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Article

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# Henri Frankfort, Aby Warburg and 'Mythopoeic Thought'

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*This is the text of a lunchtime lecture given at the Warburg Institute in the spring of 2004. It formed part of a series given by current members of staff which were devoted to the work of past Warburg scholars, and was intended to introduce the audience - fellows, students and readers at the Warburg - to the work of Henri Frankfort, Director of the Institute from 1949 to 1954. Since Frankfort's interests were very distant from those of the Institute today, his life and work had largely been forgotten by modern Warburgians, and the first third of the lecture was of necessity a rapid account of his career. The remainder of the lecture is an analysis and criticism of the concept of 'primitive thinking' in the work of Frankfort and Aby Warburg.*

*To have rewritten the lecture as an article, taking into account the voluminous literature on Warburg, would have taken more time than I currently have available, and I thank Richard Woodfield for allowing me to publish it in this unrevised form. While the Warburg literature continues to expand apace - see Warburg 2010 for recent references - Frankfort is still undeservedly neglected; the most substantial study to date is Wengrow 1999.*

After Fritz Saxl's sudden death in 1948, he was succeeded as Director of the Warburg Institute by Henri Frankfort. Frankfort is to date the only Director of the Warburg not to have received the title 'Professor of the History of the Classical Tradition'. Instead he was made 'Professor of the History of Pre-Classical Antiquity'. There was no point in pretending; Frankfort did not study the classical tradition. In fact he did not even study the European tradition. Almost his entire research career was devoted to the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, before they were conquered by Alexander the Great. And Frankfort was mainly interested in periods well before Alexander; his research in Egypt focussed on the pharaohs Akhenaten and Seti I, who lived between 1350 and 1250 BC, while his Mesopotamian work was mostly devoted to the period from prehistory up to around 2000 BC.

The Henri Frankfort fellowship at this Institute, which was founded by his widow Enriqueta in memory of her husband, is, as its rubric asserts, 'not intended to support archaeological excavation'. This is somewhat ironic, since Frankfort was one of the most brilliant archaeological excavators of his generation. As the *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Archaeology in the Ancient Near East* puts it, 'the various archaeological expeditions that Henri Frankfort directed rank among the most carefully conducted, most fruitful, and best published of any of his time'.[1] And when the great Sumerologist Thorkild Jacobsen learned, in 1930, that the Iraq archaeological expedition of which he was to form a part would be directed by Frankfort, he was greatly pleased to hear it, since, he tells us, Frankfort was a man 'whom I had long admired from afar as a consummate

[1] Meyers, 1997: II, 344.

archaeologist'.[2] In 1930 Frankfort was just 33 years old, which gives you an idea of how quickly he established his great reputation.

Henri Frankfort was born in Amsterdam in 1897.[3] After studying Dutch language and literature at the university in his home town, he decided to change subject rather dramatically, and went to University College London to study Egyptology with Flinders Petrie. Here he wrote an M.A. dissertation on painted pottery styles in Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia, before 3000 BC. This may sound like an unambitious subject, but Frankfort used it to tackle a fundamental problem in world history. He attempted to trace the earliest interrelations between the cultural centres of the Near East, and he argued on the basis of their pottery traditions that the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia must have evolved independently of one another, only coming into contact after they had reached the stages of urbanism and complex political structure. His conclusion, which was radically at odds with the diffusionist theories popular at the time, is still generally accepted by archaeologists, and the thesis was considered so brilliant by a number of professors in London and Oxford that he was asked to prepare it for publication by the Royal Anthropological Institute.[4] While he was doing this, he studied for his Ph.D. at Leiden, applying his skills at tracing pottery styles to a later period, by showing the earliest interrelations of Greek and Near Eastern civilization in the Aegean and Levant.[5] In the wake of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* this general area of research has excited considerable interest amongst academics, but the train of thought which lies behind it is not new; Frankfort was tackling the problem eighty years ago.

Frankfort managed to finish his Ph.D. in three years—an impressive achievement, then as now. He also managed to write up his M.A. for publication at the same time. What makes this already commendable feat of industry almost unbelievable is that while he was carrying out these tasks he was also acting as Director of the Egypt Exploration Society, in charge of excavations at Tell el-Amarna, Abydos and Armant. In 1925, at the age of just 28, he had been given one of the most important administrative posts in British archaeology. Four years later he was given another prestigious post; he was invited to become Director of Chicago University's Oriental Institute Iraq Expedition. For the next 8 years he directed digs at Khorsabad, Tell Asmar, Khafaje and other sites in what had been southern Assyria. The most spectacular of these excavations was that of the Assyrian citadel and temple complex at Khorsabad, but Assyrian art left Frankfort cold, and he handed most of the excavation work there to his deputy, Gordon Loud. He was more interested in the art of earlier millennia, and in particular in the cylinder seals of the third millennium BC.

