

THE MNEMOHISTORY OF EGYPT

APPROACHES TOWARDS THE UNDERSTANDING OF EGYPT IN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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There are two modes of access to the past, one »historical« and one »mnemo-historical«.¹ The historical way aims at investigating and reconstructing past events, conditions, situations as they »really« were or happened exploring all kinds of contemporary sources. The »mnemohistorical« approach, on the other hand, asks for the past, not »as it really happened« but as it was and is remembered, addressing the same questions to tradition that is expressed by a famous hexameter:

Quís, quid, ubí, quibus auxiliís, cur, quómodo, cuándo?
Who?, what?, where?, by what means?, why?, how? and when?²

Who, when, why, for whom, remembers the past and by what means? When I first applied the »mnemohistorical« method, I was dealing with apocryphal traditions about the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. In this case, there are no sources that would give an access to the event »as it really happened«. All we are left with are codifications of memory. Outside the Bible, these come – to name only the most important sources – from the Egyptian historiographer Manetho (third century BCE) and his Jewish excerptor Josephus Flavius (first century CE): two historians, who »remembered« the event for completely different reasons, in different form, at different times. Manetho wrote for the Greek court to introduce the new rulers of Egypt into the history and culture of their kingdom, Josephus wrote for the Greek-speaking intellectual class with the apologetic interest to defend the Jews against the calumnies about Jewish history circulating in Hellenistic historiography. This bias led him to mistake a passage in Manetho for an Egyptian account of the Exodus tradition, whereas

it dealt as a matter of fact with legendary memories of the Amarna age.³ In my book *Moses the Egyptian*, I asked primarily the »why« question.⁴ What was the agenda of those, who stressed the Egyptian descent or education of Moses? My interest was not to correct them, stressing the Hebrewness or Jewishness of Moses, but to understand their agenda, especially concerning those writings in the 18th century who wanted to overcome the distinction between »natural« and »positive« religion, religion based on the study and worship of nature and religion based on revelation.

Mnemohistory is the history of memory. Here too, however, an important distinction has to be made. The past is not only »remembered« by later generations, it also exerts by itself an influence on later times. When Manetho, e.g. wrote his excursus about the Helio-politan priest »Osarsiph« who led a group of lepers and adopted the name »Moyses« after having given them laws, he stood under the impression of legends circulating in Egypt at his time, in which an Egyptologist easily recognizes a distorted memory of Akhenaten.⁵ Josephus, on the other hand, read Manetho's text as a malicious account of the Exodus. The German terminology distinguishes between *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (history of reception) and *Wirkungsgeschichte*.⁶ Manetho's excursus testifies to the *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the legendary reverberations of the Amarna experience that in spite of the destruction of all tangible testimonies still existed in Egypt after more than 1000 years.⁷ Josephus' reading of Manetho, on the other hand, can be seen as a case of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*; he studies Manetho's text as a sample of anti-Jewish propaganda.

Originally, both terms derive from the literary discourse and refer to different ways of dealing with »classical« texts. *Wirkungsgeschichte* attributes their »afterlife« mainly to the texts themselves. That a text such as Homer's *Iliad* is still read by readers of our time is not due to the interest of modern readers in Greek epic poetry but to the enormous intrinsic qualities of the text that did and do not fail to impress readers of all times. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, the most prominent theorist of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, calls this property of classical texts their »unmittelbare Sagkraft« (immediate communicative power).⁸ Immediacy can be understood as widely independent from any mediating institutions such as schools, teachers, literary critics, commentaries etc. *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, on the other hand, is connected with the »School of Constance« (Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and others) that attributed the »afterlife« of classical texts to the reader and mediating institutions, without whom there would not be any afterlife at all.⁹ The same distinction may also apply to the past in general. That an event or a period is remembered for centuries to come may be due to its lasting importance; examples are the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment or the French Revolution (Kant: »ein solches Phänomen vergisst sich nicht mehr«),¹⁰ or to the keen interest of scholars who unearth from the archives persons, events and institutions that possibly never existed. Examples for this kind of remembering the past are Moses or Wilhelm Tell.

The mnemohistory of ancient Egypt is interesting, not because it contained any authentic knowledge about Egypt but because it served as a mirror of contemporary society and

culture. The less important this literature is for the historical approach to the past, the more it serves the interests of mnemohistory. Why has a special element of the past been »remembered«, i.e. studied and discussed? Because it provided a model for a society confronted with instant problems. »The call«, wrote Henri Bergson, »to which memory responds, emanates from the present«.¹¹

The confrontation with ancient Egypt in the early modern period is an example of mnemohistory par excellence as until the beginning of the 19th the West had no direct access to the literature of ancient Egypt. Even when Greeks and Romans lived for centuries in Egypt and from Herodotus onwards described the writing of the Egyptians, they did not do so in a proper way and until Champollion the West has not been able to read Egyptian texts in the way modern Egyptology does. This is grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of ancient Egyptian culture and writing. Let's explain this with respect to the most important concept of Egypt in 18th century: the Egyptian mysteries.

