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*Searching for Orientation in the History of Culture:*

*Aby Warburg and Leo Frobenius on the Morphological Study of the Ifa-Board*

Carlotta Santini

I. WARBURG AND FROBENIUS: REASONS FOR COMPARISON

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars and thinkers converged in Hamburg, making it the “dreamland of humanists” of which Emily J. Levine rightly speaks.<sup>1</sup> Among the many intellectuals active in the city during this time—many of whom were in some way connected to the talented art- and cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), the ingenious creator and organizer of the eponymous *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek*—one name is too often overlooked: that of the anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938). One of the most unconventional ethnographers of his time, Frobenius is known as one of the father of modern Africanism and a pioneer of primitive art studies. Frobenius and Warburg were brought together, albeit indirectly, by the *Hamburger Museum für Völkerkunde*. Warburg was a member of the museum’s *Verwaltungsrat*, and upon the request of director Georg Thilenius (1868–1937), he dealt with its ethnological collections. Specifically, Warburg was responsible for the American collections, to which he himself contributed following his field studies among the Hopi and Pueblo Indians (1895–96).<sup>2</sup> In 1904, Frobenius financed the first of his

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Most of the documentary materials used in this article are from unpublished sources quoted in accordance with the Warburg Archive system of cataloguing (WIA). I would like to thank the staff at the Warburg Archive for their competence and support. Special thanks go to Eckart Marchand for providing me with the original manuscript of the letter of Mary Warburg to Aby Warburg, December 8, 1923. I would also like to thank Anja Klocke from the Übersee Club Hamburg for sending me the long abstract of the conference Frobenius held at the Club in December 1923. A special thanks to Werner Heuler-Neuhaus and his wife Eva, specialists of Dogon culture, for having introduced me in the complex cultural and historical dynamics of the Niger bend region, and in particular for having given me access to their personal library and collection of African artifacts in Berlin.

<sup>1</sup> Emily J. Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Aby Warburg, *Images from the Pueblo Indians of North America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

famous expeditions, the D.I.A.F.E. (*Deutsche Innerafrikanischen Forschungsexpeditionen*), which provided the museum with some of its most significant pieces.

An analysis of the connections between the two scholars is useful for more than mere biographical reasons.<sup>3</sup> Warburg and Frobenius offer two clear examples of a cultural and scientific trend in organizing universal knowledge and unreservedly addressing the nature and dynamics of human culture—one of the most unstable fields of knowledge. Highlighting some points of contact in Warburg’s and Frobenius’s approaches to a specific case study reveals the profile of a common method for the study of culture based on formal, critical, and historical criteria. Combined with the universalistic and supra-disciplinary instance that informs the research of these authors, this methodological approach can be understood as one of the most innovative features of what might be deemed the “cultural turn” of the sciences of the spirit at the beginning of the century.

Frobenius and Warburg have often been considered outsiders to their own disciplines (Anthropology and History of Art), and precisely because of their own claims to independence from the constraints of specialism, they can be most usefully understood as historians of culture.<sup>4</sup> Of course, both scholars were engaged in the cultural and intellectual landscape of their time.<sup>5</sup> For example, both to some extent respond to neo-Kantianism, which perceived the study of culture as the last bulwark that escaped Kantian criticism. But above all, as I will demonstrate in this article, they both freely re-elaborate and develop the tools provided by the formalistic theories of their time and the historical-critical method of ethnology.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Probst, “Über Kreuz: Leo Frobenius als Gegenspieler von Aby Warburg,” in *Kulturkreise: Leo Frobenius und seine Zeit*, ed. Jean-Luis Georget, Hélène Ivanoff, and Richard Kuba (Berlin: Reimer, 2016), 53–72.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Diers, Thomas Girst, Dorothea von Moltke, “Warburg and the Warburgian Tradition of Cultural History,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 59–73.

<sup>5</sup> For Aby Warburg, see Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970), but also more recently Maurizio Ghelardi, *Aby Warburg e la lotta per lo stile* (Torino: Aragno 2012); Philippe Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l’image en mouvement* (Paris: Macula 1998); Andrea Pinotti, *Memorie del neutro: Morfologia dell’immagine in Aby Warburg* (Milano: Mimesis, 2001); Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, translated with an interpretive essay by Mychel P. Steinberg (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Along with his collaborators and contemporaries, Warburg himself recognized that there were multiple commonalities between his project of a Science of Culture and Frobenius's project of a Philosophy of Civilization. In response to a somewhat naive Herr Dr. Koehn who, on his visit to the KBW library on March 14, 1928, claimed to be a scholar of "*Kulturwissenschaft* in general, in the sense of Spengler and Frobenius!" Gertrud Bing replied gently but firmly that "this word [*Kulturwissenschaft*] has a somewhat different meaning here."<sup>6</sup> On several occasions, members of the Warburg entourage, seduced by the anthropologist's theses, pointed out the potentially significant connections between Warburg's and Frobenius's theories. For example, in March 1923, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, then actively engaged in the cultural and scientific life of the Warburg Library, wrote to Fritz Saxl:

In the library yesterday I read Frobenius's book *Und Africa spricht* [*sic!*]<sup>7</sup> in order to familiarize myself with . . . African things. He deals in detail with the worldview [*Weltanschauung*] and culture of the Joruba [*sic!*] people, for whom . . . a peculiar spatial conception emerges. Four (or respectively 16) basic spatial directions are distinguished. . . . The structure of the settlements and even the whole world is divided and organized according to these celestial directions. . . . Frobenius claims that a similar system can only be found amongst the ancient Etruscans and he seeks connections between them and the Joruba! His entire presentation, however, has astonished me: he provides

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<sup>6</sup> "Kulturwissenschaft im Allgemeinen, im Sinne von Spengler und Frobenius! . . . Dieses Wort hat hier eine etwas andere Bedeutung," Aby Warburg, *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg*, mit Einträgen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl, herausgegeben von Karen Michels und Charlotte Schoell-Glass, in Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften, Studienausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), VII Abt., B. VII, p. 224, March 14, 1928, B. 4, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach* . . . (Berlin: Vita, 1912). Warburg read at least the first volume of the three-volume *Und Afrika sprach*. The book is still in the library and displays his ex-libris. On his reactions to this reading, see the letter from Warburg to Mary Warburg, November 6, 1923, WIA GC/37 155 and the one from Warburg to Saxl and Bing, May 5, 1925, WIA GC/17 181.

