

## Learning from the Past? On the Societal Impact of Studying Ancient Cultures

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## **Learning from the Past? On the Societal Impact of Studying Ancient Cultures**

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**In a world facing mighty challenges with global impact, determining the societal function of the Humanities – in German, “Geisteswissenschaften” – and outlining their potential for future development is of particular importance. This is particularly true for disciplines focusing on ancient cultures, such as Assyriology, Egyptology, or Byzantine Studies. In fact, it may be argued that the long-term survival of the individual academic disciplines conventionally subsumed under the heading ‘Ancient Studies’ – in German, “Altertumswissenschaften” – will largely depend on their ability to emerge successfully from this process of reflection and reorientation. The present paper argues that the societal impact of studying ancient cultures – i. e., ‘learning from the past’ for the benefit of the contemporary world – may and must take place on four different levels, all of which form an integral part of any research endeavor undertaken in the Humanities.**

Key words: Humanities, Ancient Studies, Assyriology, methodology, epistemology, interdisciplinarity, museums, internet

### **1. Introduction**

Why do I need to know how little children were taught to write 4.000 years ago [e. g., 7]?<sup>1</sup> As a professor of Assyriology at Heidelberg University, one of my more challenging obligations is to answer this and similar questions. Their particular challenge lies in the fact that they are not only asked by students and other genuinely interested people alone, but also by university administrators and politicians. In the latter case, such questions frequently take on the characteristics of an exam, the failing of which may very well seal the doom of the academic discipline in question. Even though we insiders tend to think otherwise, justifying the existence of highly specialized research segments in the Humanities, such as Assyriology, Egyptology, Comparative Semitics, Byzantine Studies, Papyrology, or Near Eastern Archaeology is as much a legitimate request as it is a necessary task [1].

Going even one step further, I would suggest that in a world facing mighty challenges with global impact, determining the surplus value and societal function of what is often and rather clumsily termed ‘Ancient Studies’ (in German, “Altertumswissenschaften”) and outlining their potential for future development is of particular urgency. During a time when the equal distribution of the world’s limited resources, the global climate change, the regulation of the

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is in part based on research carried out by the author in the framework of the Collaborative Research Center 933 “*Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies*” of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft at Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg.

financial markets, new forms of political participation through social networks, and shifting asymmetries in international power politics raise highly complex questions to be answered only through a significant increase in human knowledge, leading researchers in Ancient Studies – as well as in the Humanities in general – have to reflect upon what their specific contribution to this knowledge increase might be. In fact, it may be argued that the long-term survival of the individual academic disciplines usually summarized under this heading will largely depend on their ability to emerge successfully from this process of reflection and re-orientation, strengthened by the awareness that their unique expertise is urgently needed by the societies sustaining them. This is particularly true for those disciplines studying ancient societies characterized by a marked longevity and cultural homogeneity, such as Assyriology [6], Egyptology, or Ancient Chinese Studies, to name only a few.

In the following, I will try to demonstrate that the societal impact of studying ancient cultures – i. e., ‘learning from the past’ for the benefit of the contemporary world – may and should be realized on four different levels, all of which form an integral part of any research endeavor undertaken in the Humanities:

1. Subject – *what* is studied and *what* results are generated;
2. Methodology – *how* the subject is approached;
3. Representation – *how* subject, methodology, and results are presented;
4. Material Foundation – *how* the artifacts studied are conceptualized and treated.

## 2. Studying the Past?

Before we turn to several promising research subjects in Ancient Studies, however, we should be very clear and honest about what we are doing and, more importantly, not doing when we ‘study the past’, even though this may appear to be commonplace:

1. *We never study the past.* The past in its sheer infinite massiveness built of myriads of successive moments of complexity is irretrievably gone and cannot be analyzed or even viewed.
2. Instead, what we actually do is *thinking of questions and addressing them to material remains of past societies as we interpret them today.*
3. These *material remains are selected by us* according to criteria that we may or may not be aware of.
4. Even if we were able to analyze all the material evidence at present available for any given ancient society, it is still a *random selection, created by many voluntary or involuntary acts of destruction, conservation, and/or discovery in the past.*
5. In many cases, research is not carried out on the actual material remains of ancient societies, but on their *representations* in the form of images, drawings, transcriptions, models, reconstructions, etc., i. e. *present-day interpretations of original artifacts represented by means of specific cultural forms* [e. g., 10].

