government, and as a result had a strong centralist and hierarchic structure.

The edited volume of S. Grunwald, U. Halle, D. Mahsarski, and K. Reichenbach, as fascinating as it already is, also shows how research concerning the funding of archaeology is still in its beginnings. The value of this new approach has, however, been conclusively proven, especially when comparisons are being made. With her contribution on Polish post-war archaeology, K. Reichenbach also demonstrates, for instance, how much room for own initiative still existed during the Third Reich, for archaeologists, or patron-dependent researchers like Herman Wirth.

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**JAN ASSMANN, *Achsenzeit. Eine Archäologie der Moderne*.** C. H. Beck Verlag, München 2018.  
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In his 1784 “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose”, Immanuel Kant called the belief that man and history have a telos (and presumably a progressive one) a ‘regulative idea’, one that we cannot prove with empirical evidence, but in which we must have faith if we are to wrest human history from chaos, and perhaps despair. According to Jan Assmann, for Karl JASPERS (1883–1969), the identification of an ‘axial age’ (the period between roughly 800 and 200 BCE, when many of the great world religions got their start) in his “Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte” (Zurich 1949), was similarly a regulative idea, one that in the dark years after WWII gave him hope for cross-cultural understanding and world peace (p. 187). In a desperate attempt to push beyond a past of genocidal emphases on difference, Jaspers dove back into this ‘axial age’ to discover a period of cosmopolitan connection in which many world cultures had simultaneously, and apparently independently, experienced a ‘break through’ to modernity. In the passage from Mythos to Logos, many peoples had, for the first time, achieved full and reflexive self-consciousness, experienced individual longings for liberation and salvation, and articulated consciousness of their own historicity. For Jaspers, this was the moment in which philosophy was born, a philosophy that was not divorced from religious thought, and so could be found in the sayings of the Buddha as in the Pre-Socratics, in the biblical prophets, and in Confucius. It was not Jaspers’ mission to describe how this synchronicity came about – whether by communication between cultures or by means of the independent evolution of similar ideas. Rather, his aim was to understand how and why ‘axiality’ had occurred in this era, and how it might, in some way, be replicated by postwar peoples facing the urgent task of articulating a cosmopolitan ‘origin and aim of history’.

In his fascinating historiographical review, Jan Assmann tries to trace the sources of the idea of an ‘axial age’ and its emergence around 500 BCE, in the Iron Age. In twelve chapters spanning the period from the Enlightenment to the present, he shows clearly that Jaspers’ ideas were anticipated in various ways by predecessors such as the French traveller and translator of the Zend Avesta, Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), the now-forgotten nineteenth-century cultural historians Ernst von Lasaulx (1805–1861) and John Stuart Stuart-Glennie (1841–1910), and the sociologist Alfred Weber (1868–1958). One very long chapter is devoted to Jaspers himself, and to explaining how he reconfigured the work of these predecessors during the dark times in which he found himself in the 1930s and 1940s. Jaspers’ ‘axial age’ theory, Assmann argues, was

an admirable attempt to formulate an anti-nationalist universal history; and even if Jaspers' work has become empirically problematic, this theory might still be a useful 'regulative idea' for today's world of revived religious and nationalist integralisms, when the belief that dialogue is possible and human commonalities outweigh differences seems to be waning fast. *Achsenzeit*, then, is not actually a book about the axial age but about the purposes to which the idea has been put in the last 250 years. As its subtitle promises, it is 'an archaeology of modernity' (that is, of a certain kind of modern cosmopolitanism), not of the axial age itself, which explains why a modern historian is, here, seeking to review the work of an Egyptologist.