wonderful new evidence of the widespread and typical qualities of the spiritual form to which all these systems can be traced.<sup>8</sup>

As often did in those years when Warburg was recovering in Ludwig Binswanger's clinic in Kreuzlingen, Saxl forwarded the letter to him, who replied to Cassirer just three days later. In this letter, Warburg expressed his opinion on Frobenius as follows: "However, I must warn you about Frobenius's book. Frobenius is an amazingly superficial observer."<sup>9</sup>

## II. HISTORY OF AN ERROR? THE IFA-BRETT CASE STUDY

Further evidence of Warburg's explicit hostility vis-à-vis Frobenius has been documented.<sup>10</sup> In this case, his harsh criticism was in response to a specific controversial passage concerning the identification and interpretation of ethnographic objects from the Yoruba (not Joruba), a population settled in the great bend of the Niger River, in the historic region of Yorubaland, now divided between Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. The objects in question were the wood disks, boards, or small tablets called *Ifa* or *Ife-Bretter*, ritual dishes used in the ceremonies of the cult of Ifa, to make geomantic predictions, a form of divination using sand.

<Figure 1 here.>

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<sup>8</sup> "Gestern las ich in der Bibliothek in dem Buch von Frobenius 'Und Afrika spricht' [*sic!*] um mich zunächst einmal ganz allgemein über afrikanische Verhältnisse zu orientieren. Er behandelt darin eingehend das Weltbild und die Kultur der Joruba [*sic!*], in dem . . . eine eigentümliche Raumfassung zu Tage tritt. Es werden 4 (resp. 16) räumliche Grundrichtungen unterschieden. . . . Nach diesen Himmelsrichtungen ist nicht nur die Gliederung der Siedlungen orientiert, sondern das Weltganze überhaupt eingeteilt. . . . Frobenius behauptet, dass eine ähnliche Systematik sich nur bei den—alten Etruskern finde und sucht daraus, irgendwelche Zusammenhänge zwischen ihnen und den Joruba herzuleiten! Im Ganzen aber hat mich seine Darstellung äußerst frappiert: sie bildet einen neuen schönen Beleg dafür wie allgemein verbreitet und typisch die Geistesform ist, auf die all diese Systeme zurückgehen," Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassen Manuskripte und Texte: Ausgewählter wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009), Bd.18, 57, Letter of Cassirer to Saxl, March 24, 1923, WIA GC/13916.

<sup>9</sup> "Dem Buch von Frobenius muss ich allerdings eine Warnungstafel umhängen Frobenius ist ein erstaunlich oberflächlicher Beobachter," Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassen Manuskripte*, cit, 58, Letter of Warburg to Cassirer, March 27, 1923, WIA GC/14001.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Warburg to Max Warburg, 1925, WIA GC/17138; Letter of Warburg to Thilenius, January 4, 1913, WIA GC/5698.

As summarized by Cassirer, Frobenius proposed a complex interpretation of the cult of Ifa based on three main arguments. First, he offered a morphological analysis highlighting the quadripartite and centripetal forms of the dishes, which he recognized also in the motif of the solar Gorgon associated with the cult. Second, he identified a magical practice relating to numerology—especially the numbers four and sixteen (as noticed also by Cassirer) and their recurrence in geomantic practices—which he perceived to be foundational to the cult of Ifa’s formal heritage. Finally, he claimed to deduce from these forms and their divinatory use a cosmological conception. In keeping with his interpretation, Frobenius explicitly ignored any Islamic influences by recognizing in the cult of Ifa the survival of an older cultural form linked to Asian solar cults—an authentic *Weltanschauung*, as the same Cassirer recognized. As Cassirer acknowledged, this purported Asian solar culture ostensibly spread throughout Africa via a peculiar channel: water. Thus, it moved from Persia through to Phoenicia via the Mediterranean, after a cultural migration that would have touched upon Greece, Etruria, and Sardinia, passing through the Pillars of Hercules and reaching the shores of West Africa via the Atlantic. This prehistoric odyssey, which would have taken place sometime during the Bronze Age, is at the basis of the well-known and controversial hypothesis of an African Atlantis, for which Frobenius remains as much famous as infamous.

Upon reading Frobenius’s study, Warburg immediately identified the Ifa’s dishes and their geomantic schema as common Arabic geomantic boards diffused throughout the Islamic world, with their astrological systems connected to sixteen geomantic figures. More substantial and detailed outlines of Frobenius’s interpretation of the Ifa-Brett could be found in academic contexts, in particular a review by Carl Heinrich Becker (1876–1933), professor of Oriental Language and Culture in Bonn, which explicitly acknowledged Warburg’s

interpretation of the Ifa-Brett.<sup>11</sup> In this review, Becker complained about Frobenius's idiosyncrasies with regard to Islam. Indeed, though Frobenius himself justified his anti-Islamic approach by affirming that his research aimed to be free from ethnocentric prejudice (what he called the "Islamic glasses" [*Brille des Islams*] commonly adopted by scholars in African studies), his work was motivated rather by his desire to reclaim black African culture from Arab influences and to recognize its autonomy, antiquity, and originality at all costs. According to Frobenius's field observations, the cultural coherence and uniqueness of the Yoruba region in comparison with neighboring populations convinced him that it was the very center of cultural productivity in West Africa and not merely on the periphery of the final waves of Islamic civilization.

### III. FROM THE YORUBA REGION TO THE PALAZZO SCHIFANOJA

Was or was not Frobenius mistaken? From philologist Warburg's point of view, Frobenius's method lacked historical-critical sense. Cassirer inevitably came to the same conclusion. In a letter to her husband in December 1923, Mary Warburg reports on Cassirer's reaction to a conference held by Frobenius at the Übersee Club in Hamburg earlier that month: "talented people are seldom also scholars, and scholars rarely have talent."<sup>12</sup> The morphological method, applied in an extra-historical manner, led Frobenius to incorrectly label the objects in question. According to Warburg, Frobenius simply did not see the obvious connection of these dishes with the Islamic tradition and therefore did not recognize that they were essentially the same objects, revisited in the Yoruba style. Furthermore, Frobenius's morphological analysis was far more daring. Regardless of the local context and the actual

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Heinrich Becker, "Neue Literatur zur Geschichte Afrikas: Leo Frobenius und die Brille des Islam," *Der Islam: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orient* 4 (1913): 305, 4. There is evidence in Warburg's Zettelkasten (WIA III 2.1 ZK, 021 011016) that he read this review.