A cylinder seal is a small cylindrical piece of stone with an image engraved into it, so that when it is rolled over a piece of clay it leaves that image behind. Tens of thousands of these cylinder seals have been recovered from ancient Iraq, and their function, besides various amuletic uses, was to enable people to sign clay documents, pots and door sealings. Each cylinder seal, therefore, had to be unique, and as a result hundreds of different types of image, in tens of thousands of different permutations,

[2] Jakobsen, 1995: 2745.

[3] Most of the information in what follows is drawn from Van Loon, 1995.

[4] Frankfort, 1924.

[5] Frankfort, 1927.

have come down to us, and form by far our largest stock of visual information about ancient Iraqi culture.[6]

Frankfort was to write two books about cylinder seals. The first, called *Cylinder Seals: a Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, was published in 1939, and the second, *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region*, was published posthumously in 1955.[7] Both are still fundamental texts in Mesopotamian art history, in part because in them Frankfort published over 1000 cylinder seals for the first time, making them invaluable sources of documentation, in part because his precise archaeological work put the periodization of cylinder seals onto a much more secure footing, and in part because he was the first to identify correctly a number of iconographic types.

Frankfort had been made a Research Professor of the University of Chicago in 1932, and in the following year he was also made Extraordinary Professor at the University of Amsterdam. Although his academic bases at this time were in Iraq, the Netherlands and the United States, his home was in Hampstead, where he and his first wife, Henriette, kept house in the summers, between seasons of excavation.[8] Around 1937 the couple moved out of London to a cottage at Kimmeridge, near Corfe Castle in Dorset. Two of their guests there, for a fortnight in 1938, were Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, who the Frankforts had met two years previously, and with whom they had become very friendly.[9]

From 1938 until he came to the Warburg Institute as Director in 1949, Frankfort worked at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, a city he unfortunately detested. Nevertheless he was freed from the duty of administering excavations, and so was able to turn to turn his mind to a more theoretical approach to ancient Near Eastern civilization. Having published a stream of excavation reports, he now began to publish general books which synthesized his views on ancient culture. After his book on cylinder seals there appeared a book on Egyptian religion,[10] which was followed by one on ancient Near Eastern concepts of kingship.[11] Together with Henriette and his Chicago colleagues Thorkild Jacobsen and John Wilson, he also published a very ambitious book on the nature of speculative thought in Egypt and Mesopotamia, which was published in America as *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*[12] and in Britain as *Before Philosophy*.[13] I shall be returning to this book in a moment, since it contains his fullest exposition of the concept of 'mythopoeic thought'.

Once he had arrived in London to direct this Institute Frankfort's pace of work did not slacken. In 1951 he published a study on the origins of civilization in the Near

[6] The best recent introduction to the subject is Collon, 1987. For the proceedings of a Warburg colloquium on the iconography of cylinder seals, see Taylor, 2004.

[7] Frankfort, 1939; 1955.

[8] Henriette was of course the author of *Arrest and Movement*: Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951. His second wife, Enriqueta, was an expert on Velázquez and Goya.

[9] Warburg Institute Archive, Frankfort correspondence.

[10] Frankfort, 1948a.

[11] Frankfort, 1948b.

[12] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson, Jacobsen & Irwin, 1946.

[13] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949.

East, a return to the subject area of his MA thesis;[14] and shortly before his death he completed his final work, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, for the Pelican History of Art series.[15] This text has been republished five times, and the editors of the most recent edition remark that 'it is a remarkable tribute to Henri Frankfort's genius that ever since it was written *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* has been the standard introductory textbook to the subject and that despite the intense research that has taken place in the last forty years almost all of Frankfort's conclusions remain valid and in many cases his discussions cannot be bettered.'[16]

During the course of his life Frankfort wrote nineteen books as sole author, and another four as principal author. This means that he wrote more books than all the other Directors of the Warburg combined. That he managed to pack this into a life of just 57 years, on the back of an extremely busy administrative career, is hard to believe. As one of his colleagues in Amsterdam put it, 'Frankfort was an enormously dynamic personality. He could accomplish more in a day than anyone else in a month, besides being very cheerful and lively.'[17]