The ancient sources presented the Egyptian initiation in two aspects: a grammatological and a topological one. The grammatological aspect pointed to the fact that in Egypt there were two different scripts in use, one open, one secret; the topological aspect highlighted the wealth and extension of subterranean constructions and held that the buildings above ground served the official popular religion, the constructions underground, by contrast, the secret religion. Both were based on severe misunderstandings of the Egyptian evidence.

I shall only very briefly touch upon the well-known grammatological theories about hieroglyphs. Knowledge about hieroglyphs died out in Egypt during the fourth century CE but a wealth of information concerning the Egyptian script persisted in Greek literature. The Greeks were fascinated by hieroglyphic writing for two reasons: one is the iconic character of the signs and their apparent reference to things and concepts rather than to words and sounds, and the other is the fact that there existed, alongside hieroglyphic writing, another completely different and non-iconic script that was understood by the Greeks as being alphabetic. Both reasons were wrong but enormously influential for the image of Egypt in European memory. Of the various authors highlighting the iconic, non-discursive and purely conceptual character of the hieroglyphs, I mention only a passage from Diodorus that insists on three points: the non-discursivity (the hieroglyphs do not render the order of speech), the metaphorical character of the meanings of depicted objects and the emphasis on knowledge and memory.

1. Non-discursivity:

The hieroglyphic writing does not aim at rendering speech (logos) by the connection of syllables but at metaphorically expressing the meaning of the objects depicted which are stored in the memory.

2. Iconicity:

In this way, they draw, e.g., a hawk, a crocodile, a serpent, a part of the human body such as an eye, a hand, a face or something similar. The hawk signifies speed, since it is the

fastest of all birds; this may be applied to everything speedy. The crocodile signifies malice. The eye means the guardian of justice and of the body. The hand with outstretched fingers means the necessity to earn one's living, the closed left hand means the preservation of goods. All the other signs in form of body parts, tools and other things work the same way.

3. Memory:

By making efforts to find out the hidden meanings of things they arrive through long practice and training of memory at writing and reading everything they want to.¹²

The mastery of the script requires a vast knowledge about the hidden meaning of things. Learning to read and write amounts to an initiation into the secrets of nature.

The distinction between two scripts goes back to Herodotus who visited Egypt in the middle of the fifth century BCE and is most clearly expressed by Diodorus in the introduction to his passage on hieroglyphs quoted above: The Egyptians use two different scripts: one, called »demotic«, is learned by all; the other is called »sacred«. This one is understood among the Egyptians exclusively by the priests who learn it from their fathers in the mysteries.¹³ The existence of two different scripts is explained by the distinction between the sacred and the profane, priests and laymen, secrecy and publicity. Later sources, especially Clement of Alexandria and Porphyry,¹⁴ explicitly declare that the various steps in the acquisition of literacy, leading from the demotic to the sacred cursive and from there to the most accomplished script, the hieroglyphic cryptography, amounted to a veritable initiation. Pythagoras, e.g., according to Porphyry, spent twenty years in Egypt entering into the various secrets of the different Egyptian scripts. This grammatological interpretation of Egyptian split culture forms the basis of the curious theory of dual religion or society. The use of two apparently different scripts reflected, in the eyes of the ancients, a split in Egyptian society, between the initiated priests on the one hand, and the rest of the literate society on the other. This situation was a perfect confirmation of what Heliodorus and other ancient authors described as the Egyptian »duplex philosophy«, a vulgar or exoteric and an exclusive or esoteric one, one for the priests and one for the people.¹⁵

Hieroglyphic writing, therefore, was held to be not only a system of communication but also, and above all, to be a codification of sacred knowledge and divine wisdom. It was both natural and cryptic, whereas alphabetic writing was held to be both conventional and clear. The non-iconic, demotic script was believed to be an alphabet invented by the Egyptians for the purposes of communication, administration and documentation, whereas Hieroglyphs were invented for the purposes of mystery, for the transmission of esoteric knowledge. Needless to stress that all this is pure imagination. Its importance lies not in what it has to say about ancient Egypt but about Western concepts of secrecy, its religious and cultural functions.

The most important source in early modernity concerning the Egyptian hieroglyphs was the first book on Hieroglyphs by Horapollon Nilotes, which dates from the fifth cen-

tury CE and was discovered in 1418 by an Italian merchant in a Greek monastery.¹⁶ For seventy hieroglyphs, it gives not only the meaning, which is mostly correct, but also the motivation, which is rather fantastic. The sign for »to open« is said to be written with the image of a hare because this animal never closes its eyes, and the image of a goose writes the word »son«, because this bird has a peculiar sense of family. Obviously, the lost knowledge about the phonetic meaning of the signs – the words for »to open« and »son« are nearly homonymous with the words for »hare« and »goose« – has been replaced with that moralizing zoology that is known to us by Aelianus, Plinius and the *Physiologus*.

