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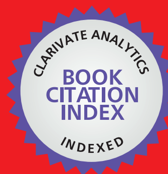

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Chapter

Introductory Chapter: The Importance of Reception Studies for Ancient History

Helena Trindade Lopes, Isabel Gomes de Almeida and Maria de Fátima Rosa

> *"The landscape of my days appears to be composed, like mountainous regions, of varied materials heaped up pell-mell. There I see my nature, itself composite, made up of equal parts of instinct and training. Here and there protrude the granite peaks of the inevitable, but all about is rubble from the landslips of chance (…) [1].*

1. Reception studies and history

Reception studies applied to history constitute a relatively new research field that was clearly influenced by the postulates of Reception Theory's scholars, such as Hans-Robert Jauss [21], which were developed during the 1960s and 1970s within literary studies. For this theoretical current, the significances of a given literary composition should be understood as always dependable of the readers, who produce meanings according to their own background. This proposal thus responded to the structuralist approach of the 1940's New Criticism, which defended that a text stood for itself ([2], pp. 250–255).

Subsequently, several academics applied these notions in their historical approaches to literature. One of the scholars we should mention is Martindale [3, 16] who postulates in his *opus Redeeming the Text* the imperative need to include reception theory in the research area of classical studies ([4], p. 1). In this seminal work, Martindale identified some of the theoretical formulations that allow to recognise relevant historical significances in the different uses of antiquity.

Within classical studies, Hardwick's [5] book *Reception Studies: Greece and Rome: New Surveys in the Classics* constituted another important step into the theoretical and methodological definitions of reception studies applied to ancient history. In this work, Hardwick detailed the main notions and concepts of the field, elaborating on how certain texts, images, and events of the ancient classical world were used in other historical contexts as political, cultural, and social *autorictas*, but also as symbols of resistance and controversy [19].

If we think about the pre-modern and modern western history, it becomes easy to identify this use of elements produced in antiquity as legitimation tools for those contexts. Take the *Renascence*, for instance, where there was an obvious reception of ancient Greek and Roman cultural and artistic traits, or the eighteenth century *Enlightenment,* profoundly marked by considerations on ancient literature, philosophy, and art. And more closely, let us not forget the nineteenth and twentieth century western imperialisms and colonialisms, where political, social, and military practices were justified through allusions to ancient Greek and Roman

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imperialisms. Given these multiple cases, one can say that recent western history is, in a way, a history of reception of classical antiquity.

However, when we speak about reception of antiquity by the so-called western world, we should look beyond the Greek and Roman pasts. We should address antiquity in its multiple expressions, integrating other civilizations and cultural contexts, such as the Egyptian, the Mesopotamian, the Hebrew, the Persian, or the Hittite.

Notwithstanding their pivotal importance, the first major historiographic publications regarding reception studies were mainly focused on the ancient Greco-Roman cultures, namely on their written products. Hence, reception studies were firstly more cohesively and robustly applied to the classical era, which impacted the volume and characteristics of the academic works produced. In the last years, however, there is a more integrated approach to the reception of antiquity, whereas scholars specialised in different ancient context works towards a broader development of the field.

Having all this in mind, what constitutes the objects and the major historical problematics that should guide us when working on the reception studies field? First, we should address the different and multiple forms by which "ancient material was transmitted, translated, extracted, interpreted, rewritten, reedited, and represented" by later historical agents ([6], p. 4). The understanding of ancient material should be broader and inclusive, that is, one must work from an intertwined perspective that analyses the intertextuality between material, iconographic, and written data produced in ancient civilizations and received by later contexts.

Second, we should analyse how this ancient material was transformed to better deal with the anxieties, the contingencies, and the expectations of the agents/authors who took over this material and appropriated it as their own. In this sense, the perceptions, transformations, and appropriations of antiquity become part of a context that must be present at the time of the phenomenological analysis of reception. We should bear in mind that the significances attributed to the material received results largely from the aspirations, feelings, and mental framework of the agent who receives it. Thus, we should also consider the coetaneous political, social, economic, and cultural processes, given that they influenced the ways this ancient material was received and transformed.

Moreover, it is usual to identify ancient material as integrating the notion of common heritage of a given context. And as such, ancient material was reinterpreted and used in the most diverse manners. In order to understand how and why a specific ancient material is transformed into heritage, one must truly know antiquity and the different layers of its reception, so that we are able to recognise its appropriation. And even if this appropriation is evident, it needs to be problematised so that its multiple significances may become clearer.

