

## Chapter IV

### The Reception of Antiquity

#### Reception of Antiquity

**Maria Helena Trindade Lopes**<sup>1</sup>

CHAM & DH, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

**Isabel Gomes de Almeida**<sup>2</sup>

CHAM & DH, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

**Maria de Fátima Rosa**<sup>3</sup>

CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

#### **The heritage of classical civilisations and the dawn of Reception studies**

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that Reception Theory first appeared, especially by the hand of German academic Hans-Robert Jauss<sup>4</sup>. Deeply connected to Literary Studies, Reception Theory postulated that the *reader*, and not only the *writer*, was responsible for producing meaning and significance, being an active part in the process of comprehension of the literary work as a whole<sup>5</sup>. Regarding the study of Antiquity, this theory was first applied by Charles Martindale, for whom it was imperative to understand Classical Studies in the light of Reception Theory<sup>6</sup>. After him, many authors addressed this vital issue, ascertaining the importance of numerous myths, texts, artistic manifestations, and historical events of Antiquity had over the centuries in different political, cultural and social moments<sup>7</sup>. The events of the past were able to produce meaning in the present, conveying messages carried with socio-political significance<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Address all correspondence to: [helenatrindadelopes@hotmail.com](mailto:helenatrindadelopes@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor of the History Department of University NOVA FCSH, Vice Director of CHAM. Address all correspondence to: [isalmeida@fcs.unl.pt](mailto:isalmeida@fcs.unl.pt)

<sup>3</sup> Invited Professor of the History Department of University NOVA FCSH. Address all correspondence to: [frosa@fcs.unl.pt](mailto:frosa@fcs.unl.pt)

<sup>4</sup> Vd. the seminal work *Toward an aesthetic of reception* (1978).

<sup>5</sup> About Reception Theory, vd. Thompson 1993: 248-272.

<sup>6</sup> Martindale 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Vd., for instance, Hardwick 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed exposure on Reception of Antiquity, vd. Lopes, Almeida, and Rosa, 2020.

Little by little, Reception of Antiquity became an integrant part of Literary and Historical studies in some universities. However, it is, even to this day, practically applied to ancient Greece and Rome. The fact is not surprising. Contrary to what happened with the civilisations and cultures that preceded the Greco-Roman world, especially Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Classic cities and empires, their myths and their narratives, never completely disappeared. The monuments and the ancient texts were preserved, copied, and studied over the succeeding centuries, and their cities, for the most part, remained visible to the interested visitor. Thus, the rich legacy of ancient Greece and Rome was always the subject of a reception which we might call *direct*. On the contrary, over time, Egypt and Mesopotamia succumbed to dust and shadow, their languages became unknown, their writings were forgotten; most of their buildings were buried. Until the archaeological discovery of these civilisations, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, their reception was always, in fact, a reception of a reception – that is, a legacy received not in first-hand but by a third party.

Therefore, Reception Studies of Near Eastern antiquity are relatively recent and are gradually developing. In this chapter, we thus present a review on the subject, highlighting the ancient Oriental cultures, often relegated to the background, and how their heritage was perceived over time, from Antiquity itself, through the classical authors' accounts and the Old Testament, until the advent of Archaeology, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With this analysis, we hope to contribute to its understanding and to alert to its importance.

### **Classics fascination with the ancient Near East**

The ancient Near East and its civilisations have always fascinated the mind of the so-called West, something we can observe, for instance, in the early interest of historians, philosophers and geographers. Egypt and Mesopotamia, among other civilisations and cultures, started being studied shortly after their demise and are still today the target of research and the subject of reception in various academic and non-academic vehicles. The first travellers' accounts on Pharaonic Egypt, for instance, came to us through the Greeks. Naturally, this did not happen by chance. During the Late Period (664 BC – c. 332 BC), several Greek colonies settled in Egypt<sup>9</sup>, being protected by the Egyptian kings. During the 26<sup>th</sup> dynasty (664 – 525 B.C.), for example, pharaohs recruited mostly Greek mercenaries<sup>10</sup> for their armies. And many traders settled in Naucratis, in the Delta region, or near military garrisons, as Elephantine. In this scenario of privileged contacts between the Egyptian and the Greek worlds, Herodotus<sup>11</sup>, the “traveller” *par excellence* of this period, settled in Egypt between 450 BC and 440 BC<sup>12</sup>. But before he did so and as a preparation for his journey, he read everything the Greeks had previously written about the land of the pharaohs. Among them were the descriptions of Egypt contained in *Iliad* (chant IX) and *Odyssey* (chant IV) by Homer (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), and the references to this ancient country in two tragedies by Aeschylus (525 – 456 BC), namely *Prometheus* (in which Io takes refuge in Egypt to escape the hero) and *Suppliants* (in which the daughters of Danae flee from Egypt and from the matrimonial rites to which they would have to submit and seek refuge in Greece). Thus, after ten years of intense journeys and careful observation, Herodotus recounted in his *opus Histories* (book II and part of book III) the conclusions of his research expedition.

