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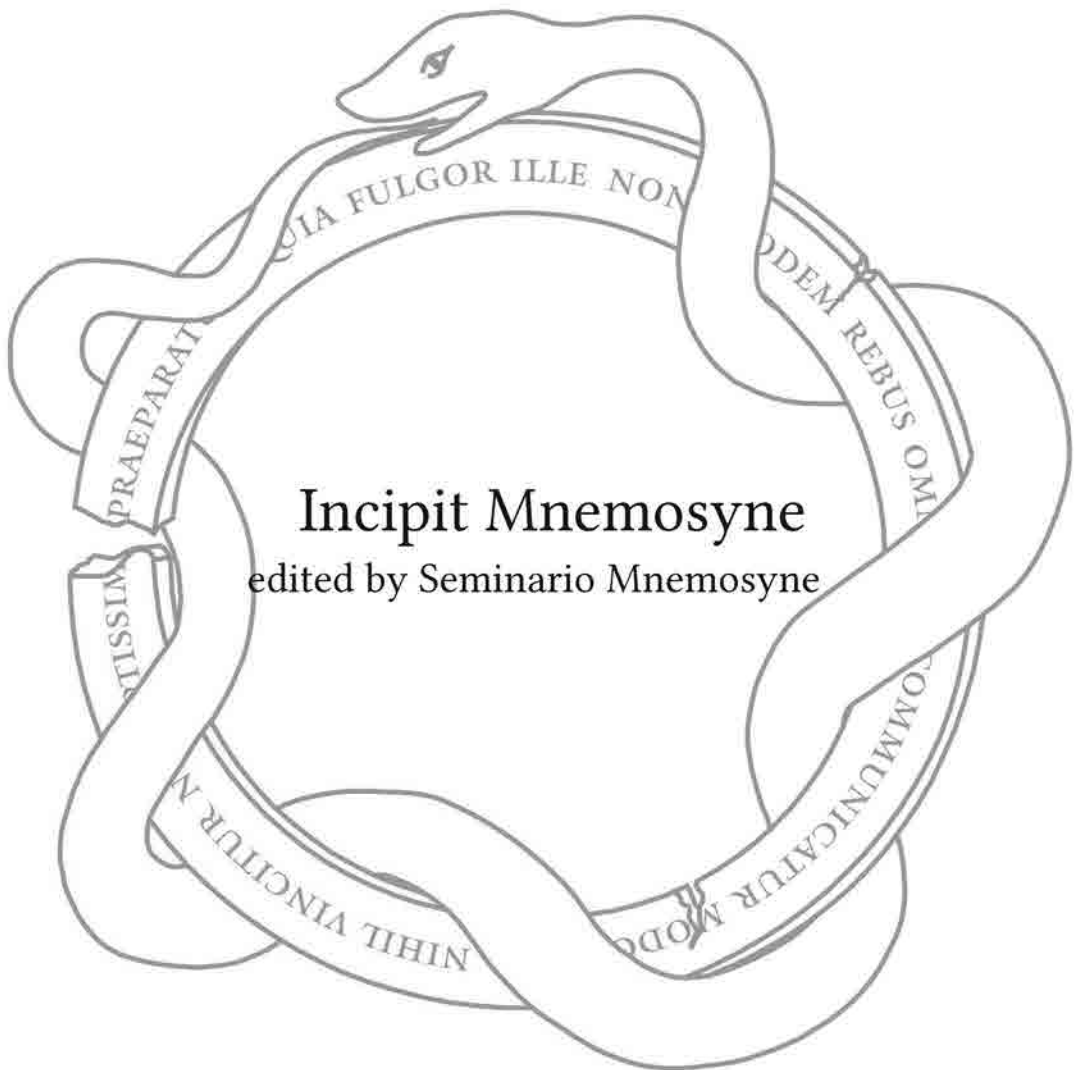
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Mnemosyne Atlas, Plate A.

# Orientation: cosmology, geography, genealogy

## A reading of Plate A of Mnemosyne Bilderatlas

edited by Seminario Mnemosyne, coordinated by Giulia Bordignon, Monica Centanni, Silvia De Laude, Daniela Sacco, with Maria Bergamo, Emily V. Bovino, Nicole Cappellari, Lucia Coco, Flavia Culcasi, Simone Culotta, Enkli Doja, Bianca Fasiolo, Alberto Giacomini, G. Olmo Stuppia, Silvia Urbini  
Translated by Elizabeth Thomson

The first three plates of Mnemosyne, identified as A, B and C, represent an extraordinary hermeneutical diorama by displaying synthetically, using the graphicness of a few figures, the depth of Aby Warburg's pioneering memory machine — published as the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne — that delineates the spatial, historical, and cultural co-ordinates of the expressive values of the West (see Engramma, Plates A, B and C of Mnemosyne Atlas, *Iter ad labyrinthum*).