So, in order to do update and value the many forms of relations between ancient and modern material, it is imperative to incorporate various theoretical and methodological tools of the modern literary criticism and of the post-modern theories, such as cultural, subalternity, and gender studies, to name just a few.

2. Reception studies and the "pre-classical" contexts

An example of this is the modern context in which the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia were interpreted at the time of the Napoleonic expeditions and during the first European archaeological campaigns at the middle of the nineteenth century. At the time, the new field of archaeology functioned as a

political arena, which moulded itself to the nationalist and imperialist interests of the powers involved in those same expeditions and discoveries.

Thus, the reception of the so-called pre-classical civilizations was, from the beginning, intimately associated with an imperialist logic, which claimed that the antiquities exhumed were a cultural estate of the European powers. On the other hand, there was a great impact of an orientalist vision, which was translated in a very distinctive glance of the *other*. As Said [7] stated: "the Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be… made Oriental".

This nineteenth century vision about ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt was thus dual: these oriental civilizations were envisioned as environments full of vice, sin, and excess (both moral and sexual) and, consequently, condemned to auto destruction due to its own transgressions, but simultaneously and ironically, they were considered as the cradle of the western civilization. This dual vision was due, in great part, to the coeval understandings of the notions transmitted by the Judeo-Christian matrix and the Old Testament accounts, which had marked the mental framework of the western world for centuries ([8], pp. 11–23).

During the first decades of the twentieth century, all these questions were deepened, and a real race for Mesopotamian and Egyptian antiquities began. The claim and appropriation of these pasts by western powers equated to a declaration of pre-eminence not only upon the oriental *other*, but also upon all western political contestants in a nationalist logic. Hence, the ancient material was used as a tool to authenticate the legitimacy and sociocultural superiority of these modern powers. The development of museology, with the constitution of public and private collections from this Orient, was a resulting phenomenon. The western audiences were thus faced with this ancient *other*, opening their horizons to new artistic and iconographic expressions and to a new cultural, social, and religious mentality. However, as mentioned above, the reinterpretation and diffusion of this past heritage were deeply connected with the political, diplomatic, and social demands of the twentieth century. Consequently, a clash between the *we* and the *other* was soon felt.

Hence, the ancient material of Mesopotamia and Egypt, when received and transformed in modern literature, music, art, and, later, in cinema, was intrinsically attached to the authors of these cultural (re)creations and to the audiences to which they were displayed. Antiquity was, and still is, often used as analogy, metaphor, parable, or antithesis to contrast and/or to equate situations of a western contemporary socio-political context. In this sense, antiquity and its reception serve contemporaneity, being that the present *we* composes itself with the past *other*.

It is important, however, to highlight an important aspect. When we speak about reception of antiquity by the modern world, we are not facing a static phenomenon clearly defined in a modern time-space context. On the contrary, we are referring to cumulative and continuous processes susceptible to creating, in the *longue durée*, a phenomenon comparable to a cultural palimpsest. As we mentioned above, the Judeo-Christian matrix and the contents of the Old Testament already contributed to the reception by the western world of echoes from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt long before the archaeological findings.

In this sense, we should go back to the space that first allowed these echoes to reverberate, that is the Mediterranean, a sea which grew within the western collective imaginary proportionally to the dimension of its history. The Great Sea connected the European, African, and Asiatic worlds since the dawn of time [23]. By allowing a prolific circulation of human agents from multiple contexts, not only their commercial and political activities were developed, but also the cultural and

religious transferences were exponentiated. The Great Sea was thus a perfect media for several reception processes, within the long chronological scope of antiquity [24].

If one recalls some of the main historical agents and events of the Mediterranean, from the second millennium BCE onwards, we can identify interesting new developments as well as interchangeable social, political, and cultural phenomena. For instance, given the contacts within the Great Sea between Egyptians, Cretans, and Aegeans, during the second half of the second millennium BCE, the Egyptian art of the period covered itself with Cretan motifs. Moreover, Minoan paintings appeared in various Theban tombs of the 18th dynasty's pharaohs (*ca.* 1550–1292 BC), such as the ones of Hatshepsut, Thutmose III, and Amenhotep II.

Later, during the first millennium BCE, the Phoenicians, who explored the western Mediterranean (which encompassed the North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula), and the Greeks, who widened their activity from the Red Sea to the Black Sea, inaugurated the colonisation phenomena with the creation of their *emporia* [9].

Notwithstanding, one can say that the true comprehension of the Mediterranean's importance as a vessel for multi-layered transferences was achieved by Alexander, the Great, in the fourth century BCE. His dream to connect the ancient world and to take the Greek values to the far east led him to create an empire that encompassed Greece, Anatolia, Phoenicia, Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Indus Valley [10]. A new process of cultural exchanges between Europe, Africa, and Asia thus began with this Hellenistic empire.

