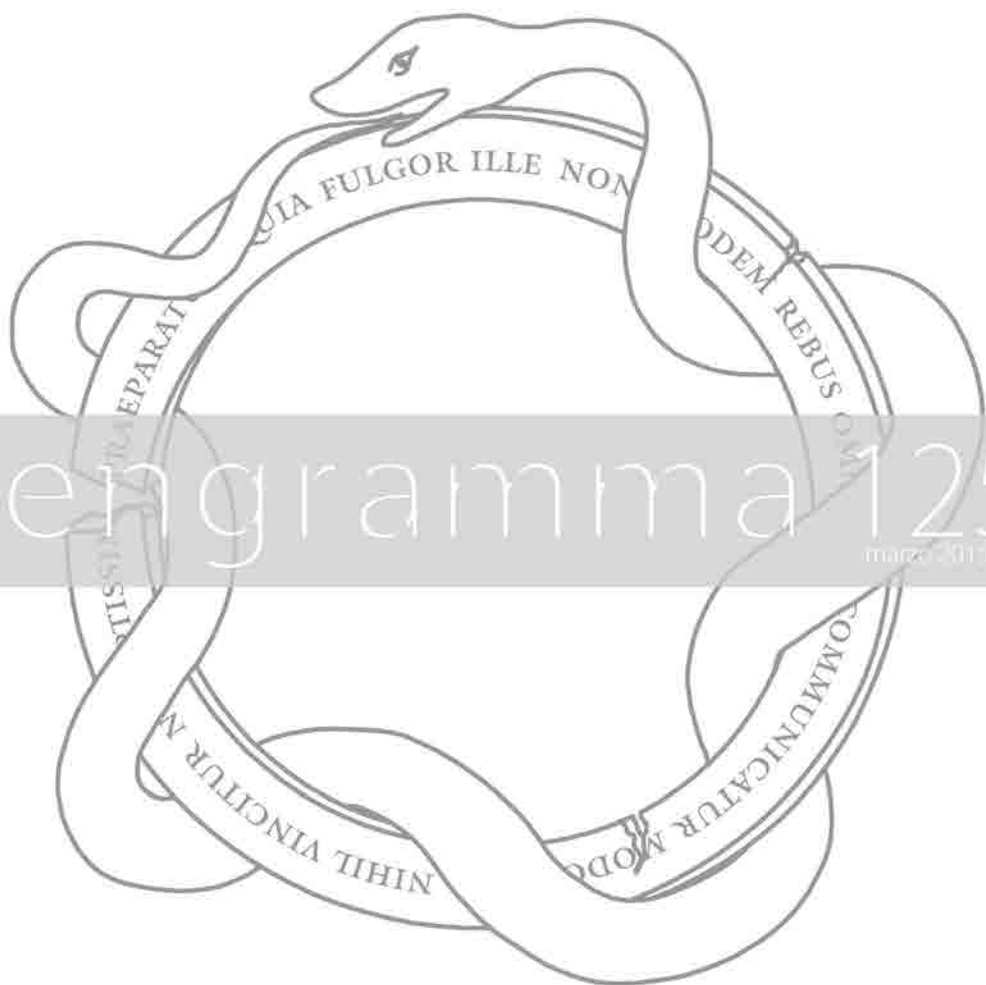


**125**

**marzo 2015**



# ATLANTE A B C

De Laude/ Magnano San Lio/ Sprung /  
Seminario Mnemosyne del Centro studi classica



ENGRAMMA • 125 • MARZO 2015  
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-70-6

# Atlante A B C

a cura di Daniela Sacco, Silvia De Laude

ENGRAMMA. LA TRADIZIONE CLASSICA NELLA MEMORIA OCCIDENTALE  
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-70-6

DIRETTORE

monica centanni

REDAZIONE

elisa bastianello, maria bergamo, giulia bordignon, giacomo calandra di rocolino,  
olivia sara carli, claudia daniotti, francesca dell'aglio, simona dolari, emma filipponi,  
silvia galasso, marco paronuzzi, alessandra pedersoli, daniele pisani, stefania rimini,  
daniela sacco, antonella sbrilli, linda selmin