The first plate that opens Mnemosyne offers an initial general overview of the historical, geographical, and gnoseological co-ordinates of the Atlas (images of the plate, enlargements, captions and details are available for viewing in Engramma). Just three figures suffice to show, according to Warburg's notes for the plate, the "different systems of relations with which man is connected": cosmic, with the sky represented via its constellations; earthly, where the signs of western culture around the Mediterranean Basin are disseminated; genealogical, with the ramifications of the family tree of one of the most powerful families of the Italian Renaissance, schematized as a paradigm within a microcosm.

Verschiedene Systeme von Relationen, in die der Mensch eingestellt ist, kosmisch, irdisch, genealogisch. Ineinsetzung aller dieser Relationen im magischen Denken, denn Sonderung von Abstammung, Geburtsort und kosmischer Situation setzt schon eine Denkleistung voraus. 1) Orientierung; 2) Austausch; 3) soziale Einordnung.

Different systems of relations with which man is connected: cosmic, earthly and genealogical. Convergence of all these relations in magic thought, as identifying descent, place of birth and cosmic place presupposes an act of thought. 1) Orientation 2) Exchange 3) Place in the social order. [Notes on Plate A written by Warburg and his collaborators; folder of materials relating to the final version of *Mnemosyne*, WIA III.104.1]



The itinerary for reading the plate starts from the top, and travels downwards taking the reader from a general horizon progressively through to a human dimension embodied in the individuals belonging to a specific historical and social context: from the heavens to earth, from earth to mankind; from cosmology to geography, from geography to genealogy, in a process of gradually focalizing specifically on the relationship between subject and object, man and world. In his Introduction to the Atlas, Warburg writes:

The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization. When the space between the "I" and the external world becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions for awareness of this distance to achieve an enduring social function will have been met. The rhythmical alternation between identifying with the object and a return to self-control expresses the oscillation between the cosmology of images and that of signs. This circular motion acts as a more or less exact spiritual instrument of orientation, and eventually determines the fate of human culture.

This text helps to understand Plate A, beginning with the first image of the cosmos. The three images in the plate (two of which were drawn by Warburg), prove by the way they are drawn and schematized, that they are intended to orientate, and by disassociation, represent and project a hermeneutical grid.

#### ITINERARIES OF INTERPRETATION

##### 1. *TRANSMIGRATIONS/PEREGRINATIONS/FILLATIONS*

The geographical map, positioned at the centre of Plate A is a guiding theme in Warburgian studies: the peregrination of images, subjects and symbols. The map is preserved with the materials for the Conference of German Orientalists (September 1926; WIA III 96.3.4) and is derived from a note elaborated by Warburg and his wife in 1911 (Bing 1957).

The geographical map lies at the heart of a device designed around the guiding theme of the peregrination of images and subjects. The modes of migration in Plate A are indicated on three levels that correspond with the three drawings on the plate: the toing and froing between the heavens and earth and vice versa, begun in antiquity, of mythological figures; the topographical representation of the main places in which classical forms and subjects found fertile soil for their development and for different forms of expression of their symbolic meanings (the *Wanderkarte* that has

the Mediterranean at its centre); the zoom on one of the stages of this migration, specifically the genealogical tree of the Medici-Tornabuoni family – a sample case that is exemplified in a family history, a physical support (via genetic filiation, and matrimonial ties), for the transmission and new interpretations of the figures of antiquity, called back to life in the cultural revolution that took place during the Italian Renaissance.

## 2. MAPPING THE HEAVENS, THE EARTH AND HUMAN TIES

In a vertical sequence that starts like a zoom from the sky towards earth, from the macrocosm to the microcosm, plate A represents a transition from the figurative to the abstract, culminating in the outline of a genealogical tree of a Florentine family at the height of the Quattrocento. The montage of Plate A makes it possible to compare three modes of graphic representation: the iconic language of a map of the constellations (top); a map of an itinerary indicating specific stages of the journey (centre); and the genealogical outline of the Medici Tornabuoni family (bottom). The three modes of graphic representation have in common the use of reference and orientation grids such as the two-dimensional segments of the heavens in the map of the constellations, the outline of meridians and parallels in the map of Europe, and the generation lines in the genealogical tree.