Another discovery of the 15th century opened a window on the content of Egyptian esoteric knowledge believed to have been committed to hieroglyphs. This was the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was brought to Florence after the fall of Constantinople and put on the desk of Marsilio Ficino: a collection of theo-philosophical treatises attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a fabulous Egyptian sage of highest antiquity.¹⁷

For about two millennia ancient Egypt was only accessible at second hand: The Egyptian literature was described by Greek and Roman authors in a way that did not lead to the decipherment of the hieroglyphs. Even when it was not possible to read Egyptian texts, the West thought to some degree that they were able to do. The *Hieroglyphica* were used as a handbook for the translation and the hermeneutics of the hieroglyphs and even more, the authors of the West wrote in this manner.¹⁸ The hermetic writings, written in Greek and Latin, were understood as Egyptian texts translated in Greek language; a form that was believed to corrupt the original and much more subtle meaning of the text but is still referred to as an authentic offspring of Egyptian wisdom.¹⁹

Even the representation of Egyptian art and iconography in the West was not present in the form of original masterpieces from the classical times but via Roman copies from the imperial period. These Roman-Egyptian hybrids, Egyptian art in Roman adaptation, were the models for Egyptian aesthetics until the documentations of the travels to Egypt served authentic evidence, beginning in the 18th century with Friedrich Ludwig Norden and then with full impact in the beginning of the 19th century with Vivant Denon's publications and the *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1828).

In 1822, exactly 400 years after the arrival of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* in Florence, Jean Francois Champollion succeeded in deciphering the hieroglyphs. With this achievement, ancient Egypt seemed to have lost its mysteries. It became clear that there was no monotheism, no arcane theology, no antagonism between a popular religion and a religion of the sages and initiates. The hieroglyphs were shown not to be a cryptography but the normal writing used for stone inscriptions and basically the same system as the cursive writings, and the subterranean structures were identified as tombs. Egyptology did in fact unveil and demystify ancient Egypt within the historical sciences. Ancient Egypt lost its mystery which after this definitive unveiling lives on outside the academics.

After having found the access to the original sources, historians of Ancient Egypt dismissed the »Egyptian Mysteries« as pure fantasy. The whole traditional image of Ancient

Egypt, as it was based on Greek and Latin sources, was discarded as »Egyptomania« and disposed of as an accumulation of misunderstandings. The hieroglyphs were shown not to be a cryptography encoding esoteric wisdom in symbols, but a normal phonographic script, the subterranean constructions were identified as tombs and the whole concept of a dual culture, religion or philosophy was exploded. From a mnemohistorical perspective, however, these same concepts can be shown to be of the highest influence and interest. The hieroglyphic theory, erroneous as it was, fuelled a heated debate on grammatology that culminated in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Not less influential proved the theory for emblematic traditions in Western art.²⁰ The image of ancient Egypt as a dual culture informed not only the secret societies of the 18th century but led also, in the writings of Lessing and Mendelssohn, to ideas of double membership that are still important for our time.²¹

But even from a historical perspective, the verdict of »misunderstanding« begins to appear not wholly justified. At least it seems plausible now to recognize in the Greek image of ancient Egyptian writing and religion a reflection of Late Egypt's self-image, i.e. the form in which it wanted to present itself to the Greek visitors, settlers and officials. With the high increase of knowledge about Greco-Roman Egypt in recent years it becomes more and more evident that many of these alleged misunderstandings were shared by Greeks and Egyptians alike.²²

ENCOUNTERING EGYPT: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND TERMINOLOGY

As demonstrated above the concept of mnemohistory is tailor-made for the research into the history of reception of ancient Egypt. This term tries to avoid problems and ambiguities of those terms that have determined the field of research so far. Let's have a short look at the history of this research in this field and the common terminology used so far to discuss the efficiency of this concept.

The Western image of ancient Egypt is a topic that has not emerged as a coherent discussion about ancient Egypt within the history of reception. Prior to scientific Egyptology, Egypt was the subject of discussion within numerous different cultural-historical reference systems. Hieroglyphs in the context of the language, the relationship of monotheism and polytheism or idolatry in the context of religion, symbolic knowledge and revelation in the history of hermeticism, the quest for the best medicine and spiritual treasures in the context of alchemy and so on. Many of these discourses have been interwoven and overlapped, nevertheless these discussions were not focused on the best possible knowledge about ancient Egypt. Egypt was used as an argument in these different contexts and not as a topic in its own right.²³ A coherent discussion focused primary on understanding the ancient Egyptian culture only emerged with scientific Egyptology in the 19th century, maybe in regard to art and aesthetics within 18th century.²⁴

It is interesting to consider the nexus of all the different discourses that make Egypt a topic. Is there something like a master-narrative or an agent of the »thing Egyptian« in cultural history? This question is crucial for further research, as we have to determine whether it makes sense to ask for the bigger story or is the object of research only a bunch of loosely or associatively connected topics.²⁵ The diversity of discourses that made Egypt a subject of discussion means that a variety of different disciplines is dealing with the research into the history of reception of ancient Egypt. In this respect, we have a large number of publications dealing with the different aspects of the history of reception from their respective disciplinary perspectives; and only a few of these papers try to understand their topic as a part of the history of reception of ancient Egypt likewise.

