

Introduction: Natural Phenomena and Interpretation

Natural phenomena are physical processes. Mentioning or depicting them constitutes a snapshot where a film would be in order: a single εἰκών, whereas the context as a whole would really be needed to establish identification, working and function. General and ubiquitous concepts like "earthquake", "rain", "moon" present little difficulty on the cognitive level, but knowledge of the context in which they are used is necessary if one wants to 'understand' them: the *quod significatur* is a prerequisite for the *quod significat*. However, in Archaeology, History and Philology the cultural background of an item, whether artifact, "fact", picture or word, often has to be induced from (our definition of) the significant. Perhaps this is not so different in other sciences, such as physics, where an isolated phenomenon also gives rise to theories about the underlying principles and causes. In reconstructing and understanding ancient societies or other cultural contexts different from our own, as in other disciplines, the greatest pitfalls lie in definition and in classification.

The attempted understanding can be of several kinds. It can pertain to formal aspects (the identification of an artifact as a hand axe; asserting that Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C.; the translation of Akkadian *šarru* as 'king'), or to functional ones. In the latter case, utilitarian and symbolic function can be distinguished.

If we understand iconography as the isolation, description and interpretation of icons - understood in the widest sense of the word - all essays in this volume are iconographical. For instance, Orthmann's analysis of the Halawa paintings, Matthiae's identification of the god Yam and van Loon's ideas on the rainbow may be viewed as formal iconographical understanding (i.e. what Panofsky calls pre-iconographic description). Van Driel's account

of the weather would classify as utilitarian-functional, and Wiggermann's paper as symbolic-functional understanding.

According to Panofsky, iconography is the explanation of figures, stories and allegories. In the case of scientific endeavour, this explanation is by way of words. Our language plays a paramount role: "...the relationship between words and images reflects, within the realm of representation, signification, and communication, the relations we posit between symbols and the world, signs and their meanings."¹ Since the languages used in this volume, and those that yielded many of the concepts discussed during the symposium (Sumerian, Akkadian and Hittite), are very different or even not yet well-known, a consensus on any of those relations might seem difficult to reach. However, on the cognitive level, natural phenomena, both in verbal and pictorial representation, do admit of clear relations between sign and meaning. One of the unchangeable facts of life for a human is nature, and it gives rise to the ubiquitous experience and convention that rain means wetness, that the moon rises and wanes, and that earthquakes leave one no place to feel safe in.

It is of course on the more abstract level of surpassed human control that (especially symbolic) meaning or function is attached to nature. Rain that is too abundant in terms of human manageability should be 'explained away'. Powers called gods apparently have reasons for their actions, and these reasons are found in the shortcomings or sins of the not so powerful ones.

This translation of cause and effect into powerful-powerless, together with the subsequent attempts at appeasement by the powerless, gave rise to the creation of humanity's own "extra power": magic. In the minds of the powerless as a social group, their leader should be able to mediate between them and the powerful, whence the emphasis in the ancient Near East on the qualities of a ruler as a civil, social and religious engineer. In the mind of an individual, the mediation is assigned to 'lower' divinities. In both cases, the intermediary has both human and divine characteristics. Hence, also the mediation takes

¹W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology*. Chicago 1986, p. 43.

place in an extraordinary fashion. Both in words (e.g., prayers, that have a formulary markedly different from ordinary speech, giving them something 'magical') and in pictures (e.g. in the Çatal Hüyük hunting scenes to propitiate a successful outcome, or simply in adoration scenes) man uses a special, magical set of signs to address the 'magic' forces surrounding him.

The symbolism in which natural phenomena are clothed and the magic used in addressing them become merged. The embodiment of this merger is called mythology; there is no mythology where humans do not play at least some kind of role, and I think myths can be seen as the stories resulting from the tension between symbolized natural phenomena and magical attempts by man to control them. Whereas the controlling is done in the myth, the myth itself is an attempt at explanation.

The phenomena to be explained seem clear and unequivocal, but the explanations always entail elaboration and justification. Perhaps this is the reason for the fact that so few actual rain showers, lightning flashes, earthquakes or eclipses are mentioned or depicted. Their greater importance lay in the meaning attached to them (the symbolic function), in their perpetrators, and in the surest way to counter them. This focus by the early artists on the "meaning" often led to a stylization or short-hand version of the described phenomenon, while the pictorial emphasis lay on the attached symbolism - always a cultural convention difficult to fathom by those not belonging to that culture.

The essays in this volume are hoped to constitute one possible way out of that quandary. Cultural relativism is *en vogue*, and every student attacks his subject matter with his own preconceived ideas, which are determined by his own culture. Yet, it is by finding conventions and regularities within that subject matter, and by following their behaviour in their own context that we try, heuristically, to enter into an understanding: Landsberger's program for a way out of the *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*. It would seem that the study of those phenomena that are experienced by all people throughout their whole life, i.e. natural phenomena, is one of the promising avenues toward understanding different cultures.

The required distillation and understanding of the conventions used by the ancients, both in verbal and in pictorial art, might be called 'iconology', and their application to specific pieces of those arts, in analyzing and understanding them, iconography. Thus, when the essays collected here are iconographical in content, the volume itself may perhaps pave part of the way towards an Iconology of the Ancient Near East.