The vertical sequence of the images in the plate suggests a reflection that goes beyond subject and content, and emphasizes another possible interpretation – the layout of the image itself. It represents a form of transition from concept to display, which before everything else requires predetermined co-ordinates on which to be assembled and traced (for example the conventions of projecting geographic details on a level); similarly, complex thought requires a skeleton, a hypothesis, via which to express itself.

Warburg's interpretative design of the Atlas, and the medium of the graphic image borrowed from the language of science, is not merely functional. On the strength of a specific philosophical theory with which philosophers were engaged (Ernst Cassirer chief among many), and their progressively definitive disaffection with the notion of truth, it became culturally fertile.

Science is an art, a hermeneutical *techné* that once it abandons revealing truth as its naïve purpose, is able progressively to reveal hidden truths, and can build imaginative, and at times inventive, models of interpretation, paradigms that simulate reality not in order to cage it in, but to state it and give it figurative form.

The graphic images on Plate A use models for mapping the earth and sky, and delineating genealogy. These methods do not reduce or trivialize complex thought. Rather, they serve to demonstrate that the abstract language of science lends itself perfectly to describing the interconnections of historical and cultural phenomena. All three images re-establish the potent and complex notion of the syncretic and conflictual nature of western culture derived from the peregrinations and hybridizations of the roots of classical antiquity.

### 3. *MACROCOSM/MICROCOSM*

The arrangement of the images enables them to be read on three levels descending progressively from the heavens, to earth and to humankind. The figures in the introductory plate are positioned in ascending order so that the larger image illustrates the smaller system of relations and vice versa. The microcosm of human relations, represented in the outline of the Tornabuoni genealogical tree is in fact the largest image whereas the macrocosm of the heavens is enclosed in the smallest of the three sketches. Macrocosm and microcosm represented in these images outline a fundamental path in Warburg's notions of the antinomic nature of the classical tradition: the oscillations of western thought between the extremes of magic and religion, and the rational. In 1988 Warburg [1932] wrote:

A process in which — as astrological forces are also involved — we should look neither for friends nor foes but rather the symptoms of the spiritual oscillations that move steadily from the magico-religious extreme towards the opposite one of mathematical contemplation — and vice versa.

The first sketch emphasizes the magico-religious extreme, whilst the map of constellations anthropomorphises the cosmos with figurative representations of mythical figures populating the heavens. The rational extreme of the three sketches in the plate reveals the need to propose an interpretative grid — a graphic argument, a subtext as well as a design that is drawn over what is real. The very sketches depicting the magico-religious extreme are also sketches of possible pathways to interpreting them.

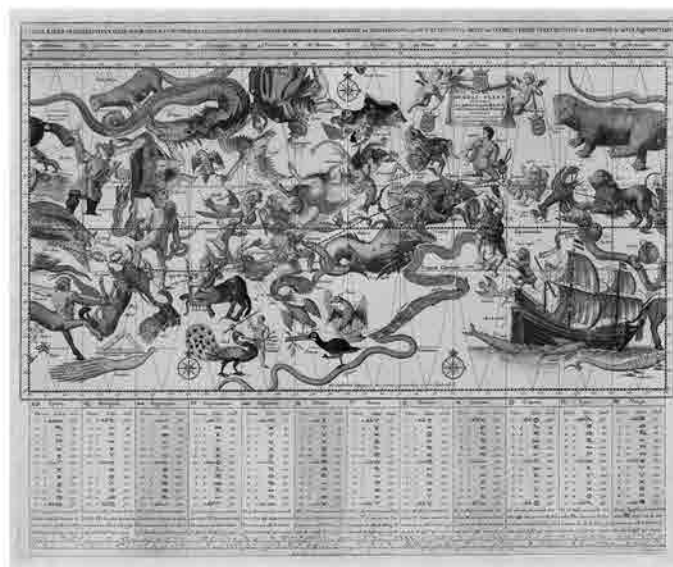
The drawings portray what Warburg defined as the “Promethean drama” of the star — studded heavens: deceit, illusion — the composition and the readability of the groups of stars as recognisable mythological characters — lie at the heart of the schematic projection and mapping of the constellations. The only forms of measurement and orientation possible are those designed as forms from the language of myth, conventions of topography and the genealogical representation of family descent.