COMITATO SCIENTIFICO INTERNAZIONALE

lorenzo braccesi, maria grazia ciani, georges didi-huberman, alberto ferlenga, kurt  
w. forster, fabrizio lollini, paolo morachiello, lionello puppi, oliver taplin

*this is a peer-reviewed journal*

- 6 Iter per labyrinthum: le tavole A B C. L'apertura tematica dell'Atlante Mnemosyne di Aby Warburg  
a cura del Seminario Mnemosyne del Centro studi classicA
- 18 Through the Maze: Plates A B and C  
The opening themes of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas  
by the Mnemosyne Seminar group of ClassicA - English version by  
Elizabeth Thomson
- 30 "Symbol tut wohl!" Il simbolo fa bene! Genesi del blocco ABC del  
Bilderatlas Mnemosyne di Aby Warburg  
Silvia De Laude
- 80 A few comments on Aby Warburg's phrase: "Kritik der reinen  
Unvernunft"  
Joacim Sprung
- 99 Ninfe ed ellissi. Dilthey, Usener, Warburg e Cassirer (Liguori 2014).  
Presentazione del volume  
Giancarlo Magnano San Lio

# Through the Maze: Plates A B and C

The opening themes of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas

by the Mnemosyne Seminar group of ClassicA | Centre for Classical Studies Iuav, co-ordinated by Monica Centanni, Silvia De Laude, Daniela Sacco, Silvia Urbini

English version by Elizabeth Thomson

## The opening plates of Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas

The first three plates of the Mnemosyne Bilderatlas are headed by the letters A, B and C unlike the plates that follow which are identified by numbers, 1– 79. Their position and identification by number reveal that the plates are a related group, and are distinct from the other panels. Panels A, B and C prove to be an introduction to the themes contained in the Atlas as a whole, a sort of threshold leading to the labyrinth which is Mnemosyne, with all the co-ordinates for making the entire work accessible. Plates A, B and C were probably assembled after the rest of the work had been completed (see the essay by Silvia de Laude in this edition of Engramma), which would confirm that they were intended to summarise and explain the entire project. The first three panels can be seen as a unit, and should be considered as heralds when specifically analysing each of the panels.



Mnemosyne Atlas, Plates A, B and C grouped together: the co-ordinates of memory

Plates A, B and C present three different approaches to the schematization of the thematic threads running throughout the Atlas and, therefore, through the traces of the repertoire of the western tradition which the Atlas represents. Plate A illustrates schematically three mapping principles: astro-cosmographical, topographical, and genealogical. Plate B, by subject, presents the development of the relationship between the micro and the macrocosm via anthropocentrism and the figure of *homo cosmicus* in an itinerary that leads from the astrological anthropopathy of the Middle Ages to the anthropopoiesis of the Renaissance, and finally to the re-emergence of magical anthropopathy in the modern age. Plate C represents by theme the journey of man through the cosmos together with his understanding of the science of astronomy (Kepler's discoveries in particular). At the same time, it also presents the trajectory leading to the acquisition of technical knowledge as the means for achieving victory and learning, which combines the power to create and to destroy.

The composition of Plates A, B and C according to layout, subject and theme provides three schemes that encapsulate in seemingly simplified fashion the complex evolution of western civilization: the three opening plates appear to present a method of tracing clear itineraries through the forest of symbols, themes, myths and figures whose wanderings represent the *corpus* of the classical tradition.

The theme that innervates the Atlas, outlined in the A, B and C group of plates, is “the distance between the self and the external world”, as Warburg himself explains in his *Introduction to the Bilderatlas* in 1929 (See Engramma, the commentary by Giulia Bordinon and the first digital edition of the original text). It considers the relationship between man and the cosmos and, as a consequence, the relationship between freedom and necessity; a relationship which at times, during the Middle Ages but during the post Renaissance period too, becomes an oppressive fetter, and mutates decisively between the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance (the era on which Warburg's studies are centred), and is then reflected into the time in which Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas is conceived – the historically significant period in which the equilibrium between man and the cosmos is disrupted and then redefined following the outbreak of the First World War.