Thus, we can summarize that what is usually called ‘studying the past’ is an *activity entirely in the present*, on all levels based on intricate mental constructions on the part of present-day

researchers, and sometimes involving material objects available at present and declared as 'evidence' or 'source' of the 'past' through utilizing them in Ancient Studies.

In other words, *'studying ancient societies' is by definition a process entirely suffused with the present*, its political debates, theoretical discourses, social conditions, cultural conventions, and epistemological premises. Thus, *how* we study ancient societies and *what* subjects we choose *will invariably change the present*, its discourses, conditions, conventions, and premises. As exponents of the field of Ancient Studies, we must recognize this permanent societal impact of our work and render it as 'beneficial' as possible for the contemporary world.

### 3. Research Subjects

As suggested above, the potential of research in Ancient Studies for a lasting and positive societal impact may be realized when particular attention is paid to the disposition of four different areas or levels of epistemic activity that are closely interconnected: 1. Subject – what is studied and what results are generated; 2. Methodology – how the subject is approached. 3. Representation – how subject, methodology, and results are presented. 4. Material Foundation – how the artifacts studied are conceptualized and treated. The following is a rough outline of what I have in mind for each of these four epistemological topics limiting myself to a minimum of the nonetheless indispensable theoretical groundwork and pertinent examples from current research in Ancient Studies.

First, we should address the "What?", i. e., the question which kinds of subjects and results may possess the biggest potential for societal impact in the contemporary world and may therefore demonstrate the surplus value of Ancient Studies for the societies sustaining them. Of course, the freedom of research, the most precious good in the human quest for knowledge, is not touched by these considerations that are merely intended to underline the heightened social, cultural, and political significance of certain topics and approaches in Ancient Studies. However, in my opinion and based on my experience in the conceptualization and organization of multidisciplinary research networks in the Humanities, I am convinced that 'learning from the past' through research on ancient cultures is rendered most effective when the subjects and results of this research meet the following criteria:

- a) Research subjects sufficiently complex to allow for results that demonstrate how intricate social, cultural, environmental, or political challenges were identified and dealt with in past societies.
- b) Research subjects the results of which point to alternatives in the ways contemporary societies are handling such complex social, cultural, environmental, or political challenges.
- c) Research subjects involving in-depth analysis of artifacts and artifact arrangements originally created by members of past societies.
- d) Research subjects that require an innovative theoretical framework or contribute to the ongoing theoretical discourse in disciplines focusing on contemporary societies, such as social and political sciences, anthropology, cultural theory, economy, epistemology etc.

Examples for research in the field of Ancient Studies striving to meet the criteria just outlined above, as do examples utterly failing to demonstrate the potential societal impact and surplus value of investigating the past. Citing from my own field of expertise – i. e., the languages and cultures of Ancient Mesopotamia – and limiting myself to research endeavors that I am responsible for, I would like to mention three different projects all of which were created particularly with a view to their potential for knowledge transfer from Ancient Studies to the contemporary world.