A downward analysis of the images in Plate A starts from the sky (the map of constellations), continues a downward path towards earth (the Wanderkarte), finally reaching the genealogical tree of the Tornabuoni family. From this perspective and a circular movement upwards one returns to the macrocosm: via Warburg's narratives of the family fortunes of merchants, bankers, patrons and noteworthy individuals and the interweaving of religion together with the re-emergence of forms of pagan antiquity in contemporary art, a description of an entire socio-cultural universe is unravelled: the Renaissance.

### THREE IMAGES

#### 1. COSMIC WRITING: THE STARS OUTLINE THE PROFILES OF MYTHICAL MONSTERS

The late seventeenth century watercolour etching represents the constellations and the evolution of religious ideas of cosmography that from antiquity to the heart of the modern age. The *numinous* figures that from the dawn of time have always been tied to human beings — as theorised by Rudolf Otto — are now abstract figures relegated to the heavens, reduced to unequivocal symbolic and conceptual meanings. Their demonic power has been deterministically neutralised, as they become material metaphors for the principles of cause and effect represented by heavenly bodies and their influences.

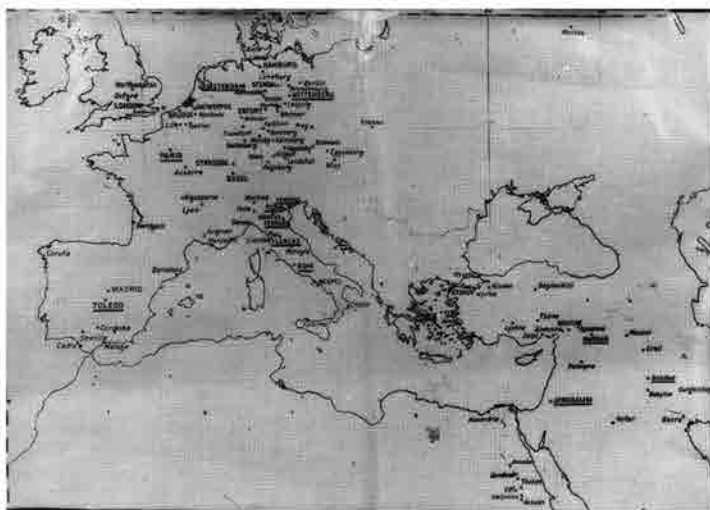


Representation of the sky with constellations, water-colour etching on copper, Holland 1684 (Hamburg, Planetarium).

A shift by degrees has occurred, a peregrination that concludes with the mythological figures being reconverted figures, which are both astronomical and astrological. This is the theme, presented, by synthesis, in the next plate in the Atlas, Plate B. Formal analogy and transposition act as rational filters: the profiles of mythical figures are superimposed on the forms of constellations, and the image becomes a sign, a useful and practical marker for measuring space, for example.

Before he died, Warburg was inspired by the works of Giordano Bruno (see Engramma, the interview to Maurizio Ghelardi edited by Silvia De Laude), who in one of his metaphors compares the phenomenon with a post-reformation unleashing of mythical beasts into the skies. Relegating gods, monsters and mythical heroes into the nether regions of the cosmos, where their disquieting images can still be contemplated, albeit at a safe distance, is also, however, a form of survival of the ancient demons. Their signs can always and repeatedly be reactivated as effective images, and ancient figures can reawaken in a procedure that is never linear, as powers that can influence – in terms of astrological conditioning – the fates of man, and his ability to “orientate” himself through life.

“Orientations” is in fact, one of the keys to understanding the introductory plate to Mnemosyne. On the very day he died, 26 October 1929, noted in his diary Warburg the phrase “what does orienting oneself in space mean?”.



The map of the routes of transigrations between north and south, and east and west (London, the Warburg Institute).

By recalling Kant's aphorism "*Was bedeutet es, sich im Raum zu orientieren?*" (What does it mean to orientate oneself in thinking?), Warburg's note seems to imply a meaning that is not only descriptive and functional for images, but is also spiritual. Warburg again notes:

Descriptive science preserves and transmits the rhythmical structures in which the monsters of the imagination become decisive life-guides for the future.