An internal comparison alone between the three opening plates reveals the weavings and junctures that unravel through images throughout all the plates that make up the Atlas. In this sense, Plates A, B and C as



the introduction to Mnemosyne, point by illustration to the cultural, geographical and historical context of the entire Atlas: the oscillation between the opposite poles of rationality and mathematics, and magic and religion, and the evolutionary lines that lead from astrological superstition to the technological conquest of the heavens, from the Mediterranean to Northern Europe.



Mnemosyne Atlas, Plate A: "Different relationships in which man is integrated, cosmic, earthly and genealogical. The coincidence of all these relationships in magic thought since the difference between descent, place of birth and cosmic position presupposes an act of thought. 1) Direction; 2) Exchange; 3) Social order (Notes of Warburg and collaborators, 1929)

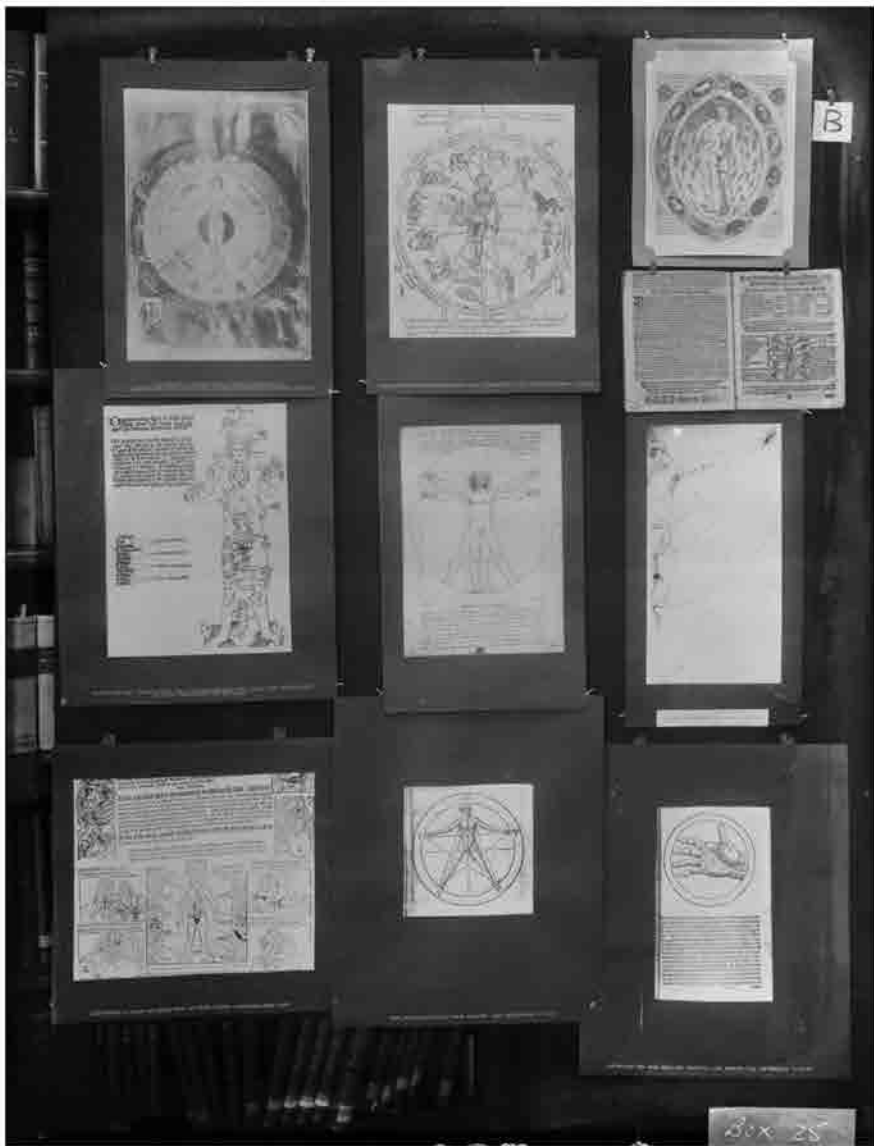
Fritz Saxl, a loyal follower of Warburg's theories, in the first memorial speech that he delivered a few days after Warburg's death, declared that "when confronted by chaos the fundamental act of human consciousness is to be guided by the position of signs and images," (Saxl 1929). The grid-like scheme of Plate A shows astrology as a star, a cosmography that reflects on topography and genealogy and different ways of controlling the heavens, space and human evolution, giving them form and sense.