<sup>12</sup> "Dass begabten Männer seid keine wissenschaftliche, Wissenschaftler seid keine begabte," Letter of Mary Warburg to Aby Warburg, December 8, 1923, WIA GC/37202.

possibility of establishing a precise historical genealogy of the formal element in question (the quadripartite centripetal form or the solar Gorgon motif), he established analogical connections with similar forms he recognized across centuries and continents, as well as in different materials and functional supports. Among the objects involved in his complex comparative work were the Ifa boards, the Greek Gorgons, Egyptian sun disks, Hittite seals, bronze discs from Benin, and Etruscan lamps (and also even American artifacts!).

But, closer examination of historical-geographic inferences Frobenius traced in his *Atlantic Odyssey*, from Africa to Greece, and from Egypt to Asia reveals similarities to those proposed by Warburg himself when he studied the Islamic pots used in geomantic practices. In 1912 Warburg gave his famous lecture in Rome on the astrological cycle of the Palazzo Schifanoja frescoes,<sup>13</sup> in which he reconstructed the figurative system of the astral sphere, tracing the erudite and bibliographical tradition of those Renaissance frescos back to the Islamic Moorish tradition and its geomantic practices, and to the Alexandrine Greek-Egyptian tradition of the *Sphaera Barbarica* of Teucrus. Warburg's analysis did not extend beyond the Hellenistic age, but the cultural tradition he recognized underlying this complex (though traceable) scholarly transmission is not much older. The iconological study of the decans of the *Sphaera Barbarica*, which were copied, reinterpreted, and transformed until their adoption in the Palazzo Schifanoja, corresponds indeed, in its main formal aspect and meaning, to older astrological Babylonian and Chaldean schemas, which can be traced to the representation of sidereal divinities in ancient Egypt.

From a morphological point of view, both Warburg's and Frobenius's reconstructions of the tradition of the geomantic boards are legitimate. From a historical-critical point of view, however, Warburg provides the reader with a well-documented and accurate reconstruction based on bibliographical evidence, while Frobenius's account does not contain

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<sup>13</sup> Aby Warburg, *Italianische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).



enough elements to formulate a credible chronology; it is a magnificent yet arbitrary piece of speculation. What matters most, however, is that, as far as Frobenius's investigation is concerned, whether or not the Ifa-Brett was an Arab geomantic board did not substantially affect his search for the formal derivations of the object nor the rebuilding of its symbolic implications.

#### IV. SYNOPTIC COMPARISON AND MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

How did Frobenius's morphological analysis operate in the case of the Ifa-Brett? First, he compared several images and objects across different ethnographic contexts in order to deduce their essential form. To this end, he disregarded any inessential formal elements relating to style, decoration, usage, or material, reducing the different objects, wherever possible, to a single simplified geometric form. While this formalist reduction was certainly problematic, Warburg himself had adopted similar practices in his field studies among the Pueblo and Hopi peoples (1895–96). When creating ornaments, the Pueblo and the Hopi used deconstructed natural images—birds, snakes, and mountains, Warburg observed—to produce abstract shapes, heraldic figures, and hieroglyphics, which conveyed particular meanings that did not necessarily correspond directly to the original naturalistic referents. As we shall soon see, these same forms provided the basis for Warburg's analysis.

Formalistic reduction led Frobenius to identify a singularity—the concentric quadripartite form—across many objects relating to the cult of Ifa.

<Insert figure 2>

Frobenius studied the development and variation of this form on two-dimensional objects, such as the geomantic divination boards and some medallions featuring the Gorgon motif associated with the cult, as well as on three-dimensional objects, such as ritual chairs or

thrones with five legs (four corner legs and one central leg). A specific process of formal criticism allowed him to identify the basic formal unity of these very different ethnographic objects, despite their different contexts and in all their possible permutations.

Both Frobenius's morphological method and Warburg's study of formal symbolism<sup>14</sup> were influenced significantly by Gottfried Semper and his studies on decorative motifs in applied arts, particularly architecture and textiles. In *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (1878–79), a book that was part of Frobenius's personal library, Semper articulates three formal principles for judging the unity of a form: symmetry (*Symmetrie*), proportionality (*Proportionalität*), and direction (*Richtung*). Semper's most famous example involves snowflakes: no two snowflakes are exactly alike, yet they all share the same shape.<sup>15</sup>

All the centripetal shapes compared by Frobenius can be described in terms of formal unity, since they are symmetrical and homogeneous in proportion and direction. Whether the motif seems at times to have been enriched, moved, multiplied, or even three-dimensionally projected is irrelevant. Because he was dealing with centripetal forms, both square and circular shapes, the principle of direction was also respected. The clockwise or counterclockwise movement of a centripetal model has indeed no impact on the form, according to Frobenius. Consider, for example, how circular motion allows the solar symbol of the swastika, the Gorgon motif, or the so called “kneeling running” [*Knielauf*] schema to maintain their uniqueness even when drawn in both directions.

## V. THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD AND THE GENEALOGY OF FORMS

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<sup>14</sup> See Spyros Papapetros, “Aby Warburg as Reader of Gottfried Semper: Reflections on the Cosmic Character of Ornament,” in *Elective Affinities: Testing Word and Image Relationships*, ed. Véronique Plesch, Catriona MacLeod, and Charlotte Schoell-Glass (Paris: Brill, 2009), 317–36.

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten* (Mittenwald: Mäander, 1977), xxv.

Despite its high degree of abstraction, Frobenius conceived his formal criticism as an essential tool for historical criticism; and it is precisely the historical validity of his observations that Warburg intended to prove false. A very specific conception of the history of culture enabled Frobenius to attempt such large-scale geographic and historical morphological comparisons. Indeed, Frobenius was responsible for the first formulation of a historical-critical method for ethnographic studies, a method that was later developed by Fritz Graebner and disseminated in the Anglo-Saxon world by father Wilhelm Schmidt, the chief of the so-called School of Wien.<sup>16</sup> Combining geographical and historical approaches, this method results from the convergence of the studies on anthropic geography of Friedrich Ratzel, the migratory theories of Moritz Wagner, and a general application of genealogical and philological methods (like stemmatics, source criticism, and hermeneutics) to the study of the material sources of ethnography.<sup>17</sup> The actors of this current, which include even Franz Boas as one of the last representatives of the Berlin School of Adolf Bastian, are better known in the Anglophone world as the Diffusionist School,<sup>18</sup> and are commonly (and sometimes erroneously) opposed to the mainstream evolutionary theories of the time.