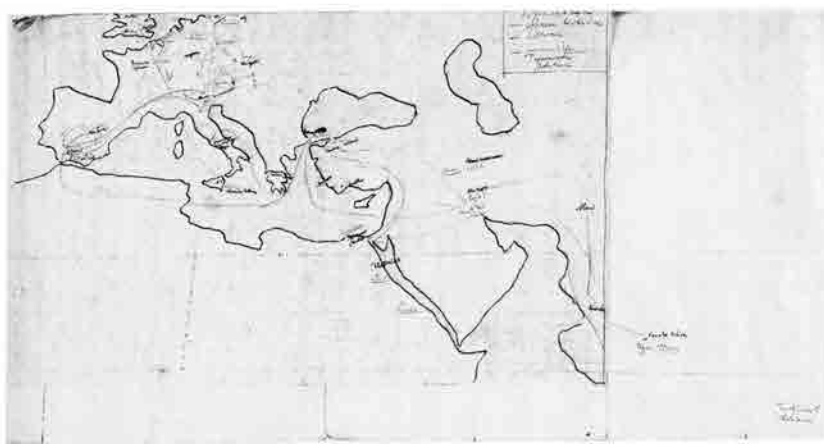
However, storing the ancient pagan gods in the heavens, and relegating them to function as heavenly signs is not unambiguously a process of reassuring and progressive distancing from magico-religious thought. When Aby Warburg and Gertrud Bing, as scholar and assistant working together, were still conceiving the introduction to *Mnemosyne*, they make a significant statement about their concentration of this argument in their Roman diary:

Gertrud Bing: *As regards the psychological concept of polarity as a heuristic principle, we need to add a debate on the idea of transformation implicated in distancing and absorption [Einverleibung]...*

Aby Warburg: *... metaphors and tropes ...*

Gertrud Bing: *... and the notion of monster as an enlightening act thanks to the determination of extension and causality ...*

Aby Warburg: *... and imaginary directional indications.*



Aby e Mary Warburg, Wanderkarte 1911: "Die Bilderwanderung der Sphaera Barbarica, Albricus, Humanistische Restitution." Lecture in Hamburg, 1911 (WIA, III.78.z. [24]).

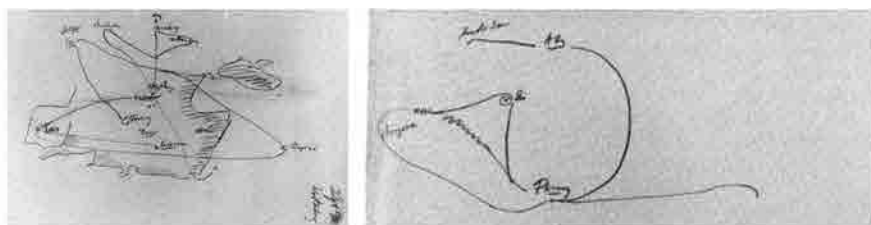
The polar oscillations between the concatenation of the logico-rational and the magico-religious that materialises in a form of art follow the same dynamics as poetic expression, which is defined by rhetorical tropes and metaphors. It is in this sense that Warburg's note for Plate A can be understood: "identifying descent, place of birth and cosmic position presupposes an act of thought". It is another way of saying that cosmic, earthly and genealogical ties come together to configure rational thought, which, nonetheless, preserves its own magico-fantastic quality because, on the strength of the *vis imaginalis* of thought, — the figure of the "monster as illuminating act" — it creates a primary space for thought.

## 2. MAP WRITING: ON EARTH, A DRAWING OF THE MIGRATION ROUTES WITH THE MEDITERRANEAN AT CENTRE

The second image on Plate A — in which the names of several cultural capital cities of the West are underscored (Toledo, Paris, Amsterdam, Wittenberg, Venedig, Padua, Ferrara, Florenz, Rom, Athen, Harran, Jerusalem) — is related to the first inasmuch as it displays the migrations and transformations of mythical figures in both space and time: from oriental and Graeco-Roman beginnings, to the transition to Arab culture and return to the West via Spain and Italy, until reaching Northern Europe (on the modes of peregrination in antiquity, see, in *primis* the entire route III in *Mnemosyne*).

Warburg's interest on the dynamics of the diffusion of motifs and figures of pagan antiquity throughout the Mediterranean, the heart of Classical Antiquity features early in Warburg's thinking. The map in Plate A, preserved among the materials for the conference on the German orientalists (September 1926, WIA III 96.3.4), was redacted from a version elaborated by Warburg and his wife in 1911 (BING 1957), the route is clearly indicated:

Cyzicus > Alexandria > Oxene > Baghdad > Toledo > Rome > Ferrara > Padova > Augusta > Erfurt > Wittenberg > Goslar > Lüneburg > Hamburg



Sketches by Aby Warburg.