The most relevant information in his account concerns daily life, religion and, above all, the country itself, its geography, which Herodotus was able to “read” and narrate in an exemplary way. Information about popular religious festivals<sup>13</sup>, about the cult of animals and the “rational repetition” of the laws of nature, were Herodotus' most remarkable contributions to the knowledge of the ancient pharaohs' civilisation. Nonetheless, Herodotus did not limit himself to exploring ancient Egypt, focusing on the cultural potential of the Nilotic country. The historian from Halicarnassus went further on, likewise describing in great detail the contemporary civilisation of Mesopotamia. *Histories* also include an exhaustive account of one of the most important capitals of the land between the Euphrates and the Tiger rivers: Babylon<sup>14</sup>. About this sumptuous city, the historian's account narrates its architecture and its foundation, thoroughly characterising its *national*

---

<sup>9</sup> Agut-Labordère 2012: 293 – 306.

<sup>10</sup> Lopes 2018: 69.

<sup>11</sup> Coulon, Giovannelli-Jouanna, Kimmel-Clauzet 2013.

<sup>12</sup> This dating is relative, given that we do not have precise information about it.

<sup>13</sup> Coulon 2013: 167-190.

<sup>14</sup> Montero Fenollós 2012: 63-64.

god and its strange rites. Herodotus' was the first classical account of ancient Babylon, although he may have never been there.

But the classical accounts on the cultures of the Near East do not end here. A few years later, Plato<sup>15</sup> (428 – 347 BC), for whom Egypt was eventually a place for experimenting with his conceptions, bequeathed to us the image of a country of mythical wisdom, where a group of superior individuals – the priests – transmitted, over the centuries, a science and knowledge that granted stability to the country and that was capable of defying time. Plato's was followed by other accounts, namely the long work organised by Diodorus Siculus<sup>16</sup>, a contemporary of Julius Caesar, who must have visited Egypt between 60 and 56 B.C. In his *Bibliotheca Historica*, this author presents a chronology of Egypt in which Osiris, the mythical king-god of this civilisation, is the first to be mentioned. Diodorus describes Egypt very well both from the geographical and from the naturalist points of view. A few years later, Strabo (25-19 BC), a Roman citizen with a Greek mother (he ended up writing in Greek), travelled through Egypt when the country was already a province of the Roman Empire. He voyaged in the best conditions, thanks to his friend, governor Aelius Gallus, and narrated his trip in the work entitled *Geography*. Strabo was also particularly sensitive to the theme of festivals and the cult of animals, of which he gives precise details.

Both Diodorus Siculus and Strabo mention Mesopotamia as well on their works. But whereas Strabo only refers to the land between the rivers in passing, Diodorus' account of the kings and queens of ancient Mesopotamia is one of the richest ever produced, having inspired many tragedies and literary novels over time. The author was inspired by *Persica*, the lost work of Ctesias the Cnidian, a Greek historian from the time of Persian Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II. During the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., he served in this ruler's court as a physician and composed a detailed account on the ancient cultures of Persia, Assyria and Babylonia, amongst others<sup>17</sup>. Diodorus thus collected the historical details of his predecessor, presenting a detailed version of the history of Babylonia and Assyria. Although the author managed to capture very well the aura of magnificence and authority of their ancient capitals, such as Nineveh and Babylon, the truth is that his account has little historical accuracy. It focuses on mythical and legendary figures, such as King Ninus and his consort Semiramis, "the most renowned of all women of whom we have any record"<sup>18</sup>, or the perfidious Assyrian monarch Sardanapalus. None of these sovereigns has existed, as they are composite figures based on ancient episodes and rulers. Notwithstanding, they convey a clear idea of what Greek and Roman authors thought about their Eastern predecessors. Many centuries later, this vital account inspired authors as significant as

---

<sup>15</sup> McEvoy 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Haziza 2012, and Chamoux 1995: 37-50.