The number of books focused on the whole history of reception is tiny. This imbalance is grounded in the fact that scientific Egyptology as the main discourse about ancient Egypt nowadays does not cover the history of reception by its self-definition. Egyptology focuses on ancient Egypt itself, it incorporates the Greco-Roman and the Coptic Egypt but draws the line of its competence at least with the beginning of Arabic Egypt. Initially, Egyptology formed its self-concept in sharp distinction from the history of reception stigmatizing it as a history of errors and failures.²⁶ Nevertheless, it was Egyptology as well that helped to establish the research into the history of the reception of ancient Egypt as a scientific topic in its own right. Two Egyptologists launched this additional perspective that took reception seriously in the 1960s: Erik Iversen and Siegfried Morenz.

The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European tradition was first published in 1961 by Erik Iversen. This book is part of a long tradition of brilliant studies in the hieroglyphic tradition. Most books and articles of this tradition have been written by scholars specialized in the fine arts and in Renaissance culture. Karl Giehlow in 1915 and Ludwig Volkmann in 1923 wrote very good and still useful books on this topic.²⁷ As an Egyptologist Iversen refers to these books but he goes much further in chronology. He begins with ancient Egypt and he ends with Champollion. Iversen suggests that he is giving an account of much more than the hieroglyphic tradition when he writes: »But as a red thread through this intricate web of direct and indirect influences [...] runs the hieroglyphic tradition.«²⁸

Iversen implemented the »concept of Egypt in the West« as a fruitful additional perspective into a well-established research tradition. In doing this he maintained the high level of the research literature he is referring to. He tried to understand the actual author and the actual piece of art within their historical and intellectual framework. After more than half a century, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs* is still a very good book. But besides its merits Iversen was wrong in insinuating that the hieroglyphic tradition is a sufficient red thread through the full range of the history of reception. There are many discourses and images not covered by this approach and it is misleading to postulate the one trace as *pars pro toto* before even beginning to find different traces.

Siegfried Morenz intended to give an account of the whole range of encounters of Europe with Egypt in his book *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* in 1968. He claimed

that he would not omit any important part but also admitted that this could only be a sketchy attempt.²⁹ Morenz describes three stages of this encounter: The first lasted till late antiquity as an encounter of Europe and Egypt as a living culture. The second one deals with the »idea of Egypt« that began to emerge during Roman times in the context of the Isis cult and was not connected with the cultural realities in Egypt. The third stage that led to scientific Egyptology for Morenz begins with the idea of true scale comprehension and »understanding culture in its own terms« which was stimulated by the German art historian Winckelmann and the German philosopher Herder in the 18th century.³⁰

Morenz examines whether the idea of Egypt expresses the best available knowledge of its time, especially with respect to the second stage, and in particular the history of reception. He does not compare for example Athanasius Kircher's writings about Egypt with modern Egyptology – this would be anachronistic. But he inquires whether anybody had better information and he challenges the plausibility of the single concept of Egypt. And in this regard Morenz condemns for example Kircher's interpretation of the hieroglyphs as grotesque nonsense.³¹ From my point of view Morenz completely misses the crucial point in the interpretation of the meaning Egypt had to the West by regarding the history of reception as the pre-history of Egyptology. Kircher's main interest was not to understand ancient Egypt as well as possible. Rather than aspiring to be an Egyptologist he used the »concept of Egypt« in theological and philosophical controversies. Being a Jesuit he fought against the Reformation and tried to prove wrong any attempt to limit the truth claim of Christianity, the revelation and the role of the Roman-Catholic Church. These were Kircher's intentions and his attempt to understand Egypt must be understood as a part of this challenge. Even when Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* is one of the most comprehensive compilations of Greek, Latin, Arabic and Hebrew texts about ancient Egypt, it was not intended as an end in itself and it must not be understood as the ideal prerequisite for the best possible understanding of ancient Egypt as a topic sui generis.

There is a third important book that launched this research theme in the 1960s, not written by an Egyptologist. In 1967 the historian Jurgis Baltrušaitis, a Lithuanian living and working in Paris, published *La quête d'Isis* with the subtitle »Essai sur la légende d'un mythe. Introduction à l'Égyptomanie«.³² This book is a brilliant account of the importance of the goddess Isis in parts of the literature from the Renaissance to the beginning of the 19th century. He traces many motives back to their origins in Antiquity and covers many different discourses using Isis and ancient Egypt as an argument. Baltrušaitis labels his study an »Introduction à l'Égyptomanie« and he does not claim to give a comprehensive account by using the subtitle »essai«.