1. The first pertinent example is an attempt at determining the conceptualization of knowledge and the fundamental epistemological premises in early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE Mesopotamia by analyzing the material representation of knowledge items in contemporary cuneiform word and sign lists. These lists were primarily used in the training of apprentice scholars striving to master the intricacies of the cuneiform writing system. The preliminary results of the ongoing analyses point to the conclusion that both the conceptualization of knowledge and the fundamental epistemological premises derived from it are by no means ‘primitive’, ‘archaic’, and completely devoid of conceptual sophistication, as has been frequently claimed in the past [e. g., 11], but in fact very akin to recent theories of knowledge, knowledge management, and knowledge representation in the fields of post-structuralist epistemology and neuro-physiology of the human brain [4].
2. A second research initiative investigates how inscribed artifacts utilized within the power discourse of Ancient Mesopotamian rulers, such as the famous stele of king Hammurapi of Babylon (1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE), consistently employ and amalgamate various material and immaterial cultural forms of rather disparate historical and ethnic pedigree in order to create synthesized ‘transcultural’ artifacts. The material evidence analyzed so far through a broad array of different methods and tools suggests that the ‘message’ of these ‘media hybrids’ was by far more complex than hitherto imagined, combining in material form many diverse topics relevant in the context of power discourse, such as trade, economy, law, cultic practices, theology, legitimization, history, ancestry, knowledge, and academic training. Against the backdrop of cultural and social diversity, of social challenges arising from migration and integration, of environmental problems, and of the precarious claim to hegemony by Babylonian rulers eternally threatened by the pronounced particularism of the southern Mesopotamian political landscape, the transcultural artifacts, through their material presence, apparently dispersed an aura of cultural complexity, religious tolerance, reverence towards successful cultural forms, and the will to rule with the support and inspiration of the sphere of transcendence [9].
3. Finally, the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) 933 “*Material Text Cultures. Materiality and Presence of Writing in Non-Typographic Societies*” is a large interdisciplinary research venture with the bulk of its research projects in the fields of Ancient and Medieval Studies. It was established by the German Research Foundation in July 2011 at Heidelberg University and is funded with more than 2.3 Mio. € p. a. for a total of up to 12 years. Currently, about 80 scholars from more than 20 disciplines are participating in the CRC 933 “Material Text Cultures”. They focus primarily on script-bearing artifacts from non-typographic societies that did not possess any or any widespread methods for the mass production and distribution of

writing. Pertinent examples studied are recitation scrolls from Ancient Egypt, clay tablets from Mesopotamia bearing cuneiform script, written characters on medieval buildings or Buddhist inscriptions on stone slabs. Using an innovative theoretical and methodological framework developed from recent concepts in social practice, material culture, and actor-network theories [5], these artifacts are examined with a view to their material presence in specific spatial, social-cultural, and practical contexts. Among the questions addressed to the evidence are: Where and in which cultural forms did writing exist? Who had access to it? Which social practices took place at, with or because of the writing, and to what extent were these practices of reception influenced or even conditioned by the 'materiality' and 'presence' of the script-bearing artifacts? The 'material text cultures' thus identified provide valuable new insights into attributions of meaning and the overall operativity of writing in past and present non-typographic society. One of the research center's important long-term perspectives with a considerable societal impact is to establish an interdisciplinary, theoretically grounded *research network for the written cultural heritage of mankind*, which will also include the expertise of scholars from social and natural sciences.

It goes without saying that complex research subjects like the ones just described cannot be realized without the results of highly specialized and detailed analyses to be carried out exclusively by equally specialized scholars in the individual disciplines of Ancient Studies. I am thinking of analytical segments such as grammar, paleography, codicology, textual criticism, numismatics, prosopography, or iconography, to cite only the most important ones.

However, if studying ancient cultures is supposed to have a societal impact, if dealing with the material remains of past societies is aimed at learning from the past, these isolated segments of fundamental research in Ancient Studies must not be an end in themselves, but have to be integrated into a *larger, conceptually and methodologically advanced research framework designed to tackle the complexities of cultural processes past and present*.

#### **4. Methodology**

This brings us to the second area of epistemic activity in the field of Ancient Studies that may have a particular impact on how we deal with the challenges of the contemporary world, probably even more so than the actual subjects we investigate and the results our research brings about. This second epistemological area is that of methodology or, to put it less complicated and rather generalized, the way in which the research subject is approached.

However, what is of particular interest to us here is not the standard methodologies individual disciplines have developed to classify and analyze the evidence on a very basic level, such as grammar, paleography, textual criticism, iconography etc. Rather, dealing with past societies such as the Ancient Mesopotamian ones teaches us something about the *mental posture* or intellectual attitude that we should assume when we face participants – human or non-human, material or immaterial – of a society different from our own. I am convinced that this mental posture is the indispensable prerequisite not only for excellent scholarship in the field of Ancient Studies in particular, but also for a beneficial societal impact of research in the Humanities in general. Its main characteristic is the *unconditional acceptance of the fundamental equality of all societies past and present, along with the actors, the social-cultural practices and cultural forms constituting them*. No matter where, when, or under

which circumstances these societies existed, they must be viewed as *inherently complete entities of equal value functioning in accordance with self-imposed and historically tested social-cultural mechanisms*.