The Plate, which is probably the most enigmatic of the three, suggests a methodological relationship between the different applications of the same cartographical logic: the recognition of constellations in the heavens by joining up luminous dots of stars in the shape of man and animals; drawing maps and routes on earth; drawing family trees that represent relationships between members of one family, chosen as an example.

In effect, therefore, the Plate shows from top to bottom, an image of the sky populated by mythological characters; a map that, in order to illustrate transmigrations between North and South, and East and West, starts at Cyzicus and Alexandria, and ends (perhaps with a pinch of irony) in Hamburg, where Warburg was born; the bottom of the page shows the ancestry of the Medici-Tornabuoni family, during the Renaissance.

Plate B includes astrology in the relationship between the micro and macrocosm, which, from its pagan conception in late antiquity, reappears in the Middle Ages, absorbed and transfigured into the figurative language of Christianity (the first image on the panel is an illustration of a vision by Hildegarde of Bingen), to re-emerge during the Renaissance and recover in part its ancient meaning. In the plate, there are three identifiable thematic itineraries: the first is cosmological, the second anthropometrical and the last is magico-apatropaic. From the beginning, plate B represents astrology as astropathy, articulated into the derived practices of astrodiagnostics and astrotherapy, and finally becoming the esoteric magic of astrophilia, encountering en-route, and significantly placed at the centre of the montage, the Renaissance figures of *hominis dignitas* by Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer, the only ones that are free of astral *religio* and who, conversely, impose upon the cosmos their own proportions and limits. With the emergence of the two Renaissance images, man is no longer conceived as the passive victim of a conflict between demonic forces fighting for control of his body. He actively takes part in the battle to re-establish the balance between subjection and cosmic forces. However, the conquest of equilibrium is never final. The positioning of the two images from *De occulta*

*philosophia* by Agrippa von Nettesheim at the end of plate illustrates the drift towards astropathy and its magico-esoteric cures. The subject of Plate B, therefore, is also the incessant oscillation between classical rationality, which Warburg called “Athens”, and “Alexandria”, the name he uses for the spatial and temporal dimension of Hellenistic irrationality.



Mnemosyne Atlas, Plate B: Different degrees of influence of the cosmic system on man. Harmonic correspondences. Later, reduction of harmony to abstract geometry instead of what is cosmically determined (Leonardo da Vinci)". (Notes of Warburg and collaborators, 1929).

In his essay *Ancient and pagan divination in the time of Luther*, Warburg writes:

We live in the age of Faust when modern scientists, oscillating between magical practices and cosmological mathematics, endeavour to gain for their thinking the space that separates them from their object in order to contemplate it dispassionately. *Athens must always be conquered afresh from Alexandria* (Warburg 1920).

In Plate B, therefore, the relationships between the human body and the cosmos illustrated during the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era appear to be parallels and exchanges of energy that, despite being difficult to sustain and control, reveal a world that has the potential to be conquered, measured and represented. If the microcosm of the heavens is connected to the macrocosm of the human body, and the heavens are populated by monsters and demonic forces, any subjection between man and the cosmos is reversible thanks to the science and technology (astrological, magical and medical during the Middle Ages and post Reformation, and geometrical during the Renaissance), invented by man to understand the “correspondences between man and the cosmos”, and, thanks to the geometry of Leonardo da Vinci, to escape the determinism of the “influence of the cosmic system on man”.