From what I have said up till now you will, I am sure, have come to the conclusion that Henri Frankfort was a very impressive person. Nevertheless, you might still be wondering, as I too have wondered, why this very impressive *archaeologist of the ancient Near East* was made Director of the Warburg, an institute that supposedly studies the classical tradition in Europe, in the middle ages and the Renaissance. It is hard to imagine that any of the other scholars considered for the Directorship were *prima facie* less academically qualified for the post than Frankfort was, so why was he offered the job?

Obviously, we can never know the answer to that question for sure. Verbatim minutes of the selection committee's deliberations were not kept. From what has been preserved in the Warburg archive we can reconstruct only some of their deliberations. We learn that the assistant Director, Gertrud Bing, presented them with a list of five people who, she thought, would be right for the job, with her reasons for so thinking.[18] Unfortunately that list does not appear to have survived. None of the people on the list had applied for the job, and none of them knew they were on the list. It might be added that Bing was the only member of the Warburg staff on the committee, which consisted of senior University professors, and in fact no one at the Institute except Bing had any idea what was going on.[19]

The committee must have ranked Bing's five possibilities, and after the meeting, a letter was sent to their first choice, asking him if he would accept the Directorship.

[14] Frankfort, 1951.

[15] Frankfort, 1954.

[16] From the introduction by Michael Roaf and Donald Matthews to the 1996 edition, published by Yale University Press.

[17] Miss J. A. Groothand, secretary at the Amsterdam Archaeological Institute, quoted in Van Loon, 1995: 60.

[18] Warburg Institute Archive, Frankfort correspondence. Letter from Bing to Frankfort, 4/8/48.

[19] Warburg Institute Archive, Frankfort correspondence. Letter from Edna Purdie to Frankfort, 28/6/48.

That first choice was not Frankfort; it was Erwin Panofsky: but Panofsky declined the offer.[20]

The committee then offered the job to Frankfort, and, after six weeks of understandable dithering, he accepted.

So, why was Frankfort chosen by the selection committee above three of Bing's other candidates? We do not know, but we can probably guess some of the truth. The committee must have been impressed by Frankfort's administrative experience, which could hardly have been equalled by any other scholar of similar age. They must also have been encouraged by his ability to publish copious amounts of first-rate research. Nor was he in the least bit narrow; he had read widely in English, French and German literature and philosophy, and so was well-placed to take an intelligent interest in the work of his colleagues. All of these features must have helped Frankfort in the committee's eyes. And I should add that another advantage he seems to have had is that Bing was strongly in his favour from the start.[21]

But there was too an element of Frankfort's scholarship which, or so I shall argue, probably helped his application for the post. His field of interest may at first sight seem entirely alien to the Warburg tradition, but he shared with Warburg and Saxl a number of philosophical attitudes towards the conduct of research. In particular, he had made a serious contribution to one problem that Aby Warburg had always considered central to his own ideas. The problem in question concerned the relationship between, on the one hand, 'modern', 'scientific' or 'rational' thought, and, on the other, 'primitive', 'mythical', or 'mythopoeic' thought.

In his published and also in his unpublished writings, Warburg had little concrete to say about primitive or mythopoeic thought, but from what he did say we can safely deduce that he considered the concept crucial to his whole intellectual endeavour. He certainly gave this impression to Fritz Saxl, who wrote that:

The study of philosophy was for Warburg inseparable from that of the so-called primitive mind: neither could be isolated from the study of imagery in religion, literature and art. These ideas had found expression in the unorthodox arrangement of the books on the shelves [of his library].[22]

In a series of notes that Warburg jotted down in 1923, as he was preparing to give his lecture on the Hopi serpent ritual, he made it clear that Saxl did not misrepresent him in these remarks. Warburg wrote as follows:

The means of my library should serve to answer the question which Hering formulated so aptly as 'memory as organized matter'; likewise it should make use of the psychology of primitive man—that is the type of man whose reactions are immediate reflexes rather than literary responses—and also take account of the the psychology of civilized man who consciously recalls the stratified formation of his ancestral and

[20] Wuttke, 2003: 942-5, 950-2, 964, 991-2.

[21] Warburg Institute Archive, Frankfort correspondence. Letter from Bing to Frankfort, 4/8/48.

