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## Introduction : [Special issue: Complex Genealogies in the Ancient World]

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## Introduction

Sebastian FINK<sup>1</sup>, Vladimir SAZONOV<sup>2</sup>

In a recently published lecture series, originally given in Tokyo in 1986, the great French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss discussed the relevance of anthropological research, broadly defined as the “study of that ‘human phenomenon’”,<sup>3</sup> to our modern world. In his first lecture he stressed the fact that at that time (1986) the West had seemingly lost the capacity to develop sustainable models for the future or at least believe in the ideology of progress through science and technology, which had been driving its development for such a long time. He therefore suggested that we should look at “the humble societies”<sup>4</sup> and learn our lesson:

As a first lesson, anthropology teaches us that every custom, every belief, however shocking or irrational it may appear to us when we compare it to our own, is part of a system whose internal balance has been established over the course of centuries; it teaches us that one cannot eliminate an element from that whole without running the risk of destroying all the rest.<sup>5</sup>

In a broad sense, the study of Antiquity is also a part of anthropology as it provides us with insights into ancient societies and, from the background provided in the sentence above, we have to understand that all aspects of any given society are relevant to its functioning as a system. Due to the anthropological fact of birth and death, societies need to replicate themselves over generations if they want to survive. In order to remain stable every society has to develop a kinship system in order to set the relationship of its new(born) members with the others, to set rules concerning marriages and to establish rules concerning the inheritance of property.<sup>6</sup> Lévi-Strauss details further that in many “traditional” societies there exist tensions between social and biological parenthood, which might be relevant for us given the success of reproductive medicine, and which also brings our traditional (western,

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<sup>3</sup> LÉVY-STRAUSS 2013, 6.

<sup>4</sup> LÉVY-STRAUSS 2013, 5.

<sup>5</sup> LÉVY-STRAUSS 2013, 44.

<sup>6</sup> LÉVY-STRAUSS 2013, 45–46.

biological) concepts of parenthood into question and makes new forms of relations between parents and children possible. What Lévi-Strauss pointed out as a possibility—the widespread use of new reproductive technologies—has become a reality today.

He explained the issue using the following example of complex genealogy: “*There is also no reason, it seems, why the frozen sperm of a great-grandfather could not be used a century later to fertilize a great-granddaughter. The child would then be his mother’s great-uncle and his own great[sic]-grandfather’s brother.*”<sup>7</sup> Lévi-Strauss hints at the fact that anthropologists have investigated many societies that have different ideas of filiation from ours, e.g., the concept of biological and social parents. Anthropology and (in our case) historical Anthropology has the potential to question the things we take for granted and to hint at new possibilities.

It is quite obvious that someone’s claim of being the true heir to a powerful position like that of city-ruler or king might be questioned by more members of society than an “ordinary” person’s claim of being heir to their parents’ (or however they might be defined in that particular society) property and position. People holding special positions in society are therefore more inclined to justify their claims to such elevated positions using special genealogies. In short: special people tend to have special genealogies. However, even if these genealogies are special they have to be based on beliefs that are somehow acceptable in the society in question. By studying rulers’ genealogies we gain insight into a central part of the organization and worldview of any given society, improving our understanding of it as a whole. Whether the genealogies discussed below might be of any help regarding the problems of our contemporary societies remains up for debate, but Lévi-Strauss surely reminds us how central the question of genealogy and filiation is and how we need anthropological evidence in order to understand that “our” biological understanding of filiation is not the only possibility.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the papers presented in this issue were given at a panel at the BAAS conference in Tartu in April 2016 entitled “Genealogies in the Ancient World”. While not all speakers were able to turn their talks into papers, a few others agreed to write additional contributions in order to examine the phenomenon of complex genealogies using case studies from different places and epochs. Examples range from third millennium Mesopotamia to the early modern Inka Empire in Peru, and thus cover a wide expanse of time and space.

In their article “Complex Genealogies in Mesopotamia: From Mesilim to Tukultī-Ninurta I” Sebastian Fink and Vladimir Sazonov discuss several case studies of complex genealogies in Ancient Mesopotamia, focusing on Early Dynastic, Neo-Sumerian (Lagash II, Ur III) and Middle Assyrian royal genealogies from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, and on the Middle Assyrian king Tukultī-Ninurta I (13<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century BC) under whom the Middle Assyrian Empire reached

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<sup>7</sup> LÉVY-STRAUSS 2013, 48.

<sup>8</sup> One of the starting points for our interest in genealogies was the claim in the Gilgameš Epic that Gilgameš is a two-thirds god. See FINK 2013; FINK 2014.

the peak of its power. In his article entitled “On the lineage of king Telepinu” Siim Mõttus focuses on the controversial case of the genealogy of Telepinu (ruled ca 1525–1500 BC), one of the last Hittite kings of Old Kingdom who usurped power in ca 1525 and created the famous *Edict (or proclamation) of Telepinu*.

Three articles, those of Mait Kõiv, Jakub Kuciak and Stefan Scharinger, focus on Ancient Greece and thereby provide us with a broad approach to the use of genealogies in Greek texts as they study genealogies in historiography, in tragedy, and in legends and stories about a famous philosopher and school-founder.

Mait Kõiv’s article “Manipulating genealogies: Pheidon of Argos and the stemmas of the Argive, Macedonian, Spartan and Median kings” details how ancient Greek authors dealt with the genealogy of Pheidon of Argos and in it he explains how different traditions concerning Pheidon of Argos’ genealogy came into being. In his contribution entitled “Der Mythos im Dienst der Politik: das Beispiel der euripideischen Tragödie *Ion*” Jakub Kuciak analyzes the Euripidean tragedy *Ion* and discusses how the myth and genealogies given therein were influenced by the political situation in which Euripides’ text emerged. These two contributions clearly demonstrate that different genealogies, be they of groups or individual persons, can make sense in different historical and political settings. In his article “A Genealogy of Pythagoras” Stefan Scharinger examines the various and partly miraculous traditions of the genealogy of the famous philosopher Pythagoras of Samos.

The last article, entitled “The Origin Myths as a Possible Basis for Genealogy of the Inca Imperial Dynasty in Ancient Peru” by Professor Tarmo Kulmar, deals with ancient Peruvian myths. As Professor Kulmar shows, these myths can be seen effectively in the context of a genealogical interpretation of the Incas’ imperial dynasty.

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