It may seem remarkable in our presentist age to think that many people in the last 250 years had very passionate views on the period between about 800 and 200 BCE, but as Assmann shows, not only was there an enormously wide-ranging debate about the cultures and 'great men' of this era but often global histories and philosophies depended precisely on pinpointing who thought, said, and worshipped what, when, in the course of these years. The author of many other fine studies of ancient historiography, he is also well aware that debates about religious or philosophical priority hardly begin with Anquetil Duperron, the first scholar featured in the book; from very early on, we have wanted to explain to ourselves how and why our ideas look like those of others. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Herodotus was already crediting the Egyptians for having invented the religious, scientific, and artistic ideas the Greeks borrowed – and getting flak for this from his fellow Greeks. Similarities are intriguing – if also threatening, or at least they have seemed so to western and Christian writers. As one of Assmann's figures writes of similarities between Greek and Chinese ideas: "These correspondences and many others [...] do not seem to us the work of coincidence" (p. 53). Priority in time – if provable – has been even more threatening, especially to Christian and Jewish thinkers, some of whom have not wanted to share their revelations with anyone else, while their critics wished, impishly or seriously, to disperse the credit. Until very recently in the West, antiquity has been a battleground, and the chronology of cultures a ceaseless war. That is one of the major reasons that Jaspers – following in the wake of the great comparatist Max Weber – wanted to distribute credit for the 'breakthrough' to all. Cynically, one might doubt that we can hope for little more than perhaps a hiatus in this venerable battle that, arguably, the West spread to the rest of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One of the impressive aspects of this book is the care the Egyptologist-author gives to a cast of often little-known eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers, individuals who sketched out aspects of the 'axial age' theory or who, like G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), held views entirely incompatible with its interests in cultural synchronicity. Assmann does a fine job of investigating the particularities of the proto-axial theories of characters such as the French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat (1788–1832) and the German cultural pessimist Ernst von Lasaulx. He profiles the Egyptophilia of the obscure philosopher Eduard Maximilian Röth (1807–1858) and describes in detail the even more elusive Victor von Strauss und Torney's use of Isaiah 49.12 to suggest that after the destruction of the Temple, some Jews had travelled to China ("Sinim", in the King James Version), where they might have encountered the ideas of Laotse and discovered the unnameable highest entity I-Hi-Wei to be a faint memory of their own name for God (JHWH). Assmann is not perhaps so good at – or so interested in – pinpointing some of the things many of these figures have in common, namely a keen interest in religion and the desire to save it from excessive rationalism, cultural conservatism (not surprisingly quite a number are Catholics), and a dislike of the Protestant-Prussian (or English liberal) tainted philhellenism that wanted to give the Greeks all the credit for humanity's great inventions. But the portraits of Jaspers' predecessors are well-drawn, and make for interesting comparisons once the reader gets to the very long chapter on the German philosopher himself. Here the sketches of Jaspers' own previous work, and of his contemporaries and interlocutors in the period in which he was formulating his ideas about axiality, are

also well-done. Less rich, or perhaps just less interesting to this reader, was the material on Jaspers' reception or post-Jasperian revisions to his ideas which substituted terms such as 'moral revolution' or 'breakthrough to transcendence' for Jasper's axial age. The book could have done with a chapter on Max Weber (1864–1920) and the great ancient historian Eduard Meyer (1855–1930), who are responsible for a great deal of thinking about structures of power and their relationship to religious configurations. But that is quibbling; this is a very important and fascinating book, above all for scholars interested in the history of historical, religious, and philosophical ideas, and adds a great deal to our understanding of the dimensions of the debate and the diversity of persons involved, in some way, in it.

There are only two subjects on which I wish Assmann had said more, and they are perhaps connected. In discussing those who made the axial age the period of focus, Assmann shuts off from our view the very large contingent of those who were interested in pushing chronologies backward into the even mistier mists of time, to locate the very *first* revelation, the *first* true astronomer, the *very first* monotheism, 'the origin of all the cults,' as the radical Enlightener C. R. Dupuis put it. This world of deep time occasionally peeks out behind Assmann's protagonists, but he doesn't really give us a sense of the very contentious discussions that raged across these same 250 years about whether the Egyptians civilised China (or Greece), or vice versa, where Dionysos came from (and whether or not he was the same god as Osiris and Christ), whether or not the Jews stole their ideas about the Flood and the Sabbath from the Babylonians. We have no portraits of those who believed Zoroaster or the Vedas *predated* Moses, such as orientalist Martin Haug (1827–1876), or the Indologist and philosopher of world religions, F. Max Müller (1823–1900), or who believed a perennial philosophy had dribbled down through the ages (as did some unorthodox Catholics such as Joseph Görres [1776–1848], and after her own fashion, the theosophist Madame Helena Blavatsky [1831–1891]). These were the hyper-diffusionists many of the axial age thinkers were working against (by pushing the debate at least out of the mythological and into the 'historical' age), or sometimes giving consolation to – for as we have seen, some of the axial age writers were eager to undermine 'the Greek miracle,' or God's revelation to the Jews. The hyper-diffusionists' work frequently suited racist and nationalist agendas, sometimes (as in the case of Max Müller, one of the early promoters of the term 'Aryan') to its proponents' own surprise and dismay. In any event, including some of these figures would have helped Assmann show more clearly why comparativism à la Max Weber or Jaspers offers a healthier cosmopolitan orientation: we can examine similarities and differences without fighting about who was first.