These are three important studies initialising something new by focusing on the image of Egypt in the long-term and broader cultural context. All of them are both ground-breaking and fraught with problems: Iversen is in danger of equating a part of the story with the whole. His study illustrates the problems of focussing on one discourse. Iversen has a vast knowledge of many aspects of the history of reception of ancient Egypt and his book bene-

fits from this.³³ Nevertheless his book inevitably leaves out a multitude of discussions that made Egypt a topic. This is no problem as long as the author is capable of making clear in which way this special aspect of the history of reception is part of the bigger story, in which way it is typical, in which way it is an exception, where are the relationships to other discourses and so on. The good and excellent studies are doing this nowadays, but to highlight the special case with the general characteristics requires a profound knowledge of cultural history and the history of reception of ancient Egypt. The problem is increased by the fact that many scholars are writing studies that could be regarded as a contribution to the research into the history of reception of ancient Egypt, but they are not trying to classify their study in this way or they do not take up the further research in this field and miss out on presenting their research as a contribution to the mnemohistory of ancient Egypt.

In this regard Baltrušaitis' book only aims to present an essay without any systematic or comprehensive purpose. Like Iversen, Baltrušaitis did not embed his study in the broader context of the history of reception of ancient Egypt and has not made any claim to cover this history even when his book is stunningly rich with examples. Unfortunately, Baltrušaitis used the term »Egyptomania« and made it popular in the Romance languages. Especially in France and Italy it is used for the discussion of the image of Egypt in the fine arts. Before Baltrušaitis the term was already used in 19th century and afterwards it was adopted by Jean Marcel Humbert regarding a conscious adoption of decorations and forms from ancient Egyptian art.³⁴ Later on and together with Clifford Price he used this term for any »kind of approach to anything ancient Egyptian«.³⁵ The problem with this terminology is that »mania« suggests an evaluative difference between the scientific Egyptological approach with the word »logos« and the pathogenesis of the human mind with the word »mania«. Neither Baltrušaitis nor Humbert used this term in this way for their profound research. Nevertheless, this evaluative term bears this overtone of an irrational interest in ancient Egypt. Besides a number of excellent studies there is an even bigger number of studies taking the research into the history of reception not as a proper analysis of cultural history but as a description of funny or quirky topics. This might be entertaining and even something that is sold in the book-market but delivers no significant contribution to the understanding of history. The term »Egyptomania« is growingly used to classify books and articles that make no proper attempt but remain descriptions of curiosities without a detailed contextualisation in cultural history.³⁶

Morenz' book had the most comprehensive aspiration in presenting a history of the whole story with all of the important topics of the encounters of Egypt and the West. This is a courageous attempt to describe and understand the »Idea of Egypt« in the whole history of the West. This was the first time ever that a scholar tried to do this. Nonetheless Morenz failed: It was too big a task for just one scholar and Morenz' account leaves out many important parts of the whole story. But first and foremost: there is an important methodological problem with his approach: Morenz misunderstood the story of reception of ancient Egypt by taking it as an early form of Egyptology. This might be caused by a special interest which

is part of an Egyptologist's *déformation professionnelle*: namely the focus on looking for the genuine Egyptian value. However, even if this approach might be explained by an Egyptologist's typical perspective, it trivialises the mnemohistory of Egypt.

Since the publication of these three books nobody has tried to write a book with the aim of covering the whole range, at least nobody with a proper scientific approach. The scope has always been limited either to a special problem or with regard to a specific period, mostly to both. The only attempt to give an account of the wider range of the research is a good example of the problems involved: In the year 2000 a conference took place in London entitled *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*. The resulting eight volumes published in 2003 constitute a stunning collection of articles and topics.³⁷ They offer a good insight into the variety of topics but do not present an overview. There neither is a general introduction, just introductory remarks, nor is there a general index, a discussion of the research field and the research history. And there are many gaps with regard to the topics covered – this is inevitable in general but becomes a serious problem when there is no overview classifying the different articles as part of a bigger story. We still lack an overview and the *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* are proof that the discussion about the history of reception is in danger of being treated as a bunch of loosely connected topics and detailed studies.

TERMINOLOGY BETWEEN HISTORY OF RECEPTION AND EFFECTIVE HISTORY

Baltrušaitis used the term »Egyptomania« to label his study, Morenz examines a »Begegnung/ encounter« and Iversen traces back the »tradition of a myth«. There are a lot of terms used for the research field we are talking about. Let us briefly consider the most important and frequently used terms and their methodological implications.³⁸ As pointed out above there are two different perspectives to consider: the term »Reception of ancient Egypt«³⁹ lays the focus on the recipient's interpretation, the active agent in his time and in his socio-historical setting who forms an image of Egypt using (passive) sources. In focussing on the intention of the one who forms a concept of Egypt *Rezeptionsgeschichte* operates mainly with explicit ideas and texts. Likewise, it is focused more on the way the concept of Egypt is formed than on the output itself. This implies a constructivist epistemology and is requiring an analysis of the synchronic setting of an act of reception like New Historicism, Microhistory or Constellation Analysis. Jan Assmann has explained this concept of »history of reception« above with the example of Josephus who was reading Manetho as anti-Jewish propaganda and intentionally disputed this thesis.