According to this tradition, Frobenius argued that there must be a limit to the number of forms that exist, since there is a limit to the number of ideas (what Adolf Bastian called *Elementargedanken*) that individuals or groups can develop. Cultural invention is therefore a rare event, and the diffusion of culture on earth can be explained through contact and human exchange, through borrowings, contaminations, and variations of this original heritage. Following these postulations, if two populations—separated by tens of thousands of kilometers—both use bows, this tells us nothing about their contact. In fact, only one

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<sup>16</sup> Fritz Graebner, *Methode der Ethnologie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1911); Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology* (New York: Fortuny, 1939).

<sup>17</sup> See Carlotta Santini, “La méthode historico-critique et le traitement des sources entre philologie et anthropologie: Fritz Graebner et sa réception américaine,” in Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, Jean-Louis Fortis, *The Circulation of Linguistic and Philological Knowledge between Germany and the World* (forthcoming, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Grafton Elliot Smith, “The Diffusion of Culture,” in Grafton Elliot Smith, Bronislaw Malinowski, Herbert Joseph Spinden, and Alexander Goldenweiser, *The Diffusion Controversy* (New York: Norton, 1927), 9–25.

operative principle is at stake in such an example: the principle at the basis of the functioning of a bow can be observed in nature and all men will eventually encounter it. But an arc or, more particularly, a shield can be constructed in several different ways. The selection of a particular form is therefore not necessary as far as nature is concerned, but becomes so in terms of “culture.” The detection of similarly shaped shields or bows among geographically distant and seemingly unrelated peoples, or even just the presence of one shared decorative motif, may indicate some level of contact between the two cultures. While functional inventions are within everyone’s reach, purely formal inventions are rare and are the result of specific choices.

Frobenius’s statement about the primacy of form over purpose was linked to the observation that a form does not cease to exist simply because it no longer serves its original objective. An instrument changes if the conditions of its usage change, if its material conditions change or, finally, if it becomes obsolete. What happens, then, to form itself? Form is something that endures, existing well beyond any shift in the conditions of reproduction. If new conditions hinder or prevent the exact same reproduction of an original formal motif, it will migrate to other mediums—from wood to cloth, from cloth to vases, and so on. While its explicit meaning might be forgotten, misunderstood, or reformulated, its symbolic meaning and formal integrity remain intact.

Frobenius’s forms are conceived as leitmotifs, threads that intertwine with historical and cultural developments. A form’s ability to survive despite re-elaborations or degradations that modify its meaning is one of the most innovative theses of the Warburgian method applied to the history of art. Nevertheless, Warburg did not agree with Frobenius’s claim to historical validity. To Warburg, the ostensible hyper-formalism of Frobenius’s first morphological analysis pertained only to pure forms divorced from their social context, materiality, or artistic/functional purpose.

## VI. THE NEED FOR IMAGE, THE NEED FOR MEANING

The forms isolated by Frobenius's morphological analysis and inscribed within his daring genealogies are not conceived as atoms or granitic units (unlike Bastian's *Elementargedanken*). They resemble the elements of the periodic table; like long-lasting atomic structures, they are linked internally by historical necessity, but this link can be broken and allow for further reorganization. What then determines the internal qualities of an image? What elemental force constitutes the bonds of a form's constituent elements?

Here we encounter a central element of Frobenius's morphological theory, which reveals an extraordinary overlap with Warburg's own theory. In the most philosophical of his books, *Paideuma* (1921), Frobenius conceives the process of form shaping, from a Platonic point of view, as an epistemological act. Form shaping results from man's first cognitive approach to the world around him, which can be defined as affective. In order to describe the cognitive/emotional act at the base of the form-shaping process, Frobenius uses a term that will resonate with Warburg specialists: *Ergriffenheit*. This term, which has no straightforward equivalent in English, was used by Romantic scholars and intellectuals to refer to a particular emotion; it is commonly and erroneously translated as *commotion*. This emotion does not simply describe the soul's passive state. Rather, *Ergriffenheit* involves a dual process, both active and passive, in which man is appropriated by nature while simultaneously taking from it; he learns about (hence why Frobenius refers to this emotional/cognitive process as *paideumatic*) and apprehends the impressions that come from nature.

This emotional/cognitive exchange is, for both Warburg and Frobenius, essential to the production of mental forms and continually informs all processes concerning man's cultural development. Forms produced at the earliest stages of this emotional/cognitive

process of human consciousness are permanently imprinted. They can be defined as emotional crystallizations, whose impressions cannot easily be erased. For Frobenius, this is the reason why forms endure, irrespective of medium, purpose, or apparent contextual relevance; its inherent importance, established once and for all by the emotional charge that originated it, determines its reemergence throughout the history and development of humanity.

Warburg studied the survival of iconographic cycles and the recurrence of certain figurative representations of emotion across different eras and traditions, either as literal quotations or as curious distortions of form and content. He is especially famous for his theory of the *Pathosformeln*: representations or expressive forms of specific emotions, established and stabilized in antiquity, which reemerge under certain circumstances with all their emotional charge as obligatory repertoires of expressive formulas. Warburg's hermeneutics of the image recognizes not only the interpretative level of the meaning/content of the *Pathosformel* (what Erwin Panofsky will later define as the "expressive meaning" of an image) but also the emotional charge linked to the image. The misuse of classical models during the medieval period shows how meaning (even expressive meaning) often becomes dissociated from imagery and misunderstood. But the image itself persists across different contexts and is constantly reinterpreted and translated. What remains unchanged is its emotional charge—the emotional intensity linked to the image.