Plate C is dedicated mainly to the power of Mars, and its theme is the discovery of astronomical mathematics and the simultaneous survival of the magical and demonic aspects of the influence of the planets. The montage opens with engravings representing orbits of the planets, and, in particular, the elliptical orbit of the planet of war giving the lie to the composure of the cosmos represented with its concentric spheres. The engravings compared with images taken from contemporary tabloids representing the Zeppelin airship accomplishing the feat of circumnavigating the world, recount the story of man’s attempt to measure the heavens, conquer them and rule routes through them. At the same time, the inclusion of a miniature taken from a German manuscript of the second half of the Quattrocento representing Mars and his bellicose sons, (“the wayward sons of Mars” in the caption), is a reminder that, despite technological and scientific achievements, it is always necessary to reckon with the irrational and destructive influence of Mars.

While mounting this Plate, Warburg thought of including another figure that was to recall the power of astrology and its drift in the direction

of mysticism and superstition, which endured throughout the age of technological discoveries: the image of an enormous fish in the sky (comparable in form to the Zeppelin), taken from a prediction printed by Leonhard Reymann forecasting a Universal Deluge in 1524, “a fish with a star-covered belly (representing the planets in conjunction), [...] from which the destructive hurricane hits a city” (Warburg, 1920, 336).



Mnemosyne Atlas, Plate C: “The evolution of the concept of Mars. Detachment from the notion of anthropomorphism. Image – harmonic system – sign” (Notes by Warburg and collaborators, 1929).

Warburg had already concerned himself with the *monstrum* and the huge fish appearing in the heavens in his essay *Ancient and pagan divination in the time of Luther*, arguing that it had been used as propaganda, as had the matter of Luther's birth, during the Reformation.

The great challenge facing Kepler was to placate Mars, the most brutal of planets, and to discover new rules of mathematical cosmography that would make it possible to calculate the orbits of the planets. Plate C opens with two illustrations taken from the works of Kepler: although he had still based his *Mysterium Cosmographicum* on what had until then been accepted as undisputed laws controlling the solar system – uniformity, regularity and the circularity of the movement of the celestial bodies, governed as they are by physical laws conceived as subordinate to a divine and transcendent principle – in his *Astronomia nova* of 1609, he used empirical data from astronomical observation to confirm that the theory was untenable. Kepler then decided to study the movement of Mars with the courage “to overcome a primitive fear applied to mathematics that made it impossible to construe celestial bodies in ways that differed from the ideals and demands commensurable with earthly humans” (Warburg, 1925, 100-101), and introduced a new solution to calculate the movements of its orbit: the ellipse. Thus, the antagonist of the representation of the cosmos as spherical, perfect and orderly is Mars, and the discovery of the planet's elliptical trajectory, rotating on two foci and not just the one, revolutionises the Platonic notion of the harmony of the spheres. The formal constant in Plate C is the ellipse, from the shape of the planet's orbit to the contour of the airship; the heroes of this story, who with their scientific knowledge and their courage succeed in taming the heavens, are Kepler, and, featuring in the closing images of the Plate, Count von Zeppelin, and the aviator-entrepreneur Hugo Eckener.

By including an image of the airship Warburg, tells the story of a wonderful invention whilst recalling its prismatic nature: technology can serve destruction (the airship was used as a bomber during the First World War) while at the same time it can be an instrument of communication between people and of knowledge (in 1929 Eckener circumnavigated the world putting into contact nations that had once been enemies, surviving storms and communicating with earth via radio, etc.).

### The co-ordinates of memory: themes introduced in Plates A, B and C

The main theme proposed in the first three plates of the Bilderatlas is the need for *Orientierung*, orientation, bearings. *Orientierung* is almost a technical term in Warburg's lexicon and implies the attempt to discover designs in the heavens and on earth that enable man to plot routes in the search for interior as well as exterior order giving shape and limitations to the frightening world, and to the anxiety caused by the demons that inhabit not only the heavens above but also those that dwell inside us, disturbing the psyche (for Plates A, B and C as devices that provide co-ordinates for the Atlas as well as a remedy for Warburg's dysphoria after his time in Kreuzlingen and after returning for the last time from Italy, see once more the essay by Silvia De Laude in this edition of Engramma).