<sup>17</sup> Montero Fenollós 2012: 64, Asher-Greve 2004: 8-9, and Nichols 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Diod. Sic. 2.4.

Voltaire<sup>19</sup> or Lord Byron<sup>20</sup>, who left an indelible mark on the history of the reception of ancient Mesopotamia.

Concerning the classical accounts on the ancient cultures of the Near East, we must also mention that during the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Christian era, Plutarch (46-125 AD), who was Apollo's priest in Delphi, travelled through Egypt, and wrote his memoirs. Among other contributions, he described the myth of Osiris, a founding myth of the Egyptian civilisation, which is narrated in the work *De Iside et Osiride*<sup>21</sup>. Meanwhile, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Christianity became predominant within the Roman empire of Byzantium, and, in 391, emperor Theodosius I decreed the closure of all non-Christian temples of the empire. As a result of this decree, the knowledge of hieroglyphic writing, which was taught by priests in Egyptian temples, was lost. Hence, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., there was no one left who could read or understand the texts of ancient Egypt anymore. Pharaonic Egypt was thus condemned to a "death" of several centuries.

A similar process occurred regarding the ancient writing system and languages spoken during millennia in ancient Mesopotamia. Throughout the Neo-Assyrian empire (10<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.), Akkadian was gradually replaced by Aramaic as a spoken language. The cuneiform script, which served as a support to this Mesopotamian language, was consequently replaced by the Aramaic alphabet, being this process boosted by the imposition of Aramaic as the official and functional language of the state administration, after Cyrus' Babylon takeover in c. 539 BC<sup>22</sup>. Thus, even though there was no prohibition on the teaching of this ancient script, as it occurred regarding hieroglyphic writing, the truth is that the syllabic cuneiform writing system used in ancient Mesopotamia lost its strength and, with the demise of ancient Mesopotamian powers, ended up falling into oblivion<sup>23</sup>. Hieroglyphic and Cuneiform would only be deciphered centuries later, bringing to the light of day the history (told in the *first person*) of these ancient civilisations...

---

<sup>19</sup> Vd. the *opus Sémiramis*, a tragedy composed by Voltaire and published in 1749.

<sup>20</sup> Vd. the Lord Byron's play entitled *Sardanapalus*, composed in 1821.

<sup>21</sup> Sauneron 1951: 49-51.

<sup>22</sup> About cuneiform writing, vd. Finkel and Taylor 2015: especially 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> We must, however, draw a distinction between the different systems of cuneiform writing. As we know, Old Persian was in use during the time of the Achaemenid kings, such as Darius I, who used it profusely in Persepolis or Behistun. Cuneiform would only disappear completely during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Over time, it would fall into disuse and became an illegible script until the efforts of deciphering carried out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. About this subject, vd. Larsen 1996: 177-188 and Fagan 2007: 79-93.

## **The expeditions to the east and the legacy of the past**

The accounts and descriptions which we have after this period, and up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, are by no means comparable to those written by the ancient Greeks and Romans. With the Muslim conquest in 642 and until the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt was virtually a forgotten and unknown land to Europeans. Regarding Mesopotamia, and above all its last significant capital, Babylon, the foundation of the city of Seleucia by Seleucus I Nicator, c. 300 BC, and the transfer of power from the old Mesopotamian site to this new city, conceived as a symbol of the newly found Greco-Macedonian power (in opposition the ancient Babylonian eastern aura) led to the former's obliterating<sup>24</sup>. Centuries later, with the construction and establishment of Baghdad by the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, in 762, with its election as a new capital, its flourishing and the importance it acquired, the ancient capital of Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar II submerged, being henceforth mistaken for the modern Muslim city.