[22] Saxl, 1949: 47.

personal memories. With primitive man the memory image results in a religious embodiment of causes, with civilized man in detachment through naming.[23]

These remarks are very condensed, and contain a great deal of Warburg's general theory of culture. Rather than attempting to interpret them straight away, I think it would be helpful to turn to what Frankfort had to say about 'mythopoeic thought'. For if Warburg's writings on mythopoeic thought are infrequent and gnomic, Frankfort wrote at length and with great clarity on the subject. And although Warburg and Frankfort have rather different conceptions of mythopoeic thought, the latter makes a useful introduction to the thought of the former. Or at least, I have found that a number of obscure passages of Warburg have become clearer to me after reading Frankfort's lucid exposition.

Frankfort discussed the concept of 'mythopoeic thought' most fully in the Introduction and Conclusion which he wrote, with his wife Henriette, to the multi-author volume I have already mentioned, published in America as *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* and in Britain as *Before Philosophy*. There are I think one or two indications that Frankfort himself found the American title slightly embarrassing, and so in what follows I shall use the British title, which is in any case much more informative about the contents of the book. Frankfort also used the concept of 'mythopoeic thought' quite extensively in his book *Kingship and the Gods*, which was written just before *Before Philosophy*, though published two years later.

Frankfort believed, and of course he was not the only person to have believed this, that Greek philosophy marked a major change in world thought. As the Frankforts put it:

…throughout early Greek philosophy *reason* is acknowledged as the highest arbiter… It is this tacit or outspoken appeal to reason, no less than the independence from 'the prescriptive sanctities of religion', which places Greek philosophy in the sharpest contrast with the thought of the ancient Near East.[24]

In attempting to describe the particular quality of ancient Near Eastern thought, Frankfort used three terms as near synonyms: 'pre-Greek', 'primitive', and 'mythopoeic'. He nevertheless wished to make it clear that both 'pre-Greek and 'primitive' might be misunderstood, and clarified the matter in *Kingship and the Gods* as follows:

When we speak occasionally of 'pre-Greek' or 'primitive'—instead of mythopoeic—thought, we do not mean to suggest that the Egyptians and Mesopotamians must be viewed as modern savages or that the myth-making tendencies died with the Greeks… But, however irrational modern man may be in reasoning or reactions, he nevertheless attaches authority to 'scientific' thought alone. It is the absence of this norm which puts primitive and pre-Greek thought beyond our understanding unless we allow for the difference and adapt ourselves to its consequences.[25]

[23] Gombrich, 1970: 222-3. On the serpent ritual lecture see the original versions and notes in Warburg 2010. I thank Katia Mazzucco for this reference.

[24] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 262.

[25] Frankfort, 1948b: 362.

What then was this difference between modern and pre-Greek thought? The Frankforts expressed it using a distinction borrowed from the theology of Martin Buber:[26]

The fundamental difference between the attitudes of modern and ancient man as regards the surrounding world is this: for modern, scientific man the phenomenal world is primarily an 'It'; for ancient—and also for primitive—man it is a 'Thou'.[27]

By this they meant to suggest that ancient and primitive people viewed the world not as inanimate but as alive, possessed of the same consciousness that humans know themselves to possess. As they put it:

The world appears to primitive man neither inanimate nor empty but redundant with life; and life has individuality, in man and beast and plant, and in every phenomenon which confronts man—the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the eerie and unknown clearing in the wood, the stone which suddenly hurts him when he stumbles while on a hunting trip.[28]

It may sound from these statements as if the Frankforts were subscribing to the widespread theory of animism, a term coined by Sir Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* of 1871. There can be no doubt that Tylor was the founder of the tradition within which they were working, but the Frankforts were nevertheless keen to put distance between their theory and that of Tylor and his immediate followers.

…there is justification for the aphorism of [Ernest] Crawley: 'Primitive man has only one mode of thought, one mode of expression, one part of speech—the personal.' This does not mean (as is so often thought) that primitive man, in order to explain natural phenomena, imparts human characteristics to an inanimate world. Primitive man simply does not know an inanimate world. For this very reason he does not 'personify' inanimate phenomena nor does he fill an empty world with the ghosts of the dead, as 'animism' would have us believe.[29]

This is a rather peculiar objection to the animist theory. Tylor and his followers were all atheist materialists, who believed that the world was made up of inanimate particles. If primitive man held the view that the material world was somehow alive, then primitive man must have made a mistake; and Tylor and others attempted to explain how this mistake had come about. The Frankforts' claim that 'Primitive man simply does not know an inanimate world' and that 'For this very reason he does not 'personify' inanimate phenomena' would seem on the face of it to have missed the point entirely. It may well be that primitive man never sees the world as inanimate, but from the materialist perspective the world simply *is* inanimate, so primitive man *must* be reading life into the world, given that the world is lifeless.