Plates A, B and C placed as the opening images to the Atlas indicate that finding one's bearings is essential in order to understand the purpose of a journey which is always about migration and return. Warburg borrows from Kant's 1927 essay *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* the notion that finding one's bearings is "to determine when leaving a certain part of the world (one of the four which make up the horizon), where the other parts are, especially the *orient*".

To orient oneself is, therefore, having to decide where the orient is, and reflecting on the continuous toings and froings between the East and the West, from one shore to the other of the Mediterranean, displayed at the centre of Plate A as a liquid area through which the classical tradition flows. However, even in antiquity, this was a journey that extended beyond the boundaries of *mare nostrum*. Symbol of the link between the East and the West was the mythical Gordion Knot that magically stopped communication between Asia and Europe. Alexander the Great – in the Atlas, he represents the journey and transmigration of myths and symbols beyond the spatial and temporal confines of Greek and Roman civilization – becomes lord of the cosmos because he resolves the problem of the knot by cutting with one stroke of his sword the inextricable tangle of cord, or, according to a variant of the myth circulating in ancient sources, he finds the cord connecting the cart to the pole, and simply unties it. His decisive act confirms the flexibility of the boundary between East and West, precariously obstructed by the knot, and begins a new flow of exchanges because Alexander is able to see that "the geographical juxtaposition between East and West is undetermined – and by fluctuating, it is merely an opposition of less light and night" (Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, *The*

*Gordian Knot*, 1953). In more recent times, von Eckener, flying his airship around the world, followed Alexander's cosmic journey. In his essay *Airship and Submarine in Medieval Imagination* (1913), Warburg reminds modern aviators studying the topical problem of engine cooling of the episode in medieval legend when Alexander is transported to heaven in the primitive airship lifted to flight by magic griffons, and how "with soaking sponges, he tried to cool their burning feet as they ascended into the heavens" (Warburg 1913, 282).

In panels A B and C, the theme of astrology and its scientific evolution with the astronomy of Kepler is intimately linked to the theme of orientation – a theme that was particularly dear to Warburg and Fritz Saxl, who collaborated closely with him during the last years of his life to put the finishing touches to the project: indeed astrology plays with the relationship that binds man to the cosmos, together with the unceasing effort by man to extricate himself from the need for that bond. The relationship between freedom and necessity with regard to destiny is expressed in the motto, coined by Warburg, '*Per monstra ad sphaeram*'. It is a play on words that echoes a famous line by Seneca (*Per aspera sic itur ad astra*, *Hercules Furens* II, 437), from which in antiquity the proverb '*Per aspera ad astra*' had already been taken. The motto '*Per monstra ad sphaeram*' was chosen by Warburg himself as an *ex libris* when his beloved friend Franz Boll (author of *Sphaera. Neue griechische Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Sternbilder*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1903, an essential text for Warburg's analysis of Schifanoia) died, and he acquired part of his friend's library. As regards the Latin source, the change Warburg made by coining a new motto is particularly significant: the adversities one has to survive in order to reach the stars are not just the impervious and difficult routes of the journey; they are also horrible monsters – *monstra*, whose demonic power man has been called to overcome. '*Per monstra ad sphaeram*': the three plates grouped together speak of man's disquiet at being subjugated to the *monstrum*, and of the prospect of ambiguous (because never definitive) freedom from that bond that will come with the scientific contemplation of the stars.

The issue of polarity between technology and magic, "Athens" and "Alexandria", never resolved, is, according to Warburg, interwoven with astrology and orientation; in other words, with the extremes of the inexpressibility of the world according to the *logos* and the tension of *pathos*, and, to use the names of the Gods who represent the extremes of the human condition that Warburg borrows from Nietzsche, between Apollo and Dionysus.