During this period, it was mainly through the Bible that more or less legendary episodes about Egypt or Mesopotamia reached us. From Egypt, Europeans recalled the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews pursued by the pharaoh's army; Joseph sold by his brothers; Joseph at the Pharaoh's court; Moses being saved from the waters of the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh, and many others. All these legends served to keep the memory of Egypt alive in the Middle Ages and later, during the Renaissance. Meanwhile, the discovery, in 1422, of a small brochure, the *Hieroglyphica* by Horapollon de Nilopolis, a work probably dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., which offers a symbolic meaning for the interpretation of some hieroglyphic characters, stimulated a whole series of new attempts at understanding of this ancient writing system during the following centuries<sup>25</sup>, reviving the interest in Egyptian hieroglyphics, its pyramids, mummies and antiquities, which became one of the greatest attractions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The first European traveller to the Levant region, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was Parisian Jean de Thévenot, who wrote his voyage account in the work entitled *Voyage en Levant*<sup>26</sup>, printed in 1664. He crossed Syria and Persia and, in 1652, stopped in Egypt. He visited the Delta area/region, Cairo and Giza. Meanwhile, the appetite for Egyptian artefacts increased, and the first "thieves" of antiquities appeared, some of them at the service of European kings. Among these, we must highlight the Consul General of France in Egypt during the reign of Louis XIV, Benoit de Maillet, who, in addition to sending a set of looted antiquities to his king, published, in 1735, a great work where he intended to describe Egypt as a whole: *Description de l'Égypte, contenant plusieurs remarques curieuses sur la Géographie ancienne et moderne de ce pays, sur ses Monuments anciens, sur les Mœurs, les*

---

<sup>24</sup> Montero Fenollós 2012: 257.

<sup>25</sup> Wildish 2018.

<sup>26</sup> De Thévenot 1976.

*Costumes, la Religion des habitants, sur le Gouvernement et le Commerce, sur les Animaux, les Arbres, les Plants, etc.*

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Superior of the French Jesuit Mission in Cairo, Claude Sicard (1677 – 1726), an excellent Latinist and Hellenist, who spoke and wrote Arabic correctly, travelled throughout the Egyptian territory, reaching Aswan and Philae. His voyage was initially intended to describe the Exodus itinerary and the crossing of the Red Sea, but in time, with the discovery of Egyptian monuments, it ended up becoming a demand on the geography of ancient Egypt. In the aftermath of this travel, the first map of Egypt, from the Mediterranean shores to Aswan was elaborated, designed by Sicard himself, who promptly sent it to the king. In his account entitled *Parallèle géographique de l'ancienne Égypte et de l'Égypte moderne*, Sicard described 20 pyramids, 24 temple precincts and more than 50 tombs. It accurately situated Memphis and Thebes and the most remarkable temples of Egypt, namely Elephantine, Edfu, Kom Ombo, Esna, Dendera.

At the same time, these travellers crossed the East and Egypt; the first attempts to decipher hieroglyphic writing also occurred<sup>27</sup>. These efforts began with Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher (1602 – 1680), followed by scholars such as Englishman J. Wilkins (1614 – 1672), English bishop William Warbuton (1698 – 1779), French orientalist Charles Joseph de Guignes (1721 – 1800), German theologian and orientalist Paul-Ernst Jablonsky (1693 – 1757), German geographer Carsten Niebuhr (1733 – 1815) and Danish scholar Jorgen Zoega (1755 – 1809). But the first significant successes came from Frenchman J. J. Barthélemy (1716 – 1795), and, after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, from the French orientalist Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758 – 1838), from the Swedish diplomat Johan David Akerblad (1763 – 1819) and the English physicist Thomas Young (1773 – 1829). They were the precursors of renowned Champollion.

However, an aspect was truly decisive and vital for the birth of Egyptology – the French expedition to Egypt. When, on July 1, 1798, Napoleon disembarked with his troops in Alexandria, accompanied by 167 “learned men”<sup>28</sup>, headed by Baron Dominique Vivant Denon, painter, engraver and writer, and by Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier, the great animator of the scientific expedition, founder of the Cairo Library and author of the historical preface to the work *Description de l'Égypte*, the old dream of Alexander the Great came, once again, to light. This commission of French wise men (naturalists, historians, botanists, cartographers, “antiquarians”, engineers, geologists, astronomers, technicians, artists, etc.), designated as “Commission des Sciences et des Arts” of the expedition to Egypt, aimed to provide a detailed description of the country and its monuments. This task was completed in a short period of two years, despite the enormous difficulties faced. Members included, among others, the mathematician and physicist Gaspard Monge, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Farout 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Vd. Solé 2006 and 2001.

chemist Claude Louis Berthollet (together, the two ran the Institute of Egypt), the zoologist Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire, the doctor Desgenettes, the botanist Alire Raffeneau-Delile, the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, engineer Michel-Ange Lancret, the geographer Costas, the surgeon Larrey, the mineralogist Déodat de Dolomie, the architect Charles Louis Balzac, the orientalist Jaubert, the painter André Dutertre, the designer Redouté or the polyvalent genius, engineer Nicolas Conté, who invented the charcoal pencil.