[26] Buber, 1923.

[27] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 12.

[28] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 14. The last example is taken from Van der Leeuw, 1938: 37; Frankfort quotes it approvingly in Frankfort, 1948b: 377.

[29] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 14.

It is possible that the Frankforts just failed to notice a slip in their own logic here, but it is also possible that there is method in their illogicality. When he was an undergraduate, Frankfort had been very attracted to mysticism, and held the view, which was common enough in artistic and intellectual circles at the time, that the world's religions all expressed a single truth in different ways. Thus, to those who had the spiritual key, it could be shown that Lao Tzu, Confucius, Plato, Buddha, Plotinus, Hegel, Spinoza and others all had identical conclusions with regard to absolute, religious truth. In a letter written when he was twenty, Frankfort laid out his mystical philosophy. The world, he claimed, is an illusion, the manifestation of a God who is at once transcendent and immanent. The deepest levels of the human mind allow us to commune, or possibly to identify with God; and the aim of life is to approach ever closer to the Divine Essence, which can be experienced directly.[30]

I do not know if Frankfort still held to this credo in later life.[31] But throughout his career he was fascinated by religion, as shown by the fact that he wrote two books on aspects of religious life in the ancient Near East; and he kept abreast of contemporary developments in theology and spiritually-minded philosophy, referring in his academic work to the writings of Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Henri Bergson, Ernst Cassirer and Carl Jung. We can at least be sure that Frankfort was well aware of metaphysical alternatives to materialism, and it is perfectly possible that he shared some variety of the opinion he ascribed to primitives, that the world is replete with life. It is indeed a logically valid objection to Tylor's animism to say that primitives cannot be personifying an inanimate world, because the world is not inanimate. It is possible that Frankfort believed the world was alive, but felt that, in the academic culture of his day, it might be wiser not to state that view explicitly.

According to the Frankforts, the tendency to view the world as alive spills over into other areas of primitive thought. The making of myths—'mythopoeic' means 'myth-making'—is a way of reading natural events as the outcome of conscious intention. To give an example, a Babylonian myth tells us that the gigantic lion-headed bird Imdugud devoured the Bull of Heaven, and this story had been interpreted by Thorkild Jacobsen as an attempt to represent in mythic form the ending of a drought by the wings of a storm.

In telling such a myth [the Frankforts assert], the ancients did not intend to provide entertainment. Neither did they seek, in a detached way and without ulterior motives, for intelligible explanations of natural phenomena. They were recounting events in which they were involved to the extent of their very existence. They experienced, directly, a conflict of powers, one hostile to the harvest on which they depended, the other frightening but beneficial: the thunderstorm reprieved them in the nick of time by defeating and utterly destroying the drought. The images had already become traditional at the time when we meet them in art and literature, but originally they must have been seen in the revelation which the experience entailed. They are products of imagination, but they are not mere fantasy. It is essential that true myth be distinguished from legend, saga, fable, and fairy tale… [Myth] is nothing less than a

[30] Van Loon, 1995: 5-6.

[31] His widow Enriqueta was certain that he did not. (personal commuunication)

carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought. The imagery is inseparable from the thought. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious.[32]

This is a rich passage, which deserves closer attention than I can give it here. But for now I would just like to say that the connection made by the Frankforts between a personal relationship to nature on the one hand, and the personal agents found in myth on the other, was one often found in earlier authors from Tylor onwards, including Cassirer and Warburg. The phrase 'mythopoeic thought'—in German 'das mythische Denken'—is intended to cover not only the tendency to make myths, but also the general animist attitude of mind which, it was believed, lay behind the myth-making faculty.