On the other hand, Manetho himself serves as an example of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history), being influenced by legends circulating in Egypt. The concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) is focused on the meaning that Egypt had in cultural history and to consider a special case of reception as part of a longer tradition and a vague circulation

of ideas. In a naive sense this term implies that a part of the ancient Egyptian culture is not lost but still exists and continues to be vivid and effective. It lays the focus on the thing Egyptian as an agent in the historical and cultural process and requires the research into the diachronic development. When Siegfried Morenz is showing that writing and calendar are two achievements the West owes to ancient Egypt, he is referring to this model.⁴⁰ Generally speaking, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, as demonstrated above, is about the impact of tradition on cultural history. It is about the legends, the allusions, the many vague concepts that have tinged so many traditions, even if they only seem to be about Egypt marginally. E.g., in the Early Modern Age, most discourses have been deeply influenced by the biblical motives of Egypt and even when the biblical texts are not mentioned explicitly they form a kind of background structure.

To make one of these concepts absolute, always bears problems: the constructivist implication of »reception« might underestimate that an artist or author does not act in a totally self-determined way. Images of Egypt were handed down to him in childhood, and he was confronted with the expectations of a patron or the requirements of the genre. We must take into account the tradition formed by the bible, sermons, classical literature or iconographic traditions and so on. It would be misleading to indicate the randomness of the encounters with Egypt. Although the concepts of Egypt have always been used as a projection surface, it has never been random but come down with a huge set of preconditions.⁴¹ On the other hand the thing Egyptian cannot be regarded as an autonomous actor in history; it is always a human being that is confronted with Egypt. He or she is either reacting (the passive model) to a tradition connected to ancient Egypt or is taking up the thing Egyptian (the active model). This tension is crucial for the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* by Hans Georg Gadamer, often translated as »effective history«. In his opus magnum *Wahrheit und Methode* from 1960 Gadamer tries to understand the nature of human understanding in general and the understanding of texts in particular. He claimed that the gap between the intention of an author and the subsequent comprehension of a written source is generally insurmountable.⁴² Following this proposition, understanding a text is not only a process of trying to understand the author, it is in the same way bound to the intellectual mind-set of the reader. It is not only a passive answer or reflex to history but also an active form of handling history: »Eine jede Zeit wird einen überlieferten Text auf ihre Weise verstehen müssen [denn ...] immer übertrifft der Sinn eines Textes seinen Autor. Daher ist das Verstehen eines Textes kein nur reproduktives, sondern stets auch ein produktives Verhalten.«

Understanding a text is always grounded in the act of reading and the very conditions of the one who is doing this. This is the perspective of »reception«. At the same time the gap between the document from history and the form in which it is understood later on is suffused with tradition that provides the guideline for interpretation: »Der Abstand der Zeit [...] ist ausgefüllt durch die Kontinuität des Herkommens und der Tradition, in deren Licht uns alle Überlieferung sich zeigt.«⁴³

Each form of dealing with history (»understanding« in general in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics), whether we call it understanding, encountering, reception etc., is acting and reacting likewise, on the one hand it means to form the concept of the intention and the meaning of a text and on the other hand it means to understand this text and oneself as part of a tradition that formed the text and our mind-set: just as the author of the text is deeply influenced by other texts, discussions and ideas the reader and his preoccupations in understanding are likewise formed by tradition, education and enculturation. As a consequence, we have two major parts to consider: the author in his socio-historical context and the tradition preforming the ways in which he faces ancient Egypt.

Gadamer deals with texts and authors writing in languages comprehensible for the West: national languages, Latin or Greek. It is a little bit more complex when it comes to understanding ancient Egypt by means of mnemohistory as we are talking about history that is referring to history. When we are interested in the concept of Egypt in 18th century, as demonstrated above, we are trying to understand an author writing in this time about Egypt or an artist creating a piece of art in this time. That means we are trying to comprehend the way the author in history is trying to comprehend the much older history of ancient Egypt. Referring to Gadamer this means the object of our interpretation is not ancient Egypt but the author in history writing about ancient Egypt and we try to understand his comprehension of ancient Egypt. The epistemological interest is the one referring to ancient Egypt not ancient Egypt itself, and the history that we have to take into account is the tradition of concepts of Egypt that led from antiquity till the 18th century. The importance of history as a predetermined setting for the understanding of the past, in this case of ancient Egypt, is crucial: nobody could face history in a purely objective way, as everybody is biased by the tradition of the object of knowledge.⁴⁴ An author writing about Egypt and a reader trying to understand a text about Egypt is always deeply predetermined by the tradition. To understand why a special case of reception took place we have to understand the tradition the recipient is faced with.