During the campaigns, an officer of Napoleon, Lieutenant Pierre-François Bouchard found in Rosetta, in the year 1799, a block of black granodiorite, which was named the “Rosetta Stone”. This block had the same text written in demotic Egyptian, in Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Due to the Capitulation Treaty, signed in 1801, it was eventually given to the British authorities (and to *The British Museum*), although several copies were distributed to scientists across Europe so they could study it and try to decipher hieroglyphic writing. Among these European scholars was Jean-François Champollion<sup>29</sup> (1790 – 1832), who, in 1822, was responsible for the birth of Egyptology with the *Lettre à M. Dacier relative à l’Alphabet des hiéroglyphes phonétiques employé par les Egyptiens pour inscrire sur les monuments les titres, nom set surnoms des souverains grecs et romains*, where he finally presented the deciphering of hieroglyphic writing. Only two years later, Champollion presented a complete summary of his findings on the hieroglyphic writing system in his *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens Egyptiens*.

In the meantime, the results of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt were published in Paris, between 1809 and 1822, under the title *Description de l’Egypte - recueil des Observations et des Recherches qui ont été faites en Egypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, publié par les ordres de S.M. L’Empereur Napoléon*. In total, the work had 9 volumes of text and 11 of illustrations in large format. This major scholarly effort, with its drawings and descriptions, must be considered the basis of Egyptology.

We should ask now, and what about Mesopotamia? As it is often the case with ancient civilisations, we may say that the process of its physical and linguistic discovery was similar to that of Egypt. If it is true that the deciphering of hieroglyphic writing resulted from the finding of the Rosetta Stone, it is also true that the understanding of cuneiform writing was due to the discovery of the so-called Behistun rock. But before this vital moment for the establishment of Assyriology occurred, a whole lot of recognition travels was undertaken. It all started during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Danish and English travellers, many of them simple curious, other missionaries or diplomats whose aim was to carry out missions on the ground, in the Near East. The travellers<sup>30</sup> thus

---

<sup>29</sup> Solé 2012.

<sup>30</sup> About this subject, vd. Invernizzi 2005.

comprised a group of different men<sup>31</sup> who, in the course of their service, explored the antiquities of the past and reported them in writing.

Flooded with images from huge and sumptuous cities, where gold shone, and the impossible was possible, from powerful kings and despotic queens, travellers went in search of the romanticism of Antiquity. But above the dream of grandness bequeathed by the classics, was the *categorical* account of the Old Testament. Travellers looked for tangible vestiges of the biblical word *in situ* and observed at the landscape trying to identify the place where the Lions' Den of prophet Daniel was located, the dwellings of Samson, the palace of the perfidious Nebuchadnezzar II and, of course, the mythical tower of Babel. One of the first to describe it was German botanist Leonard Rauwolff, who travelled to the Tigris and the Euphrates during 1574. He wrote an account named *Aigentliche Beschreibung der Raiß inn die Morgenländerin*, published in 1582, where he recognised the importance of ancient Mesopotamian ruins, and described his walks on the Nebi Yunus mound in Nineveh, and around what he identified as the Tower of Babel, «which the children of Noah began to build up to heaven»<sup>32</sup>. Like so many others before<sup>33</sup> and after him, the author mistook the tower for another monument, in the case the ruins of the ancient ziggurat of Aqarquf.

A similar error was usually made regarding the location of the ancient city of Babylon. During Modern age, Baghdad's sumptuousness, importance and cosmopolitanism led to its common identification with ancient Babylon. John Eldred, for instance, an English merchant who travelled from Aleppo to Bagdad, during 1583, spoke about the «New Babylon», stating that many old ruins were still visible on site<sup>34</sup>. Like Portuguese soldier Nicolau de Orta Rebelo<sup>35</sup>, who, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, described in great detail the tower of Babel (which was actually Aqarquf) – and whose description is one of the first to detail the Mesopotamian architectural apparatus<sup>36</sup> – Eldred also made thorough comments on the sun-dried bricks used in the construction he observed (also Aqarquf) and its layers of matting.