In 1925 Ernst Cassirer published *Das mythische Denken*, the second volume of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, and Frankfort—who had met Cassirer over supper with Saxl and Bing in 1936[33]—read this book very closely. Indeed, certain phrases in *Before Philosophy* recall sentences written by Cassirer. Thus the Frankforts write that:

The primitive uses symbols as much as we do; but he can no more conceive them as signifying, yet separate from, the gods or powers than he can consider a relationship established in his mind—such as resemblance—as connecting, and yet separate from, the objects compared. Hence there is coalescence of the symbol and what it signifies, as there is coalescence of two objects compared so that one may stand for the other.[34]

This has much the same flavour as Cassirer's comment that:

Where we see mere 'representation', myth, insofar as it has not yet deviated from its fundamental and original form, sees real identity. The 'image' does not represent the 'thing'; it *is* the thing; it does not merely stand for the object, but has the same actuality, so that it replaces the thing's immediate presence.[35]

The Frankforts give a concrete historical example which supposedly demonstrates this principle at work. At an Egyptian ritual, of which we have records, bowls painted with the names of hostile kings were solemnly smashed. The object of the ritual, we are told in the original texts, was that the pharaoh's enemies should die. The Frankforts add to this the following comment:

…if we call the ritual breaking of the bowls symbolical, we miss the point. The Egyptians felt that *real* harm was done to the enemies by the destruction of their names… For us there is an essential difference between an act and a ritual or a symbolic performance. But this distinction was meaningless to the ancients.[36]

It should be said that although the Frankforts are close in thought to Cassirer here, these ideas were not original when Cassirer wrote them down, a fact of which the Frankforts and Cassirer were well aware. The notion of the magical power of the name

[32] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949, p. 15.

[33] Warburg Institute Archive, Frankfort correspondence. Letter from Bing to Frankfort, 25/6/36.

[34] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 21.

[35] Cassirer, 1955: 38.

[36] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 21-2.

had been discussed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in his book *Mental functions in inferior societies*, published in 1910.[37] Both Cassirer and the Frankforts had read this, and Lévy-Bruhl's doctrine of 'mystical participation' is close to many of the ideas in *Das mythische Denken* and *Before Philosophy*. Nor was Lévy-Bruhl being entirely original, since he drew on the work of contemporaries such as Émile Durkheim, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who in their turn had been reading Frazer and Tylor, who had read Comte and Spencer, and so on. We are dealing with a broad intellectual tradition, and I do not want to give the impression that the Frankforts and Cassirer were in any way unusual in describing primitive thought in the ways they did.

The Frankforts conclude their discussion of mythopoeic thought with an analysis of the mythopoeic attitudes to causality, space and time. Primitives, in their opinion, view all three through the veil of personality: thus causes are inevitably thought to be somehow personal. If a river has not risen, then it must have decided not to rise; and the Frankforts tell us that Gudea, king of Lagash, slept in the temple of his city in order to be told in a dream why the Tigris had not risen. Similarly, space is understood in terms which define it in such a way that it reflects human interests. There were in ancient Egypt at least four temples which claimed to enclose the primeval hill, which rose from the waters of chaos and first created dry land, despite the fact that, in the myth, there was only one primeval hill. But the ancient Egyptians, the Frankforts tell us, would have considered it a mere quibble to worry whether a single hill could really appear in four places at once.

In their final section, on time, the Frankforts explicitly acknowledge a debt to Cassirer, before discussing Egyptian and Babylonian attitudes to time, analysing in particular the New Year festival in Mesopotamia, a subject that fascinated Frankfort. From this discussion the authors conclude that

…time to early man did not mean a neutral and abstract frame of reference but rather a succession of recurring phases, each charged with a peculiar value and significance.[38]

As a summary of their entire position, the Frankforts write as follows.

We have attempted to demonstrate how the 'logic', the peculiar structure, of mythopoeic thought can be derived from the fact that the intellect does not operate autonomously because it can never do justice to the basic experience of early man, that of confrontation with a significant 'Thou'. Hence when early man is faced by an intellectual problem within the many-sided complexities of life, emotional and volitional factors are never debarred; and the conclusions reached are not critical judgments but complex images.[39]

I have stressed that Frankfort's ideas about mythopoeic thought formed part of an anthropological tradition, and that this tradition stretched back into the nineteenth century. When Aby Warburg was at university in the 1880s he also came into contact with earlier forms of this tradition, and it appears that he, like Frankfort, considered them important and intellectually helpful. One writer he seems to have found

[37] Lévy-Bruhl, 1910.

[38] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 35.