Frobenius provides examples of such affective representations in primitive rock art that feature astonishing expressive immediacy. One of the best examples is his study of the "backwards-looking animal," a model that recurs from prehistory through the great historical civilizations. Frobenius interprets it as an image resulting directly from the perception of threat. The success of any given form depends, according to Warburg, on the emotional charge it conveys or expresses. Thus an image remains fundamentally linked to its original

emotional content, despite its migration through different cultures and media. Even after a long period of dormancy, an image that preserves the imprint of the original emotional intensity cannot fail, even after a long period of forgiveness, to reappear as the most appropriate one, expressing the same content or similar contents of the same emotional intensity.

*Pathosformel* is, however, conceived by Warburg as much more of a mediated process, the result of expressive research. The birth of an emotional image is a historical fact located in the cognitive past of humanity. For Frobenius, this occurs at a precise moment in prehistory; for Warburg, according to Fritz Saxl,<sup>19</sup> it is a longer, more complex, and essentially artistic process that stabilizes over the centuries and can be reactivated. The imaginative faculties of man are at the heart of this process: man synthesizes the sensory data and engages artistically with the results, which, after a long process of refinement and approximation, stabilize sufficiently to create a significant image, a lasting cultural product.

For both Frobenius and Warburg, expressive immediacy could be defined as a limit concept. Indeed, the tension between impression and expression is central to Frobenius's work too. He considers cultural history in terms of a metaphysical curve originating out of *Ergiffenheit*, hence out of an original impression, which then develops in continuous tension with its expressive form. The history of culture is—somewhat explicitly for Frobenius, and perhaps even more so for him than for Warburg—essentially the history of art, since it is the story of how man expresses himself creatively through physical and ideal images; it accounts for the emotional shock of his first contact with nature.

## VII. COSMOLOGY AND ORIENTATION

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<sup>19</sup> Fritz Saxl, *A Heritage of Images: A Selection of Lectures by Fritz Saxl* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970).

Equipped with these theoretical tools, let us return to the controversial interpretation of the Ifa-Board. Frobenius identified the persistence of the formal unity of the quadripartite centripetal motifs used in Ifa worship, tracing their recurrence across a variety of different cultures throughout the Mediterranean basin. He also provided a unique interpretation of these occurrences: for Frobenius, the Ifa culture's formal systems represented cosmological models that would have been recognizable throughout the entire Mediterranean region. After Frobenius, the study of such quadripartite cosmograms and maps (applied to Mandalas, celestial maps, and plans of ancient cities or temples) quickly became fashionable among scholars, profoundly influencing the intellectual landscape from the beginning of the twentieth century up through the work of Carl Gustav Jung.<sup>20</sup> According to this logic, the quadripartite centripetal motif, and its numerological implications, were a *forma mentis* established in prehistoric times and linked to a particular conception of the universe.

Warburg did not question the attribution of a cosmological meaning to the Ifa geomantic boards. He considered them astrological objects, whose structure derived from ancient Chaldean and Egyptian cosmology. Neither could he challenge Frobenius regarding the application of his formal criticism, since he himself had employed morphological criteria to identify the historical and bibliographic sources of the decans in the Palazzo Schifanoja. He applied formal analogy, before historiographical analysis even, to study medieval figurative traditions such as the *mappa mundi*, the *mundus tetragonus*, the *tetramorphus*, and the human body understood as a microcosm, to which schematic representations of the zodiac were associated. One need only consult Tafel B of Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*, which figures cosmological representations relating to the human body by Hildegard von Bingen, Leonard, and Dürer. What is more, Warburg recognized the same numerological criterion concerning multiples of four (4-16-36) as the basis of the astral map of the decans. Warburg's criticism of

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<sup>20</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book* (London: Norton & Co, 2009); Werner Müller, *Kreis und Kreuz: Untersuchungen zur sakralen Siedlung bei Italikern und Germanen* (Berlin: Widekind, 1938).



Frobenius could only touch upon what he deemed to be his misguided philological method and the absence of any antiquarian conscience in his research. The results of their investigations, however, were far from contradictory.

Let us take a closer look at Frobenius's cosmological interpretation of the Ifa-Board. The quadripartition of the circle—the four corners of the square, the four arms of the swastika—involves a horizontal orientation system arising out of the practice of horizon partition, which persists today in the form of four cardinal points. Man's first attempt at orientation concerned the demarcation of the horizon, which enabled the outlining of horizontal coordinates (sections of human space) and vertical projections (heavenly space and astrological connections). By way of example, if, during Frobenius's time, the famous Nebra sky disk had already been discovered, he would have readily linked it to his cosmological disks. Even in this case, the representation of the celestial vault, with its main celestial bodies, was later reoriented following the addition of lateral gold bands, which produced four points of reference; these constituted true partitions in the horizon and allowed the minister of a hypothetical Neolithic solar cult to re-orient the sidereal instrument toward a heliocentric celestial system.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the orientation practice outlined in Ifa formal systems by Frobenius assumed a substantial value. In the Ifa quadripartite disks and their three-dimensional projections—permutations of which are found in other objects of worship (ritual chairs, thrones, and miniature temples)—Frobenius identified the symbolic reproduction of a specific cosmological model that recurs throughout the Western world and the Mediterranean basin: the celestial vault that rests on the ground supported by the pillars of the horizon. Having identified traces of this motif throughout Europe, especially in Greece and Egypt, Frobenius came to view this cosmological construct as the basis for the construction of temples across

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<sup>21</sup> Ute Kaufholz, *Sonne, Mond und Sterne: Das Geheimnis der Himmelsscheibe* (Anderbeck: Anderbeck, 2004).

various culture. The architecture of any given temple or house reproduces the closed schema of the universe: the sky vault supported by four pillars on the ground. The interior of the temple or house, or indeed the internal elements of the Ifa mantic circle, embodies the space of human life. The very center of the disc, namely the central column, assumes further formal and symbolic value, representing as it does the passage that unites the earth and sky. In Greek and Egyptian mythology, a sexual connection at the point where the sky meets the earth or vice versa allows for procreation; it also marks a physical and metaphysical connection.

Frobenius boldly established comparisons between the cults of the mountains, the construction of square pyramids, stepped temples all over the world, and the simplest huts or tents observed in his D.I.A.F.E. expeditions. A mountain peak, the apex of a pyramid, or the crest of a roof constitutes not merely a representation but rather the actual connection between man and god. Taken to its logical extreme, we could say that, for Frobenius, humanity, from its origins to the present day, has been involved in a process of constructing and organizing “temples” that facilitate contact with the divine (from the simplest domestic dwellings to the most complex edifices of the cult).