---

<sup>31</sup> Curiously, the first known traveller in the Near East to write his memoirs was actually a woman – the Galician nun Egeria, who, during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, looked for traces of some biblical patriarchs in Palestine (Montero Fenollós 2011: 31-32 and Carreira 1980: 38).

<sup>32</sup> Fagan 2007: 26.

<sup>33</sup> We must also mention the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela from Saragossa, who identified it as the ruins of Birs Nimrud during the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>34</sup> His account (*The voyage of M. John Eldred to Tripolis in Syria by sea, and from thence by land and river to Babylon, and Balsara, Anno 1583*) is reproduced in English writer Richard Hakluyt's book entitled *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, from 1589.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolau de Orta Rebelo's account was only printed in 1972 by Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão. It is entitled *Un Voyageur portugais en Perse au début du XVIIe siècle*.

<sup>36</sup> Carreira 1985.

Years later, two European travellers presented their visions on the ancient ruins of Mesopotamia. The essential accounts of Italian nobleman Pietro della Valle and Spanish ambassador of Felipe II to the Shah of Persia, García de Silva y Figueroa<sup>37</sup>, are among the most comprehensive and meticulous, due to their descriptions of the ancient monuments, the land's geography, and also of the ancient writing. Valle<sup>38</sup>, who voyaged through the ancient Near East from 1614 to 1626, copied various cuneiform inscriptions from Nineveh bricks and Persepolis monumental inscriptions. He was the first to bring back to Europe a collection of antiquities, among which figured «square bricks inscribed with an unknown script»<sup>39</sup> which aroused great interest.

The legacy of these 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> travellers, which contained the first impressions and experiences *in situ*, was followed, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by true government expeditions of recognition and search for treasures. Therefore, having in mind his fame as a supporter of the arts and science, King Frederick V of Denmark sponsored one of the first team voyages to the East, from 1761 to 1767. The group was composed of five members, which had the mission of observing and describing their findings as well as of collecting «valuable oriental manuscripts»<sup>40</sup>. The mission claimed the lives of many of them. Carsten Niehbur, a German-born in 1733, not only survived as he spent many months copying inscriptions in Persepolis and Behistun after he had visited Egypt and Arabia<sup>41</sup>. His contribute entitled *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und den umliegenden Ländern* (1774 – 1778) was fundamental for the later decipherment of Cuneiform. In fact, the Behistun rock, dated to the reign of the Achaemenid king Darius I (c. 550 – 486 BC), contains the same monumental inscription in three different languages (Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian Babylonian) all using a cuneiform script. Future studies would thus be based on his first conclusions.

Besides the expeditions, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, driven by the success of the previous Napoleon Bonaparte's excursion, the governments and museums sought to explore the *virgin* soil of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine. Thus, while appointed as a British resident in Bagdad (1908) to defend the East India Company's interests, diplomat Claudius Rich spent much time collecting manuscripts, coins and different antiquities, from different historical periods. His collection would later form the nucleus of Mesopotamian antiquities of *The British Museum*. He also produced the first systematic map of Babylon, which he visited in 1811, and even an accurate map of the mounds of

---

<sup>37</sup> About this traveller, vd. Códoba 2005 and Caramelo 2011. Figueroa travelled through these regions from 1614 to 1624.

<sup>38</sup> Vd. Invernizzi 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Fagan 2007: 31.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*: 34.

<sup>41</sup> Caramelo 2007: 286.

Nineveh<sup>42</sup>, whose measurements he laid out in 1820<sup>43</sup>. The results of his research time in the East were published in different *Memoirs* over the years<sup>44</sup>.

Meanwhile, several advances were being made in deciphering cuneiform writing. The story of this process, which culminated in 1857, the year the deciphering was officially declared and the foundation of a new scientific discipline – Assyriology – occurred, was quite long and arduous. Several scholars contributed to it. It all started in 1611, with the publication of *Relaçam em que se tratam as Guerras e grandes victorias que alcançou o grãde Rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Turco Mahometo...*, the voyage account of Portuguese diplomat António de Gouveia. Years before Valle or Figueroa, he was the first European to mention and identify<sup>45</sup> a strangely shaped form of a script used in the walls that decorated Persepolis. After that, many would look into Cuneiform attempting to study it, but the real results would only come after the transcription of Behistun inscription.

