

Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Jochem Kahl, (unter Mitarbeit von Klaus Wagensonner). *Erste Philologien. Archäologie einer Disziplin vom Tigris bis zum Nil*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2018. Pages 1-472+XVI. ISBN 9783161554254.

In the framework of the *Sonderforschungsbereich 980 Episteme in Bewegung* (Freie Universität Berlin), the authors of this work have long discussed the impact of the invention and introduction of script and writing systems during the earliest phases of Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations. The discussion centred upon the impact of the invention of script and the introduction of writing systems in all the social contexts of these cultures, from the political and religious to the economic and private. The main result of this groundbreaking process was the birth of a scientific discipline – philology –, which, in a broad sense, had a crucial role in the production, selection, diffusion, transmission, preservation of culture throughout the centuries and is still today, even in the digital era, the only tool suitable to carefully and properly transmit cultural contents in every field of human life.

In the authors' opinion the history and significance of these “first philologies” were marginalized and neglected by previous scholarship, thus hindering a thorough comprehension of their importance for both the study of the civilizations they were born in, and the general history of humankind.

In order to expand the audience of their text, the Authors decided to avoid technical voices (“Fachtermini”) as much as possible, to present the translations in German while providing easy access to original sources, and to clarify all the issues considered difficult for readers of contiguous or other fields of studies to understand.

After a short foreword (*Vorwort*, pp. VII-IX), the introduction (*Einleitung*, pp. 1-8) provides a key for the reader, who is led through the traditional theory of the Hellenistic origin of philology (3rd-2nd century BC, Alexandria) down in time to the Mesopotamian and Egyptian histories, in their turn not considered as isolated, ancestral and independent cultural offshoots of the Eastern Mediterranean area, but contiguous, essential, primeval events in the birth and development of philology as a whole (“eine Geschichte der *longue durée* philologischen Arbeitens”, p. 4). The two areas of investigation (i.e. Mesopotamia and Egypt) and their written testimonies have specific characteristics and peculiarities that the authors have duly considered, starting from the extension of existing scholarship and continuing through the issues of terminology, the advantage of having

available original texts written on original text supports, the unavoidable comparison/contrast with Classical philology methodologies and definitions, the importance of the translations as a reflection of the contemporary research trends, etc. All in all the book aims at providing both material and methodology (or at least discussion tools) in order to draw a sketch for an innovative research perspective in philology as a comprehensive scientific discipline.

The first chapter (*Grundlagen*, pp. 9-34) is dedicated to a presentation of the general characters of the scribal traditions of Mesopotamia and Egypt. This includes overviews on the materiality of script (§ 1.2 *Schreibmaterialien*, pp. 13-25), the sources of the texts (§1.3 *Erhaltungsbedingungen – Texte als Quellen*, pp. 25-28), the producers and beneficiaries of texts as a whole (§ 1.4 *Schriftnutzer und Schriftgelehrte*, pp. 28-32), and further methodological elucidations (§ 1.5 *Vom Text zur Philologie*, pp. 32-34). The second chapter (*Schreiber, Schriftgelehrte, Philologen*, pp. 35-99) deals with the philologists in their primeval life. The ordinary scribe is an historical oversimplification. From the beginning he was a man with both technical and linguistic skills, duly trained for his job, ready to put his talents at the disposal of culture (from science to law, from religion to economy). The social role of the scribe (= philologist) appears to be well defined already in an early stage of development of writing societies, without the exclusion of women, as detailed in § 2.3.3 (*Schreiberinnen, textkundige und gelehrte Frauen*, pp. 78-82). As regards where philology was physically performed, i.e. where the production of texts took place, this is the topic of the third chapter (*Orte der Philologie*, pp. 101-139). In this case each of the two civilizations had peculiar institutions for the scribes to work in: the “Lifehouse” (§ 3.2.2, pp. 112-119) in Egypt and the temple library in Mesopotamia (§ 3.3.2, pp. 125-128). In both cases it seems evident that the collections of texts were at the same time the source and the main result of the philological work, and that the transmission of texts (i.e. knowledge) was grounded on their previous conservation and reproduction. The fourth chapter (*Gegenstände, Techniken und Methoden*, pp. 141-249) investigates the most intriguing issue of the book, i.e. starting from the enormous amount of documentation we have (materiality) and the very detailed knowledge of how, when, where and why the texts were produced (places and techniques), what can we extrapolate about the real, everyday work of an Egyptian or a Mesopotamian scribe? With careful analysis and well documented conclusions, the chapter presents all that is to be deduced from the wealth of ancient texts that Egypt and Mesopotamia yielded to us. There was certainly a stage when the texts were organized in both their single status and their belonging to longer series (§ 4.1 *Texte strukturieren*, pp. 145-179). There is evidence that examination of variations and corrections to be made to a certain version of a single text, as well as collation of written documents, were usual practices (§ 4.2 *Texte arbeiten*, pp. 179-221). The edition of a text in the sense we usually mean *mutatis mutandis* was the result of the process