The other thing about which Assmann could have said more is about both the deeper time of ancient civilisations (about which he knows so much) and about the creation of the 'Gedächtnisstrukturen' he describes as ultimately the reality behind the axial age. His text is sprinkled with mentions of ancient Egypt's seemingly primordial monism, whose underground continuity and reemergence in Spinoza and the radical Enlightenment Assmann thinks possible (e. g. p. 134, p. 223). There are sundry, gentle reminders to the reader that the Egyptological data does not fit the axial age theory at all, and suggestions that the work of the Israeli cultural sociologist Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923–2010) and others has made many of Jaspers' claims about cross-cultural similarities historically problematic, and at the same time stretched the concept so greatly that other cultures not originally included in the formulation could be included. The idea has become a heuristic device, or a Weberian ideal type, but Assmann doesn't really detail the chronological or comparative problems that such a device might mask, perhaps because this might plunge us back, once more, into various forms of nationalist exceptionalism. Instead, at the book's conclusion, he argues for retaining the concept to signify the arrival of a new "structure of memory, whose technical ('mediale') and cultural pre-requisites – writing, canonisation, exegesis – appeared first at the end of the first millennium before Christ, but then more or less simultaneously arose in

various places in the northern hemisphere, from China to Greece” (p. 293). The significance of this for us is that the texts and artefacts of this period have formed a corpus “with which we are connected through a more or less unbroken history of interpretation and reception...” (p. 293). It may well be true that individually, many of our traditions have their canonical beginnings in this period, but that does not seem to work for Egypt and certainly doesn’t for the Islamic world, whose ‘canon’ postdates the axial age by approximately a millennium. If Egyptian cultural breakthroughs come much too early, and Islamic ones much too late, can even a heuristic ideal world help to comprehend them? Historians cannot and should not avoid following their evidence; what happens when it shows us that the axial age really doesn’t fit the facts as we know them? Moreover, these ‘Gedächtnisstrukturen’ are not on the whole *collective* traditions (though Eusebius tried to swallow many of them), and it is probably only iconoclastic enlighteners, nineteenth-century cultural conservatives, and postwar European liberal cosmopolitans who have, up until now, thought of them as compatible (the Church fathers and early modern Christians saw the devil’s trickery in such similarities). What efforts in research, or persuasion, should we exert in order to maintain the ‘axial age’ as even a regulative idea?

Finally, it might have been worth noting that the China in which Jaspers took consolation was very much the ‘eternal’ China of 1920s conservatives, both in Europe and in China itself, an idealised, static, ancient ‘East’ that remained eternally wise and resistant to the mass violence, technological transformations, and class conflicts of the West. Jaspers was apparently not interested in the China of the Warring States, of the suppression of the Uighurs and Tibetans on its borders, of the Taiping Rebellion (depending on which estimates one credits, almost as destructive of human life as WWII). ‘China’ to him in the years he was composing “Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte” (1949) was not a state ravaged by Japanese armies, hunger, and warlords, on the brink of collapse and communist revolution, but a place out of time, enviable in its Confucian rationality and seeming obliviousness to current events. This observation might warn us about the dangers of taking on the axial age as our regulative idea. It would be nice to think that we can all get along, that we have a common humanity and patterns of thought that reach back centuries and permit us to find common ground. But this may well be, as Assmann comes close to admitting periodically, a western dream, dreamt as the end of European world power nears, and a romanticisation (and primitivisation) of other peoples’ histories, to save ourselves from despair. Perhaps it would be best to take our Kantian regulative antidote with a healthy gulp of historical realism. We should also remember that another commonality all humans share is that our histories are littered with violence, oppression, conquest, irrational passions, and the fear and hatred of others. *Homo homini lupus* is an adage with a venerable history (including a memorable passage in S. FREUD’s “Das Unbehagen in der Kultur” [Vienna 1930]); it is a fine thing to have ‘regulative ideas’, but we ought also to reckon with the worst in ourselves, and in our fellow human beings. A truly useful philosophy of history ought to acknowledge that the chaos and brutality of history itself can never be fully comprehended, or, regrettably, overcome.

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