Frobenius also studies a variant of this pattern in the form of the staircase motif and, in particular, the staircase roof, the stepped pyramid present in the most ancient civilizations. Studies very similar to those made by Frobenius had already been carried out by exponents of formalistic currents *fin de siècle*, such as the aforementioned Semper<sup>22</sup> and Alois Riegl.<sup>23</sup> Only minimal differences distinguish Warburg’s from Frobenius’s interpretations of the house/temple and the temple/mountain cosmological motifs. During his fieldwork by the Pueblo and Hopi Indians, Warburg had asked one of the Pueblos to represent the whole world in a single sketch, and he was presented with the decorative model of a staircase roof that was omnipresent in Pueblo villages. Warburg observed the very same staircase pattern on the

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<sup>22</sup> Gottfried Semper, *Die Vier Elemente der Baukunst* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1851).

<sup>23</sup> Alois Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin: Siemens, 1893).

internal wall of one of the most modern buildings in the village: a Christian church—that is, a modern temple.

It occurred to me during the service that the wall was covered with pagan cosmologic symbols. . . The Church of Laguna is also covered with such painting, symbolizing the cosmos with a stair-shaped roof. The jagged ornament symbolizes a stair, and indeed not a perpendicular square stair but rather a much more primitive form of a stair, carved from a tree, which still exists among the Pueblos. In the representation of the evolution, ascents, and descents of nature, steps and ladders embody the primal experiences of humanity. They are the symbol for upward and downward struggle in space. . . . Man, who no longer moves on four limbs but walks upright and is therefore in need of a prop in order to overcome gravity as he looks upward, invented the stair as a means to dignify what in relation to animals are his inferior gifts. Man, who learns to stand upright in his second year, perceives the felicity of the step because, as a creature that has to learn how to walk, he thereby receives the grace of holding his head aloft. Standing upright is the human act par excellence, the striving of the earthbound toward heaven, the uniquely symbolic act that gives to walking man the nobility of the erect and upward-turned head.<sup>24</sup>

## VIII. POLARITY AND EMOTIONAL POTENTIAL

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<sup>24</sup> Warburg, *Images from the Pueblo Indians of North America*, 15–16.

Even for Warburg, the cosmological system of the stepped temple arises out of a need for orientation: it is concerned with the organization of vertical space and upward/downward moving channels. These have ethical and metaphysical implications, as evidenced not least by philosophical and literary traditions, including Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, Petrarch's ascent of Monte Ventoso (Mont Ventoux), and Dante Alighieri's mountain of Purgatorio. As with a staircase, you can climb up or down a mountain, so that ascent and descent become two different degrees of the same symbol. One's ascension to God in heaven is counterbalanced by a descent into the underworld. Pico della Mirandola's protagonist is caught between the angelic and the *imbestiamento*, and the mountain of Purgatory finds its likeness in the funnel of hell.

This formal and symbolic dualism is well governed by Semper's third formal principle, that of direction. Contrary to the previously mentioned examples of centripetal shapes, like the swastika and similar cosmograms, where this principle didn't show its relevance, in the case of linear decorative models, the principle of direction is crucial. The same linear pattern, moving upwards or downwards, will not create equivalent forms. Think of the classical example given by Semper, that of scalloping: facing upwards it gives rise to a crown, while facing downwards it creates a frame. A crown and a frame are not the same because they do not have the same meaning. The first one results in the continuation of an upward opening; the second one marks a limit, a closure or a delimitation of what is below.

This same principle, at once formal and symbolic is found in both the Frobenian and Warburgian lexicons as "polarity" (*Polarität*). Such a terminological affinity should not be surprising since the concept of polarity was popular in nineteenth-century German culture. It was a Neoplatonic concept made fashionable in Germany by Goethe; it also owed its popularity to the philological rediscovery of Neoplatonism in the Romantic circles of Heidelberg (in particular Friedrich Creuzer and Joseph Görres) and German idealism

(Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Hegel). The Neoplatonic concept of polarity applies to the scale of beings. This can be said to be homogeneous from the qualitative point of view, because every creature from the lowest to the highest share one and the same divine nature. What determines instead a real discontinuity in the scale of beings, especially between the creatures and God, is rather a quantitative aspect: the different degrees to which each creature participates in divine nature. The scale of beings must also be considered as a graduated scale, with God at one polar extreme (the pole of perfection) and creatures, including man, at the other, in continuous tension with one other. This same Neoplatonic model is at the basis of Pico della Mirandola's own model of the chain of being and his understanding of the degrees of tension separating man from God.

Frobenius and Warburg adopt the concept of polarity to describe the emotional potential linked to form shaping. They conceive the polar value of the image as arising out of the dynamism and tension between two opposite emotional poles that are substantially interconnected and dangerously interchangeable. In Warburg's case, the use of the polar function arises out of a need to elucidate apparent misunderstandings concerning some of the content of *Pathosformeln*. Among the most quoted case studies are gestural formulas that express the joy of salvation—formulas that, in another context, can also express the terror of an incipient catastrophe. The best-known case study features *Pathosformel* that normally indicates a threat but which, in another context, signifies protection: the famous case of the “Medea” model representing one of the miracles of Saint Bernardino,<sup>25</sup> studied by Warburg in his *Atlas Mnemosyne*. If we search within the repertoire of *Pathosformeln*, we find similar examples in symbolic images, such as the image of the snake studied by Warburg in both ancient Greece and the ethnographic context of the Pueblo Indians. The snake, the symbol of Asclepius, simultaneously points to danger and healing, to poison and medicine.

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<sup>25</sup> Agostino di Duccio, Miracolo di San Bernardino, bas-relief on the gate of the Oratory of San Bernardino, Perugia.

Even in some cases studied by Warburg, where *Pathosformeln* were misinterpreted by a misguided antiquarian tradition, the fact remains that such contrary readings—which produce what he called a “dynamic inversion” of the original meaning—can be justified, because indeed the same image can express opposite meanings. For both Frobenius and Warburg, who recognized emotional crystallization in images, emotional polarity was called upon to explain this type of contradictory phenomenon. If emotional potential is calculated on the basis of intensity, then opposite emotions of the same intensity can be interchangeable—that is, the greatest joy substitutes for the greatest pain.