described above (§ 4.3 *Texte edieren und kommentieren*, pp. 222-249). The fifth chapter investigates the importance of duly prepared and edited texts for the elites of the ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies (*Philologie: Vergangenheit-Gegenwart-Zukunft*, pp. 251-311). The interpretation of the past is at the basis of the legitimization of political powers, cultural memories, attempts to gain social or economic supremacy, etc. All these processes are inextricably linked to the development and maintenance of a constant and coherent textual tradition, as Egyptian and Mesopotamian contexts well demonstrate. The history of tradition (§ 5.1 *Überlieferungsgeschichten*, pp. 251-261) is just a sequence of an extended process which includes the work (and selection) on sources, what is usually called “the invention of tradition” and the “historisation” (§ 5.2 *Quellensuche, Traditionsbildung und Historisierung*, pp. 261-282). In this respect it remains one of the most fascinating issues the interest for translation (with all connected problems), that these ancient written cultures developed, as long as the writing systems were invented, improved, and spread in the areas where Egyptian and Mesopotamian political influences were more effective (§ 5.3.2 *Mehrsprachigkeit und Übersetzung*, pp. 298-306). The sixth chapter (*Philologien vom Tigris bis zum Nil*, pp. 313-354) examines the “creative” potential of the philologists, their self-understanding and their influence on contemporary worldviews, and ultimately it deals with the social place of philology in the written cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

At the end of the volume the authors presents their conclusion as the beginning of the history of philology (*Der Anfang des Weges: Grundlegen einer Disziplin*, pp. 355-358). In fact, the enormous amount of written documentation provided by ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia in terms of both chronological extension and textual typology has no parallel if not in the Modern and Contemporary worlds, after the introduction of the press. All these data are a sound basis for anyone interested not only in diachronic linguistic analysis but also in the research regarding the birth and development of philology in general. This is the main achievement of this study. There is no contradiction and no conflict is evoked against the traditional hypothesis of the birth of philology in Hellenistic Egypt: at most this book puts the origin of this discipline some two millennia earlier. What is to be stressed is that philology was born as soon as men started writing and script became the essential and most important tool for the development of complex societies, where technological, economic, social, political, in a broader sense “cultural” progress was possible (and their achievements could be recorded in a written, durable, way).

The study under review thus provides the scholars of Near Eastern and Egyptian antiquities with a precious heuristic tool, dedicated to the crucial topic of script and writing and its multifaceted status in these ancient civilizations. At the same time it is a welcome addition to the scholarly

discussion concerning the birth, development, role, future (or even death) of philology in general at the beginning of the second quarter of the 3rd millennium. In fact, it must be remembered that, as Stefano Rapisarda pointed out recently, “la filologia è comunque un *sapere* universale. [...] La filologia serve all’umanità tutte le volte che un uomo di una civiltà fondata sulla scrittura (la quasi totalità delle civiltà, e la assoluta totalità delle civiltà avanzate) ha a che fare con un testo scritto [...]”. (S. Rapisarda, *La filologia al servizio delle nazioni. Storia, crisi e prospettive della filologia romanza*, Bruno Mondadori, 2018 Milano-Torino, p. 17. For further details on the discussion on “philology” in the 17th-20th centuries in European academies and beyond, see e.g. M. de Launay, “Auguste Böckh et la «Philologie universelle».” *Revue germanique internationale* 14 (2011), 1-17; or R.S. Leventhal, “The Emergence of Philological Discourse in the German States, 1770-1810.” *Isis* 77 (1986), 243-260).

In the end, the thesis of the book is supported by a critical analysis of the (bulky) existing bibliography, as is well demonstrated in the final bibliographical apparatus, which includes titles in German, English, French, and Italian. Furthermore, the volume is enriched with a series of well printed pictures, diagrams, drawings and tables, reflecting, as does the whole book, the excellent editorial support provided to the Authors by the publisher.

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