Gadamer's hermeneutics and the subsequent *Rezeptionsästhetik* (reader-response criticism), as has been described above, proved to be useful to study the »reception of antiquity« but it is much more complicated in the case of Egypt, as Egypt was only accessible second hand.

Greek and Roman Antiquity was always comprehensible in direct confrontation with the Latin and Greek texts, at least since Humanism for the *res publica literaria*. And Antiquity was *grosso modo* a normative part of Western culture, sometimes as a distinction often as identification. In contrast, Egypt was always a second hand image in Western culture handed down by the accounts of the bible or classical literature. Before modern Egyptology was established, one had to read, interpret, criticize or transform the Bible or the Latin and Greek writings to understand ancient Egypt. In this regard, we can look at »reception of ancient Egypt« as a subdivision of biblical studies or the Classics. Focusing on the concept of Egypt in the West we have to ask for the basis of this concept, for the underlying inter-

pretation and reception of the bible and the authors from antiquity. These images preformed the modes of »reception of ancient Egypt« till the 19th century and the decipherment of the hieroglyphs.

»Reception of ancient Egypt« thus needs a different approach to »reception of Antiquity« and mnemohistory takes up the point that »reception of ancient Egypt« had no direct access to ancient Egypt and was not able to go *ad fontes*.

Ancient Egypt appears to the West in three different forms, as a »message«, as a »trace« and as a »memory«: Egypt left behind many traces like pyramids, tombs, temples that once transmitted a meaning but this meaning was widely lost when the knowledge of hieroglyphic writing disappeared in the late fourth century CE. The messages from Pharaonic Egypt fell silent. In the narrow sense the »traces« we are talking about are remnants like wall remains, refuses and other things left behind without communicative intention. Archaeology is working on this aspect of ancient Egypt. When Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs in 1822 Egypt became »readable«, the Western world has become able to understand the meaning of the traces the Egyptians wanted to leave to posterity. Modern Egyptology is concerned with this aspect of ancient Egypt.

The third mode is Egypt as a part of the cultural memory. This is, as already stressed above, not mere »reception« or »encounter« in the sense of a self-determined or voluntary interest in Egypt. Not only does cultural memory address, interrogate, and research the past, but it is also haunted by the past. The one being encountered with ancient Egypt is coined by the society he lives in, by the peer group he belongs to in family or profession, by the form in which he is socialised or enculturated. The form we are trying to understand is always deeply influenced by these conditions that made the human being.

The investigation of the cultural memory is called mnemohistory. It is concerned with the past as it is remembered and it suspends from the question of whether the memory reflects proper history. Mnemohistory focusses on the very situation of the act of remembering by a research into the »why«-question (see above) and combines the research into the synchronic structure with the diachronic backbone of history in surveying the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past. Mnemohistory analyzes the importance a present ascribes to the past. Unlike historical positivism the task of mnemohistory consists in analyzing the mythical elements in tradition and discovering their hidden agenda as shown above.

The eminent advantage of mnemohistory is the fact that it is not giving prescriptions in terms of the object and its interpretation. It is a method that fits perfectly for the research into the pre-Egyptological encounters with ancient Egypt. So many other terms used so far are problematic: »Egyptian-revival« or the similar use of »Egyptian Renaissance« might denote in their literal sense a special time of an increased interest in Egypt.⁴⁵ These terms suggest that times of a relatively low interest were followed by a rediscovery of Egypt. This could be misleading as the image of Egypt has always had a latent potential. Research in recent years has offered striking evidence for the importance of Egypt for example in Middle

Ages literature, a period that was regarded decades ago as being absolutely not interested in ancient Egypt.⁴⁶ The idea of transformation seems to fit much better than the one of cycles of vitality and ignorance.⁴⁷ »Egyptomania« should be avoided for any rational encounter with ancient Egypt, and many more terms denote a special attitude towards ancient Egypt, e.g. »Fascination of ancient Egypt«, Ägyptophilie or Ägyptosophie.

THE LIMITS OF THE SUBJECT AND THE LIMITS OF METHOD

Talking about the terminology is a means to reflect on the range and the method of the research field. In regard to intellectual history it is a matter of debate if we will start to talk about the »Mnemohistory of ancient Egypt« with either Herodotus or with Homer and Aeschylus and in which way we will consider the documents that have survived as extracts and quotations. But in general, we agree that all these texts form the beginning of the history of reception of ancient Egypt. This is a fundamental difference to material culture, where we have a starting point much earlier.

For intellectual history, it makes sense to put an end to the history of reception with the establishment of scientific Egyptology. Something has changed dramatically with the decipherment of the hieroglyphs. The West had direct access to ancient Egypt, being able to read the original texts of this culture. From then on there was no need to make an interpretation of the accounts of the bible and the classical literature to understand ancient Egypt. The perspective changed from focusing on the inside and the hidden wisdom, allegories and philosophical interpretations to the outside, quantification, editions and translation.