It is well known that this essential prerequisite is not something to be taken for granted, neither in the Humanities or Social Sciences nor in the transcultural exchange processes characterizing today's world. Nonetheless, out of this attitude of unfettered acceptance of the 'other', a number of methodological consequences arise both for research in the Humanities and the field of Ancient Studies. The most important of these consequences I will briefly enumerate without being able to go into details:

1. The first methodological necessity prompted by the *postulate of the fundamental equality of cultures* is this: When investigating societies different from our own – and this is particularly true for societies removed in time and space – we need to explain scrupulously which evidence we focus on and why, why we use specific tools and processes to analyze it and, last but not least, what the key elements of our descriptive vocabulary signify. In other words, we need a *theoretical setting in which our conceptual premises, terminological conventions, and procedural decisions are rendered comprehensible and accessible for critique*.

2. Scrutiny of the concepts and terminological categories we operate with will invariably lead to *abandoning many of the preconceived notions* we entertain when studying societies different from our own, such as a *teleological perspective of an alleged historical development of cultures*, the very idea of a historical development, eurocentrism or any other kind of ethnocentrism, the concepts of 'primitivity' and 'modernity', or other conventional – and usually essentialistic – classifications pertaining to historical eras, territories, nations, states, societies, ethnic entities, literature, art, religion, etc. A thorough critique of such concepts has been put forward in many disciplines of the Humanities, most prominently by the so-called Postcolonial studies [e. g., 2]. However, it is still not the overall standard in the field of Ancient Studies.

3. Abandoning essentialisms and conventional categorizations that appear to be secondary superimpositions of the researcher rather than useful analytical categories has in turn significant methodological ramifications. For all that remains to be attempted when studying the past is to assume what might be called a *social-cultural micro-perspective*, an analytical scope that focuses on *certain actors within a specific social-cultural and material setting*. Thus, e. g., one might investigate the use and operativity of a particular number of cuneiform tablets stored in a monumental building in southern Iraq and cared for by three successive generations of the same family, rather than studying 'ancient Mesopotamian' 'temple libraries' during the 'Neo-Babylonian period', to use an example from the author's field of expertise [8].

In other words, neither in Ancient Studies nor in the contemporary world, do we ever deal with entire societies, cultures, ethnic groups, or settlements, but always and invariably with certain people acting within a certain cultural setting. This simple fact and the action strategies derived from it do not only serve as expedient methodological guidelines for the research projects described above, but might be of immense benefit when applied to the political and cultural challenges of the contemporary world.

## 5. Representation

As should have become evident from the preceding, the transfer of the subjects, the methodological repertoire, and the results of research in the field of Ancient Studies into other disciplines of the Humanities, the Social Sciences, or the non-academic public is crucial not only in order to illustrate the surplus value of Ancient Studies to the societies sustaining them, but also in order to render possible or enhance the beneficial societal impact of studying past societies. The success of this transfer is largely conditioned by the ways in which Ancient Studies present their research to recipients both within and outside of academia.

In my opinion, this level of epistemic activity, i. e., that of representation, is not only the most difficult one to master, but also the most important one when the survival of individual disciplines in the field of Ancient Studies is at stake. In order to improve upon what has been achieved in this area in the past, three strategies may be singled out as the most promising ones under the present circumstances:

1. First of all, researchers in Ancient Studies need to sharpen their skills in the *oral and written communication* of what they are doing. They must learn to cut technicalities and disciplinary idiosyncrasies to a minimum even when facing colleagues from neighboring fields, not to mention the general public. From my own experience, I know that the average research paper given by an Assyriologist like myself at an international conference may often be incomprehensible to Egyptologists, Classical Archaeologists, or Ancient Historians, even though these colleagues have a vested interest in Assyriological research and should be the first ones an Assyriologist would want to talk to [12]. Naturally, the translation of disciplinary idioms becomes even more crucial as well as more complicated, when scholars in the field of Ancient Studies want their research to be perceived and made use of in the Social Sciences, in cultural theory, or philosophy, to name only a few.
2. Second, the immensely rich material evidence from past societies may be documented, presented, and analyzed extremely efficiently and attractively through the implementation of *digital instruments available online* in the Internet. Networks of interactive databases combining images, descriptive texts, scientific data, music, videos etc. do not only serve as adequate tools for the long-term documentation and conservation of the cultural heritage, but spread the subjects and results of research in the field of Ancient Studies among members of a global community. Even though we still need to find solutions to the institutional problem of long-term storage of research data, digital tools like the ones just described as well as the growing number of various mobile applications should be considered 'key technologies' for a successful future of Ancient Studies.
3. Third and last, we must explicitly stress the enormous potential of professional *museum exhibitions* for the presentation of material evidence and the transfer of research results to the general public. Granted, it is true that presentations in museums are extremely costly, time consuming, and complex enterprises. Nevertheless, nothing compares to the experience of standing in front of king Tut's mummy or cuneiform tablets written more than 4.000 years ago. Only in museums, it is possible to stage a direct, physical contact with the material remains of past societies, *museums are the nexus between fundamental research in Ancient Studies and the society*. Therefore, they may be considered an