In Warburg’s case, images are inherently double, and their emotional nature can be polarized in both a negative and a positive sense, so that a single image can simultaneously imply two ostensibly contradictory emotions, all the while remaining wholly appropriate. For Frobenius, things are slightly more complicated. Polarization can be understood in the sense of a simple duplication, whereby the form becomes symmetrical. In order to demonstrate such duplication, Frobenius examined the motif of “two animals facing each other” (for example, the lions gate in Mycenae), yet another universal form that he traced across centuries and cultures. In this case, the duplication and symmetrical inversion of the original form intensifies the original meaning: if a lion signifies strength and threat, then the wild lions facing each other represent greater protection against the enemy. In other words, two lions are better than one.

But the inherent ambiguity of the image can lead to a polarization that comprises formal variation or metamorphosis. In this case, the examples studied by Frobenius can be organized according to two main categories: opposition and substitution. Opposite meanings alternate when the form involves opposing contents in different cultures. This is particularly the case for gender alternation, that is, female/male alternation in images, conceptions, and ideas. Examples of this kind are the alternation of feminine or masculine names for the

sidereal bodies or numbers in different cultures. Another example Frobenius recalls on many occasions is the gender alternation by mythological pairs: the cosmologic model of Isis and Osiris in Egypt, with the masculine ground (Osiris) embraced and covered by the feminine sky (Isis), finds its chiasmic inversion in the Greek pair Uranus and Gaea, whereby the feminine ground (Gaea) is embraced by the masculine sky (Uranus).

Frobenius observed one of the first forms of polar substitution in the motif of the “forward-looking animal,” which appears in prehistoric examples including the parietal engravings he discovered in Fezzan on one of his D.I.A.F.E. missions, and which is a traceable, stable model in many successive cultures.

<Insert figure 3 here>

One image, for example, shows the likeness of an elephant in profile, representative of the dynamic/realistic style Frobenius recognizes as characteristic of the primitive cultures of this region. A second elephant, located only a few meters away from the first one, and which is similar in style, no longer represents an animal but rather a demon. This second elephant does not move, but it stands in front of the observer; it turns toward him, fixes upon him with a penetrating gaze, and prepares to charge. Frobenius studied the motif of the magical and enchanting gaze of forward-looking animals in other variants and across different historical and cultural contexts including lions in the rock art of the Saharan Atlas; the Sorcerer in the Cave of the Trois Frères, France; the Lion Gate relief in Mycenae; the heraldic figures of noble coats-of-arms; and Abyssinian seals frequently featuring forward-looking lions, among others. Warburg also wrote about the tradition of the magic (and hypnotic) gaze of demonic animals in reference to the cult of the snake among the Pueblo and Hopi Indians.

## IX. ON THE ATLAS AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Thus far, I have compared Warburg's and Frobenius's work on a theoretical basis, identifying conceptual tools common to the two thinkers as well as similarities in their formal methods.

Now I will address the genuine affinity between the cultural-scientific enterprises of Warburg and Frobenius: namely, the material element of their research.

Within my spirit lurked the idea of developing a large construction on the essence of human development, in which all sources were perfectly ordered, linked by an internal sense to form a solid structure, such as a stone house safe from human weakness. From a carpenter I ordered drawers, from a binder cardboard boxes and containers, where I could place the material in a precise order.<sup>26</sup>

These words were written by Frobenius, though they could just as easily have been written by Warburg. Both authors entrusted the continuation of their cultural projects to material archives and to the collection of formal data, whose cataloging and organization would, they hoped, become an effective and definitive tool for historical-cultural research. Warburg's project involved creating the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* in Hamburg, the ongoing reorganization of subjects and bibliographical notes within its archives, the so called *Zettelkasten* (archives of bibliographical cards), a collection of pictures and images (the photographic collection), and the creation of a network of collaborators to implement his method in different fields across the humanities. Frobenius's trajectory was quite similar: it involved the foundation of an *Afrika Archiv* in Berlin, the collection of ethnographic objects

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<sup>26</sup> "Im Geiste tauchte der Gedanke einer großen Einrichtung auf, in der alle Quellennachweise, wohlgeordnet, durch inneren Sinn gegliedert und durch ein festes Gerüst, gleichsam ein steinernes Heim für das Wesen menschlichen Werdens, vor der menschlichen Schwäche geschützt, für die Geschichte der Kultur aufzuspeichern seien. Bei einem benachbarten Tischler wurden die ersten entsprechenden Kästen bestellt, bei einem Buchbinder die Kartons und fein säuberlich zugerichtete Einlagen," Leo Frobenius, *Paideuma: Umriss einer Kultur- und Seelenlehre* (München: Beck, 1921), 2.



from his decades of exploration, and the establishment of a library and research institute focused on cultural morphology in Munich and, later, in Frankfurt, whose *Zettelkasten* were enriched by the work of external reporters equipped with specific questionnaires.

Both Warburg and Frobenius thought these huge collections of material data, once interpreted with a synoptic method, would lead to a bold, large scale comparison and synthesis. And, strikingly, both theorists chose exactly the same name for their respective synoptic projects: the Atlas. At first glance, the panels of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* have little to do with the boards of Frobenius's intended *African Atlas*. Warburg's atlas groups together images collected over history and through different media, connected by formal and analogical threads, while Frobenius's atlas was the first phase in a more ambitious project concerning an atlas of world culture. Following in the footsteps of the finest anthropological traditions of Adolf Bastian and Friedrich Ratzel,<sup>27</sup> Frobenius's atlas is a truly geographical one that translates material data from collections and archives into a symbolic language: it features arrows, vectors, bands, and areas of cultural influence across different ethnographic lands.