If this also applies to the self-conception of Egyptology as a strict science, this model must be relativized in cultural reality. With regard to art and literature the ideas of the history of reception are still vivid and can't be regarded as outdated with the beginning of Egyptology. Three examples might highlight this problem.

Paul Klee (1879–1940) created paintings that reflect a first-hand impression from his travel to Egypt as well as an inspiration by anthroposophical books from Rudolph Steiner about Egyptian mysteries. Klee's next-door neighbour and friend Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) was a member of the Theosophical Society and Kandinsky's book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst (Concerning the Spiritual in Art)* is strongly influenced by Mme Blavatsky who understood Egyptian freemasonry from the 18th century as old Egyptian mysteries.⁴⁸ All of this was an inspiration for Klee's artistic work. All this is not Egyptology, but is it really Egyptomania? Blavatsky and Steiner served only as an inspiration and Klee never claimed to refer to scientific truth.

A concept of Egypt, likewise strange and famous, can be found in the writings of Aleister Crowley. Crowley was the most influential and notorious occultist of the 20th century. While on honeymoon in Egypt in 1904 he and his wife spent the night in the pyramid of Cheops, performed some magical rituals, visited the Egyptian Museum and were attracted

by a stela with the registration number 666. Crowley and his wife claimed to have had a revelation stimulated by this stela. This revelation was published under the name *The book of law* (*Liber L vel Legis*). The first law of this religion is »Do what you wilt«. Crowley tried to give a scientific appeal to this. He reported that he discussed the stela with Emil Brugsch, the younger brother of the German Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch and assistant of Auguste Mariette in the Egyptian museum. Furthermore, Crowley claimed that the famous Egyptologists Battiscombe Gunn and Alan Gardiner made a translation of the stela in 1912.⁴⁹

Crowley's presentation as the prophet of an ancient Egyptian religion is pure nonsense with regard to scientific Egyptology. Nevertheless, it is popular and was attractive especially in pop culture: Jimmy Page from Led Zeppelin bought Crowley's house in Scotland, David Bowie and Ozzy Osbourne dedicated songs to Crowley and in literature Crowley inspired Timothy Leary and Ian Fleming. This combination of Egyptian Religion, hard drugs and sex magic was likewise famous and notorious, shocking and appealing. L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, was a follower of Crowley and the Rosicrucian group AMORC took up Crowley's writings. Till now AMORC is strongly connected to ancient Egypt their Egyptian Museum in San Jose houses the largest collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts on display in Western North America. All this is deeply influenced by the ideas that form the history of reception of ancient Egypt. The term »mania« may suit in this context, but it does not help to understand why these people were referring to ancient Egypt.

In the case of »Afrocentrism«, the »reception of Egypt« has become the subject of socio-political controversy and is discussed in detail in classical studies as well as in reception research: one of the eight volumes of the *Encounters* is dedicated to this topic.⁵⁰ In an attempt to prove that ancient Egypt was a black culture and the origin of Western civilisation, many authors quote texts from the history of reception. In 1789 John Murrant gave a speech in the first lodge for Afro-Americans, referring to Egypt and Africa as the origin of freemasonry and humanity.⁵¹ He referred to Egypt and freemasonry in order to argue against racial abuse. In the late 18th and 19th century this was the exception rather than the rule. The most dominant concept of Egypt within the discussion of slavery was the idea of relief from Egypt as the »house of bondage« and the identifications of the blacks with the Israelites in Egypt. Nevertheless, some authors fighting for abolitionism referred to Egypt as the black African origin of culture.⁵²

In the 20th century this movement became powerful in the course of postcolonialism and the »Black Power« movement. Some authors only wanted to show that black culture is not a deficient mode of European culture but exists in its own right. Egypt played a major role for the authors trying to prove that Western culture is only an offspring of the black African culture that first flourished in ancient Egypt. Cheikh Anta Diop understood Egypt as a black African culture that must not be understood as part of the Mediterranean world but in the nexus of African cultures. Much more radical was George Granville Monah James when he claimed that the Western culture was not only an offspring of black Egypt but also

negated this relationship. With his battle cry »stolen legacy« James didn't intend to take part in the scientific discourse but acted as a political activist.⁵³

With Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* this discussion became part of the discourse of the humanities.⁵⁴ Like his many predecessors he reads the texts from the history of reception like factual reports without any historical-critical contextualisation. According to Bernal, the Greeks acknowledged the fact that the Egyptians like the Phoenicians formed the foundation of their own culture. Out of antisemitic and racist reasons the first protagonist of classical studies would have neglected the importance of the predecessors and labelled ancient Greece an Aryan civilisation.

Grosso modo this discussion is a continuation of the history of the reception of ancient Egypt. The most important sources are Greek narratives about Egypt taken as factual reports and in particular the concept of Egypt formed by 18th century freemasonry lives on.⁵⁵ In the end this is more a discussion about politics than about scientific truth and the »Afrocentrism« is an excellent example of the mnemohistory of Ancient Egypt.