Several names must be cited as involved in this long process of understanding, as the German philologist George Grotefend, the French-German scholar Julius Oppert, the English photographer William Henry Talbot, and the Irish clergy Edward Hincks<sup>46</sup>. They all had a significant impact on the decipherment of Cuneiform. But the name which will forever remain connected with this genius achievement is that of an Englishman previously at the service of the Eastern India Company, Henry Rawlinson. Based on the writings of the Behistun inscription, after arriving at a decent translation of the Old Persian text and, recognising that, unlike this, the inscription in Akkadian was syllabic, Rawlinson went on to decipher it has achieved promising results. In the year of 1857, both Rawlinson, Hincks, Talbot and Oppert have proposed a challenge by the Royal Asiatic Society – to translate a piece of an inscription by Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I. Having accepted it, they all arrived at similar translations. Then and there, Cuneiform was declared deciphered.

---

<sup>42</sup> Larsen 1996: 9.

<sup>43</sup> The first actual map of Nineveh was produced by Carsten Niehbur, although the information was scarce.

<sup>44</sup> In 1813, was released a *Memoir on the Ruins of Babylon* in the Viennese journal *Fundgraben des Orients*; in 1818 appeared a *Second Memoir on Babylon*; after his death, in 1836, was released the *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan, and on the site of Ancient Nineveh*.

<sup>45</sup> Carreira 1980: 98.

<sup>46</sup> Caramelo 2007: 288.

In time, the first excavations on the ground would follow, and the era of Archaeology would begin. The history of the reception of Near Eastern antiquity is long, slow and full of exquisite episodes. This chapter presents some contributions to the study of this reception, which include, in addition to Egypt, the reception of the Palestine region, and Classical mythology. As we know, modern and contemporary art and literature were deeply inspired by all these accounts and discoveries. Classical and Near Eastern Antiquity thus served as a vehicle for numerous iconographic and poetic creations and contributions. A brief glimpse of these contributions is presented henceforth by the hand of several authors, from different academic spheres.

## References

- Agut-Labordère, D. 2012. “Plus que des mercenaires! L’intégration des hommes de guerre grecs au service de la monarchie saïte”. *Pallas* 89: 293-306.
- Asher-Greve, J. M. 2004. “From ‘Semiramis of Babylon’ to ‘Semiramis of Hammersmith’ in *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, ed. S. W. Holloway, 322-373. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.
- Caramelo, F. 2011. “Visões da antiguidade nos *Comentarios* de Don García de Silva y Figueroa”, in *Estudos sobre Don García de Silva y Figueroa e os «Comentarios» da embaixada à Pérsia (1614-1624)*, vol. 4, coords. Rui Manuel Loureiro and Vasco Resende (coord.), 345-366. Lisboa: CHAM.
- Carreira, J. N. 1980. *Do Preste João às ruínas da Babilónia: viajantes portuguesas na rota das civilizações orientais*. Lisboa: Editorial Comunicação.
1985. “Nicolau de Orta Rebelo na senda das civilizações pré-clássicas (1606-1607)”. *Arquipélago. História e Filosofia*, 7 (1): 83-101.
- Chamoux, F. 1995. “L’Égypte d’après Diodore de Sicile” in *Entre Égypte et Grèce. Actes du 5ème colloque de la Villa Kérylos à Beaulieu-sur-Mer du 6 au 9 octobre 1994*, 37-50. Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres.
- Córdoba, J. 2005. “Un caballero español en Isfahan. La embajada de Don García de Silvia y Figueroa al sha Abbás el Grande (1614-1624)”. *Arbor* CLXXX: 645-669.
- Coulon, L. 2013. “Osiris chez Hérodote” in *Hérodote et l’Égypte. regards croisés sur le livre ii de l’enquête d’hérodote. Actes de la journée d’étude organisée à la Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon, le 10 mai 2010*, eds. L. Coulon, P. Giovannelli-Jouanna, F. Kimmel-Clauzet, 167-190. Lyon: Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée – Jean Pouilloux.
- Coulon, L., Giovannelli-Jouanna, P., and Kimmel-Clauzet, F. eds. 2013. *Hérodote et l’Égypte. regards croisés sur le livre ii de l’enquête d’hérodote. Actes de la journée d’étude organisée à la Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon, le 10 mai 2010*. Lyon: Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée – Jean Pouilloux.
- De Thévenot, J. 1976. *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant dans laquelle il est curieusement traité des estats sujets au Grand Seigneur et des singularitez particulières de l’Archipel, Constantinople, Terre-Sainte, Égypte, pyramides, mumies [sic], déserts d’Arabie, la Meque, et de plusieurs autres lieux de l’Asie et de l’Affrique outre les choses mémorables arrivées au dernier siège de Bagdat, les cérémonies faites aux réceptions des ambassadeurs du Mogol et l’entretien de l’auteur avec celui du Pretejan, où il est parlé des sources du Nil (1664)*. (Réédition). Paris: Hachette.