[39] Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson & Jacobsen, 1949: 35-6.

particularly stimulating was Tito Vignoli, an animal behaviourist and evolutionary theorist whose book *Mito e Scienza*, first published in 1879, went through a number of editions in Italian, German and English. When Warburg came to jot down a series of notes outlining his basic position on primitive thought, as part of the preparation for the lecture on the Hopi serpent ritual which he gave in April 1923, the first sentence of his first note referred to Vignoli. He wrote:

It is characteristic of mythopoeic mentality (cf. Tito Vignoli, *Myth and Science*) that for any stimulus, be it visual or auditory, a biomorphic cause of a definite and intelligible nature is projected which enables the mind to take defensive measures. This applies, for instance, to distant noises, as when a door creaks in the wind, since such stimuli arouse anxieties among savages or children who may project into such a noise the image of a snarling dog…. In primitive man memory functions through the substitution of biomorphic comparisons. This may be understood as a defensive measure in the struggle for existence against living enemies which the memory, in a state of phobic arousal, tries to grasp in their most distinct and lucid shapes while also assessing their full power in order to take the most effective defensive measures. These are tendencies below the threshold of consciousness.[40]

Vignoli saw himself as working in the tradition of Darwin, Spencer and Tylor, and agreed with Tylor that primitive man believed the world to be animated. His only departure from Tylor's viewpoint was in Tylor's claim that animism grew out of the mistaken thought-processes of early man. Vignoli believed that the animation of nature was not an invention of mankind, but rather a legacy; because he believed that animals also lived in an animated world. In his own words:

Every object of animal perception is therefore felt, or implicitly assumed, to be a living, conscious, acting subject.[41]

Vignoli was led to this belief by his experiments on animals. For example, he hit a dog with a stick a number of times and then observed that the dog became afraid of the stick. From this he implausibly concluded that the dog must think the stick was alive.[42] In some ways Vignoli can be seen as a forerunner of socio-biologists today, who try to provide evolutionary explanations for aspects of human behaviour. Vignoli held that animals saw the world as conscious because it was a useful attitude to have in a dangerous environment, and had thus been selected for by the evolutionary struggle for survival. Whether or not his theory is true, his argument is at least Darwinian.

Warburg does not seem to have been particularly interested in Vignoli's theory of the zoological origins of mythopoeic thought, despite the fact that Vignoli believed it to be his only original contribution to the animist debate. What he was interested in was Vignoli's general discussion of the relationship between the primitive animation of the world and the tendency to make myths, and the later growth of science out of the myth-making attitude of mind. For Warburg, many of the symbols of mythology and art were derived from primitive, animistic layers of consciousness, which he believed lived side by side with civilized consciousness. As he put it:

[40] Gombrich, 1970: 217-8.

[41] Vignoli, 1898: 65.

[42] Vignoli, 1898: 63.

All mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic. Ontogenetically, however, we may perhaps describe one type of response to memory images as prior and primitive, though it continues on the sidelines. At the later stage the memory no longer arouses an immediate, purposeful reflex movement—be it one of a combative or a religious nature—but the memory images are now consciously stored in pictures and signs. Between these two stages we find a treatment of the impression that may be described as the symbolic mode of thought.[43]

The importance of mythopoeic thought for Warburg, then, was that he believed an understanding of primitive modes of thinking allowed one to understand the function and the power of emotionally-laden symbols in the history of civilization. Symbols of this kind represented one form of the afterlife of mythopoeic thought.

The concept of 'mythopoeic thought' was of fundamental importance to both Warburg and Frankfort. But although they and other major figures in early twentieth-century scholarship made much use of the notion, it is largely forgotten today. There are various reasons for this, the most important of which is that anthropology itself has moved on from the concept. Even before the Frankforts published their ideas on mythical thinking in the late 40s, the work of Lévy-Bruhl was regularly and ritually execrated by Anglo-American field-workers. Frankfort was aware that Lévy-Bruhl was thought to have 'gone too far', but this did not stop him from using Lévy-Bruhl's key concept of 'mystical participation' in the first paragraph of *Kingship and the Gods*.