Soon after, the Great Sea was illuminated by two economic and cultural metropolises: Alexandria in Egypt and Cartagena in the Iberian Peninsula. The famous Museum and Library of Alexandria expressed the millenary cumulative cultural exchanges within the Mediterranean [11], and the foundation of Cartagena embodied the multiple ethnical and cultural mixtures between East and West [17].

While these Hellenistic contacts flourished, another power was preparing itself to conquer the Mediterranean. In just three centuries (*ca.* sixth to third centuries BCE), Rome redesigned the ancient western world by controlling the territories encompassed by the Great Sea, from the Italian peninsula to Carthage, its great economic rival, and from the Iberian Peninsula to Anatolia.

After the victory of Gaius Octavius (later, Augustus, the first Roman emperor) over Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra, Egypt became a Roman province, and the imperial power of the eternal city was spread from the Mediterranean to a vast European area. With Augustus, the Great Sea fully became *Mare Nostrum*. "The control of land and sea is the image of empire. It is through Augustus' conquest of the sea that peace and wealth are gained for the empire. As Suetonius implies, it was through him that Rome lived and sailed and gained its livelihood (Suet. Aug. 98). And with this sentiment, we will begin our consideration of the Mediterranean Sea as an image of wealth" ([12], p. 54).

For centuries, the Mediterranean witnessed the rise and fall of several social, economic, and political projects—independent city-states, monarchies, and empires. Simultaneously, by allowing the communication between the historical agents who built the ancient world, the Great Sea enabled the diffusion of knowledge, ideas, artistic models, and religious beliefs. Some of these persisted in time, by means of reception, appropriation, and transformation, becoming true archetypes of the so-called western civilization.

To better illustrate this, let us evoke two examples of religious ideas that the biblical tradition and the spread of the Judeo-Christian matrix elevated to a western world heritage level: the cosmogonic and anthropogonic notions. "Ptah, the creator god of Memphis, conceived the cosmos in its different manifestations in his heart

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and realized it through the creative and operative force of the word. The doctrine of the creator verb, usually recognized from the biblical text (Gen. 1) and situated in a particular historical, geographical and temporal context, actually dates back to a time and a place which was very different, the Nile Valley" ([13], p. 555).

In Mesopotamian, namely the Semitic tradition displayed in the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enūma eliš*, the fully existence of the cosmic elements was only achieved by the act of naming, that is, by the creative power of the word: "When skies above were not yet named/Nor earth below pronounced by name/Apsu, the first one, their begetter/and maker Tiamat, who bore them all/Had mixed their waters together,/but had not formed pastures, or discovered reed-beds/When yet no gods were manifest/Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decree/Then gods were born within them ([14], p. 233).

In what concerns the creation of humankind, both Egypt and Mesopotamia displayed several coexistent narratives. One of these traditions, however, described how the first humans were fashioned out of clay. The Egyptian potter god Khnum modelled the first humans from the "dust of the earth", whereas in the land between the rivers human beings were created by the god Enki/Ea, who fashioned them from clay ([13], p. 555; [14], pp. 11–20).

These notions were absorbed and transformed by Hebrews, the main agents and protagonists of the Old Testament, who deeply contacted with ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians ([15], pp. 13–14). In time, via the diffusion of Christianity within the Roman Empire, these notions reached far lands and populations, thus becoming one of the archetypes of the western monotheistic religious system. And when one speaks about biblical monotheism, again ancient civilizations must be recalled, namely the unsettling Egyptian episode of Amarna. It was during the fifteenth century BCE that the pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who later changed his name to Akhenaton, proposed a political and religious revolution, presenting the concept of the singular deity of Aten, the solar disc [20, 22]. The parallels between the Hymn to Aten and Psalm 104 are striking, clearly manifesting reception processes between the religious and cultural contexts that produced both compositions [18]. Moreover, it shows how revolutionary ideas rejected in one context, by means of reception, can become normative in others.

The examples on how the Mediterranean Sea allowed several cumulative and continuous reception processes within antiquity could go on. For the present argument, it becomes clear how these ancient levels of reception should be considered when one analyses the reception of antiquity by the western modern world. Though intricate, there is no doubt that reception studies applied to ancient history constitutes an exciting field to be explored.

> *"(…) To be sure, I perceive in this diversity and disorder the presence of a person, but his form seems nearly always to be shaped by the pressure of circumstances; his features are blurred, like a figure reflected in water" [1].*

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