important channel through which a societal impact of investigating ancient cultures may be achieved.

## 6. Material Foundation

Once again, we have touched upon the importance of the material foundation of research in the field of Ancient Studies. In fact, it might be argued that, on a day-to-day basis, the impact this research may have on cultural, political and societal processes is rendered most evident in this fourth area of epistemic activity. It pertains to the ways in which material remains from past societies are conceptualized and treated within a larger cultural-political setting by the disciplines using them as sources for various research enterprises. Traditionally, the actual artifacts and their conservation have been playing a minor role outside of museums. Rather, research in Ancient Studies has focused much more frequently on the historical and cultural data that may be gleaned from these artifacts by analyzing the written texts, images, or other codes preserved through them.

Yet, in my opinion, Ancient Studies – given their unique expertise in the scientific documentation and analysis of artifacts from past societies – have the duty to draw attention to the fact that these *material remains are part of the cultural heritage of mankind* and therefore need to be protected and cared for in a responsible manner. This implies not only the documentation and conservation of the pertinent artifacts by scholars in the field of Ancient Studies, IT-specialists and archaeometrists, but also the involvement of national and international cultural policy organizations, law enforcement agencies, and the media.

Protecting the cultural heritage of mankind, however, must not only take place at the museums and universities of former colonial powers, but primarily in the countries where the artifacts originally come from and where the bulk of the material remains of past societies are still hidden in the ground. Therefore, the lasting contribution of Ancient Studies to the contemporary world also lies in their excellent ability to *practice scientific and cultural-political capacity building* in countries like Iraq, often dubbed the ‘cradle of civilization’, where the immensely rich cultural heritage from Ancient Mesopotamia has been endangered, looted, or destroyed for several decades due to unstable political conditions [e. g., 3]. Trainee programs specifically tailored to the needs of junior Iraqi researchers are only one of many expedient means to create the local expertise necessary for the long-term protection of the country’s vast cultural heritage. It should also be emphasized, however, that specialists in the field of Ancient Studies would also contribute significantly to the protection of the world’s cultural heritage, if they abstained completely from any participation in the bustling and very profitable antiquities trade.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that research in the field of Ancient Studies has the potential to contribute considerably to our ability of coping with the complex challenges of the contemporary world and provides many opportunities to learn from the past. As has been argued in the preceding, it is not only *the immense treasure trove of human experience* documented in the material remains of past societies that we may consult in order to discover alternative ways of dealing with intricate social, cultural, environmental, or political

challenges of present-day societies. Rather, learning from the past also means *learning from the mental posture* or intellectual attitude we need to assume when approaching social-cultural entities removed in time and space: the unconditional acceptance of the fundamental equality of all societies along with their actors, social-cultural practices and cultural forms; laying open our conceptual premises, terminological conventions, and procedural decisions; abandoning preconceived and essentialistic notions about 'modernity', 'development', 'progress', 'religion' or 'culture', and always focusing on certain human actors within a specific social-cultural and material setting rather than on abstract, mentally construed social entities – these methodological principles all are precious values not only in Ancient Studies, but in the context of any inter-societal and intercultural exchange the contemporary world has to negotiate.

However, the most direct and tangible impact of Ancient Studies research on contemporary societies derives from the *adequate documentation, attractive presentation and long-term conservation of the cultural heritage of mankind*. Once we have understood that this cultural heritage lies at the root of all contemporary societies and the challenges they face and that by caring for this cultural heritage we pay our respects to the achievements of these societies, we have truly learnt from the past. This is why we need to know how little children were taught to write 4.000 years ago.

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