The kinds of objection that were advanced against the theories of primitive thought used by Warburg, Cassirer and Frankfort are neatly encapsulated in Edward Evans-Pritchard's book *Theories of Primitive Religion*, which was based on a series of lectures he gave in 1962.[44] In this book Evans-Pritchard took the whole tradition of animist and evolutionist thinking from Tylor to Lévy-Bruhl and subjected it to a scathing, often contemptuous analysis. A number of his criticisms are very serious ones for the kind of anthropological theory relied on by Warburg, Cassirer and Frankfort. First of all, much early ethnology, in Evans-Pritchard's view, was of questionable value. Thus Herbert Spencer claimed that the language of the African Bushmen required so many gestures and signs to make it intelligible that they were unable to communicate in the dark. Spencer names no source for this claim, but that did not stop Tito Vignoli repeating it as gospel.[45] Even Émile Durkheim, a much more careful researcher than Vignoli, fell foul of dubious ethnography. Most of his theory of totemism was based on Australian fieldwork which he praised for its 'remarkable sagacity',[46] but which Evans-Pritchard dismissed as 'poor and confused'.[47]

Evans-Pritchard's experience of African religion made him sceptical of a number of the mantras of 'mythopoeic thought'. Early anthropologists, he argued, tended to select curious and sensational features of the societies they visited, and neglected the mundane and matter-of-fact. As a result they grossly overestimated the difference

[43] Gombrich, 1970: 223.

[44] Evans-Pritchard, 1965.

[45] Vignoli, 1898: 209; Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 106.

[46] Durkheim, 1925: 128.

[47] Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 58.

between primitive thinking and our own. People who live in primitive societies spend the vast majority of their time engaged in practical activities, and the great bulk of their thought processes as they conduct these activities are as logical or as rational as ours are. If one's categories of causality, space and time do not mirror the workings of causality, space and time in the real world, then one is not likely to be much use on a buffalo hunt, or a mushroom-gathering expedition. As Evans-Pritchard says,

It is self-evident that, far from being such children of fancy as [Lévy-Bruhl] makes them out to be, [primitives] have less chance to be than we, for they live closer to the harsh realities of nature, which permit survival only to those who are guided in their pursuits by observation, experiment, and reason.[48]

This selection of the extraordinary at the expense of the mundane can be found *passim* in early anthropology, and also, we should add, in the writings of Frankfort. Frankfort's examples of ancient Near Eastern thought are almost exclusively taken from myths, rituals or hymns to the gods. Admittedly, very little other literature has come down to us from the ancient Near East, but that does not mean that we can interpret such texts as unproblematic tokens of contemporary thought. People often suspend their rationality when engaged in religious activity, but can be logical and shrewd in other contexts.

Another point that needs to be made is that Frankfort greatly underestimated the scientific achievements of pre-Greek culture. It is not merely that, as modern ethnobiology has shown, hunter-foragers know rather a lot about the zoology and botany of the regions in which they live.[49] Frankfort also did not appreciate the mathematical sophistication of Babylonian astrology, failing to take account of the seminal publications of Otto Neugebauer during the mid-1930s. In the light of Neugebauer's work it has become clear that the Greeks added little to the applied mathematics and astronomy of the Babylonians. Noel Swerdlow has recently described the Babylonian scientific achievement as follows:

They have left no record of their theoretical analyses and discussions, but to judge from the works they have left us… the discussions of two Scribes of Enuma Anu Enlil contained more rigorous science than the speculations of twenty philosophers speaking Greek, not even Aristotle excepted. … The origin of rigorous, technical science was not Greek but Babylonian, not Indo-European but Semitic, something I believe no one who has read Kugler and Neugebauer with understanding can doubt...[50]

So, to conclude, it would I think be argued by scholars today that Warburg and Frankfort overstated the differences between primitive and scientific thought. If people in civilized societies sometimes behave irrationally, we should not see this as an unconscious memory of a primitive period of human history when everyone behaved irrationally all the time, as Warburg seems to have thought. And when we are trying to understand the intellectual achievements of the Greeks and their successors, we should not set the Greeks up as the virtual inventors of reason, as Frankfort did.

[48] Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 87-8.
[49] Schultes & Von Reis, 1995.
[50] Swerdlow, 1998: 181-2.

Nevertheless, although their ideas are no longer tenable, there is something attractive about the sheer intellectual ambition of Warburg and Frankfort which seems to me to go beyond simple glamour. They wanted to use the humanities as a means of understanding mankind's development though time. Today we concentrate minutely on concrete historical problems, but perhaps, every now and then, we should step back, as Warburg and Frankfort did, and look at the general stream of history of which we form part. For, as Edward Tylor put it, 'they who wish to understand their own lives ought to know the stages through which their opinions and habits have become what they are.'[51]

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[51] Tylor, 1929: 19.

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