- Diodorus Siculus, 1993. *Library of History (Loeb Classical Library)*. Volume I, Books 1-2.34. Harvard, Harvard University Press.
- Fagan, B. M. 2007. *Return to Babylon. Travelers, Archaeologists, and Monuments in Mesopotamia*, Boulder – Colorado: University Press of Colorado.
- Farout, D. 2016. “De la Renaissance à la Restauration: quelques étapes du déchiffrement des hiéroglyphes”. *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre* 9: <http://journals.openedition.org/cel/433> (accessed on September 10, 2020).
- Finkel, I. and Taylor, J. 2015. *Cuneiform*. London: The British Museum.
- Haziza. T. 2012. “De l'Égypte d'Hérodote à celle de Diodore: étude comparée des règnes des trois bâtisseurs des pyramides du plateau de Gîza”. *Kentron* 28: <http://journals.openedition.org/kentron/1093> (accessed on September 10, 2020).
- Hardwick L. 2003. “Reception studies” in *Greece and Rome: New Surveys in the Classics* 33. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Invernizzi. A. ed. 2005. *Il Genio Vagante. Viaggiatori alla scoperta dell'Antico Oriente*. Alessandria.
2010. “Pietro della Valle Collezionista in Oriente”, in *Il fascino dell'Oriente nelle collezioni e nei musei d'Italia*, ed. B. Palma Venetucci, 53-58. Roma: Ed. Artemide.
- Larsen, M. T. 1996. *The conquest of Assyria. Excavations in an antique land 1840-1860*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lopes, M. H. T. 2018. “O palácio de Apriés, Mênfis/Kôm Tumân” – um projecto pioneiro, português, no Egípto” in *Língua e Linguagem no Mundo Antigo*, org. Anderson Zalewsky Vargas; Kátia Pozzer and Luis Carlos dos P. Martins. Porto Alegre: Ed. Fi.
- Lopes, M. H. T., Almeida, I. G., and Rosa, M. F. 2020. “Introductory Chapter: The Importance of Reception Studies for Ancient History”, in *Antiquity and Its Reception - Modern Expressions of the Past*, eds. Helena Trindade Lopes, Isabel Gomes de Almeida and Maria de Fátima Rosa. IntechOpen.
- McEvoy, J. 1993. “Platon et la sagesse de l'Égypte”. *Kernos* 6: <http://journals.openedition.org/kernos/550> (accessed on September 10, 2020).
- Strabon. 2015. *Géographie: Tome 14 Livre XVII, 1re partie: l'Egypte et l'Ethiopie nilotique: (L'Égypte et L'Éthiopie nilotique)*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Martindale C. 1993. *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Montero Fenollós, J. L. 2011. "The tower of Babel before Archaeology. The ziggurat of Babylon according to European travelers (XII-XVII centuries)". *Res Antiquitatis* 2: 31-49.

2012. *Breve Historia de Babilonia*. Madrid: Nowtilus.

Nichols, A. 2008. *The complete fragments of Ctesias of Cnidus. Translation and commentary with an introduction*. PhD dissertation presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida.

Sauneron, S. 1951. "Plutarque: Isis et Osiris (chap. IX)" in *BIFAO* 51: 49-51.

Serrão, J. V. 1972. *Un voyageur portugais en Perse au début du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.

Solé, R. 2001. *Les savants de Bonaparte*. Paris: Points.

2006. *Bonaparte à la conquête de l'Égypte*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

2012. *Champollion*. Paris: Perrin.

Thompson M. P. 1993. "Reception theory and the interpretation of historical meaning". *History and Theory* 32(3): 248-272.

Wildish, M. 2018. *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo Nilous Hieroglyphic Semantics in Late Antiquity*. New York: Routledge.