### Through the maze

For those who enter into the Atlas, the scope for multiple readings that interweave and proliferate is heralded at the beginning, in the group of Plates A, B and C. Placed as a virtual threshold, they orientate the peruser into the forest of the Atlas whilst simultaneously confirming that the compositional process and the interactive nature of each plate and Mnemosyne as a whole is unyieldingly complex. In this sense, Plates A, B and C can be seen as travelling companions provided at the entry to the work, but also as an acknowledgement of the complex nature of the undertaking, a *mise en abyme* of the *opus magnum* to which they give access.

The entire Atlas, Plates A, B and C advise in advance, is a journey, a jungle of excursions that cannot be simplified, on pain of tearing apart the discontinuous threads of memory. Through images we are told that the radiating boundaries and the map of the journey are not rigidly fixed and defined. Around the Mediterranean, the routes are drawn by the continuous convergence and separation of journeys between East and West, which at times merge, becoming one path, and are then attracted into other orbits.

In the western tradition, nothing is definite and the ways phenomena appear and disappear are always dynamic and reversible: signs and forms survive only if they withstand the experience of the journey, whether through space or time, and the permeable boundary between East and West that alone sanctions transmigration – physical, conceptual and symbolic. In the western tradition, from Classical Greece to Hellenism, from Hellenism to Christianity, via the Middle Ages, up to the Renaissance and modernity, only images and signs that have been cross-bred have survived because chosen as the most suitable for the biological battle for survival that, metaphorically, can also be witnessed in the dynamics of culture. Only the movement, the position and the continuous breaking of the *limes* – and mainly the *limes* between East and West – make transmission-tradition possible, a demonstrable sign of the vitality of signs and forms.

Plates A, B and C, as one learns by entering the Mnemosyne Atlas, announce that many signs from the classical tradition did not disappear because they were exhausted, or devoid of meaning. They have left firm traces, albeit at times difficult to decipher, despite the variations and frontal attacks, theoretical and real, by iconoclasts, attempts to represent one god, moralisations, attempts to make meanings unequivocal, banalizations and oblivion. However, survival, whether apparent or submerged, is evidence

that tradition is not preserved and guarded, nor confined to museums; even when motifs survive merely in the shape of an engram, if they are strong enough, they can defend themselves. Otherwise, they remain barren seeds. Giordano Bruno, a philosopher who was fundamental to Warburg during the latter part of his life, wrote:

Obiiciuntur nobis res, signa, imagines, spectra vel phantasmata. [...] Haud igitur temere oblivionem insensationem quandam appellavit Socrates; qui si eadem ratione et memorabilis iactum semen a memoria non conceptum insensationem similiter quandam appellasset, rem sane profundiore explicasset. Ni igitur vivacius phantasia sensibilibus pulsaverit speciebus, cogitatio non aperiet, ostiaria quoque cogitatione non aperiente, easdem indignans Musarum mater non recipiet.

Things present themselves to us – signs, images, ghosts,.. [...] Not for nothing did Socrates define oblivion as the loss of perception; however, if for the same reason he had also defined the seed of what can be remembered as chance and not conceived by memory, he would certainly have inquired more deeply. If indeed phantasy availing itself of sensitive images does not knock with sufficient energy, the cognitive faculty will fail to open the doors, and if the cognitive faculty which is the custodian fails to open the doors, the mother of the Muses, [Mnemosyne] scorning such images, will refuse them.

(Giordano Bruno, *Sigillus sigillorum ad omnes animi dispositiones comparandas*, 11, 19-20)

References: see in Engramma, Bibliography. Works by Aby Warburg and secondary literature

A first version of the reading on Plates A, B and C of Mnemosyne Atlas in “>”La Rivista di Engramma” 12 (November 2001



pdf realizzato da Associazione Engramma  
e da Centro studi classicA luav  
progetto grafico di Silvia Galasso  
editing a cura di Francesca Romana Dell'Aglio  
Venezia • marzo 2015

[www.engramma.org](http://www.engramma.org)