We should not forget, however, that the first table of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Tafel A) featured, among the most important representations of human relations (cosmological, hierarchical, and genealogical), a geographical map of Europe, which gave a comprehensive outline of the direction of culture (East-West, North-South) throughout European history. At the same time, if we retranslate the lines and vectors of Frobenius's atlas back to the original images and concrete data that formed the bedrock of his thought, we can observe similarities to the rich graphic tables found in Warburg's atlas. Indeed, Frobenius also identified forms separated by thousands of years and kilometers, juxtaposed them without spatial or temporal distinction, and presented them to the philosopher and cultural historian as

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<sup>27</sup> See Carlotta Santini, "Can Humanity be Mapped? Adolf Bastian, Friedrich Ratzel and the Cartography of Culture," *History of Anthropology Newsletter* 42 (2018), <http://histanthro.org/notes/can-humanity-be-mapped-adolf-bastian-friedrich-ratzel-and-the-cartography-of-culture/>.

an organic and meaningful unity that offered up immediate and intuitive modes of understanding. What was for Frobenius the first step, the synopsis of heterogeneous materials intended to reveal a morphological analogy, is for Warburg the last step following a necessary process of careful historical-philological research. The inference of historical and genealogical reconstructions—the drawing of geographical maps of cultural migration on the basis of only morphological analysis—was not enough for the historian Warburg.

## X. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, consider a very telling case in which Warburg also practiced geography. A close look at the *Zettelkasten* card containing Warburg's annotations of Becker's aforementioned review of Frobenius's *Und Afrika sprach* (WIA III 2.1 ZK, 021 011016), reveals a curious scrawl on the lower half of the sheet. It resembles a kind of flying buttress engulfed by three barely legible words. Even observers with limited knowledge of Frobenius's geographical foci will recognize the sketch as a representation of the magnificent and rather atypical arch of the Niger River, which delineates the Yoruba region and the other dreamlands of the much-desired African Atlantis. Warburg's annotations are the names of the populations inhabiting the great bend of the Niger river—the Mande, the Mossi, and the Nupe—which Becker cites in an attempt to summarize the complex cultural geographies outlined by Frobenius.

It is remarkable that Warburg had hit the mark and taken note of the core of Frobenius's thesis. The Niger River is indeed of relevance in Frobenius's work. Perhaps already known to the Romans, who believed it to be an offshoot of the great Nile River, it was identifiable as the Girin River, appearing in the extreme lower band of the famous *Tabula Peutingeriana*. The name Niger, contrary to what one might first imagine, is not of Latin

origin. The very mention of a “Girin” River on the Roman map suggests that its etymology is to be found in antiquity or that it is perhaps—and this is Frobenius’s thesis—a native term. His interest in the Niger River region is another proof of his aforementioned skepticism regarding the Arab cultural hegemony in black Africa. The cultural singularity of this region vis-à-vis other African regions—its richness and variety despite the formal and stylistic consistency of its cultural forms—provides enough evidence, as far as Frobenius is concerned, to identify it as a land that once functioned as a crossroads and an incubator of cultures.

The *Kulturkreis* of the Niger region countered the idea, prevalent at the time, of a black Africa incapable of culture and impermeable to civilization perceived to be only superficially influenced by the rich “higher cultures” of Egypt, the Carthaginians, and the Arabs that flourished to the North. The historical depth of the African cultures in this region continues to be corroborated today by archaeological finds. When, following a flood, the unregulated course of the Niger River brings to light the tombs of civilizations that once inhabited its shores, the valley’s riverbed showcases archaeological evidence of longstanding exchanges with Mediterranean civilizations going back millennia. Some of these finds—including ancient colored pearls, which remain characteristic cultural elements of the region, and key components of local craftsmanship even now—can be traced back to trade movements with at least three major Mediterranean powers: Venice, Byzantium, and Alexandria. The identification of geographical “hot spots” of African culture (the great bend of the Niger river for example)—hubs and nodes of cultural currents—and the study of their cultural crossroads and how they overlapped were essential to Frobenius’s reconstruction of cultural routes on a historical and geographical basis. His morphological method, which I very briefly described earlier, was to be the instrument that would undo these cultural knots, identify their cultural stratification, and retrace their paths. The cultural routes traced by

Frobenius, though in many cases mere conjecture based on poor archeological or documentary evidence, appeared perhaps less absurd to the anthropologists who later studied the extent of population movements and cultural exchange between the prehistoric continents (between Africa, Asia, and Oceania; between Asia and the Americas). Frobenius's research was indeed continued by his successors, Fritz Graebner and Bernhard Anckermann, who organized the famous Africa-Oceania comparative exhibition of 1905 at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin.<sup>28</sup>

Scientifically speaking, however, Frobenius's project of a philosophy of culture was much less problematic from a geographical point of view than it was from a historical perspective. His comparative ruthlessness, which juxtaposed forms originating in different cultures separated by tens of thousands of kilometers and centuries, if not millennia, of history, was one of the reasons why Warburg refused to label his method "scientific." Yet Warburg, who considered himself a sound philologist, did not link geographical and chronological limitations with improper methods, claiming too that images could be studied through the various registers of their different technical mediums and material supports.

The difference is that Warburg was legitimately inscribed within a historical field and practice; he relied on a historical method, and its investigative paths, however daring, remained verifiable in the light of historical or literary testimonies. On the contrary, while Frobenius claimed to be a historian, he nonetheless moved within a discipline consecrated to the present, anthropology, where historical evidence is necessarily weak. If Frobenius had remained faithful to the limits of his discipline, he would have been a scholar who focused on questions of detail and local culture. But Frobenius chose the most difficult path, that of the historian of civilization, within a field that, more than any other, left room for the audacity of speculation.

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<sup>28</sup> Fritz Graebner, "Kulturkreise und Kulturgeschichten in Ozeanien," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 37 (1905): 28–53; Bernhard Anckermann, "Kulturkreise und Kulturschichten in Afrika," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 37 (1905): 54–86.

We can ask ourselves at this point, whether Warburg, too, had always been faithful to the application of the historical-philological method within the limits prescribed by his discipline. Or hadn't he, like Frobenius, also shown more ambitious theoretical perspectives, which would explain how he was regarded by fellow colleagues with distrust? The respective projects of these authors, which we could rightly call humanistic, recognized in the psychological and epistemological investigation of the laws of expression, art, and cultural productions, the surest way to the knowledge of man as such. The migrations of classical images and stylistic features identified by Warburg are historically documentable, and the laws of their diffusion are those of direct reproduction, copying, appropriation, and voluntary re-elaborations for aesthetic and functional purposes. But *Mnemosyne's* bold comparisons go far beyond the specific paths dictated by the *fatum libellorum*. In its claim to trace the ultimate reasons for the production of images of humanity and the laws governing the survival of these images, Warburg's epistemological project, concealed behind the historical-critical one, is no less ambitious than that of Frobenius.

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