It was in 1911, when she first met the young Fritz Saxl, that Gertrud Bing documented that Warburg was constructing a version of the “migration chart”. Saxl, at the time working on the iconography of the planets, and had begun to study the medieval tradition on the subject, was so fascinated by Warburg’s notion of the “peregrinations” of the ancient gods over the centuries that Warburg himself showed him his *Wanderkarte*. Gertrude Bing writes (1957):

A map showing the routes travelled by tradition, indicating places, from India to Northern Germany, where traces of the passing of images or descriptions of celestial figures had been found, providing dates for every one of these traces, from the end of antiquity to the beginning of the Cinquecento. Saxl was captivated by this historical figurative atlas that provided visual images for a wide-ranging issue, studied in the minutest of details.

Two drawings by Warburg dated 1928 and included in the mass of unpublished material that is part of the documentation for the Atlas confirm the extent to which the question of orientation and *Wanderung* mattered to Warburg.

The first traces the places where Warburg studied and worked, (Hamburg, Strasburg, Florence) with two points of orientation: an unspecified “east” and a west specified as “Arizona”. The second indicates on a rough sketch of the coastal areas of the Mediterranean the routes of the wanderings of the Jewish people from the Holy Land to Holland, from the Middle East to Northern Europe via Spain and Italy. As in the map at the centre of Plate A, they are all routes that interweave with the places of the tradition of astrological demons and Warburg’s personal vicissitudes.



Wanderkarte, continuous line (red in the original): principal commercial routes between C12 and C15th centuries, 1928, (WIA, IV.25.2.2.3.).



In all likelihood, as in the two autobiographical sketches, it was Warburg's initial intention for the *Wanderkarte* to also show the routes taken by images within that specific area (McEwan 2006). The final configuration of the map was probably never intended to show precise topographical details, and was to be a more schematic illustration in which the commercial routes of caravans and sea vessels travelled by images over the centuries from Antiquity to the Renaissance to the Modern Era were instantly evident.

It is worth remembering that for the conference at the Planetarium in Hamburg in 1930 (see the essay by Silvia De Laude on Plates A B C), Frits Saxl with the help of the Cartographer Max Georg Schmidt, an expert in the history of commercial trade routes, and Wihlem Gundel, a classicist and professor of the history of astrology, had three different maps drawn. The first shows the "principle commercial routes during the Roman Empire" [continuous lines]. The other two were labelled respectively, the "principle commercial routes from the C6th to the C12th centuries", and the "principle commercial routes between C12th and C15th".

It is possible that the first sketch drawn between 1908 and 1911 by Mary Warburg and used for the course on Classical images of stars in Renaissance art, held by Franz Boll and Carl Bezold in 1913 (see above: Aby and Mary Warburg, *Wanderkarte* 1911) was intended to be included in Plate A. It was this simple map that Warburg used adding dots and lines to highlight the circulation and direction, imagined or real, of images of the constellations that had migrated across time and space. The map we see today in the montage of Plate A seems to correspond to an intermediate version between the one drawn by Mary and Aby, and Saxl's maps for the exhibition at the Planetarium.

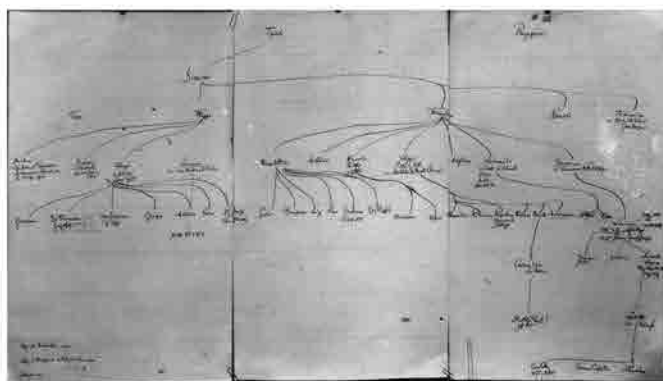
In order to demonstrate how European culture is the result of force lines, occasional encounters, and a predisposition to conflict in the wider context of the Mediterranean and the West, Warburg writes:

The history of culture is unaccustomed to considering together the notion of Antiquity as perceived by the courtly art of the north and the humanist art of Italy as components converging in the process of the development of a new style [...] If we consider the formation of style as an exchange of these expressive values, then it is the essential to examine the dynamics of such a process, and the technical means of its diffusion.

In Plate A, therefore, the map lies at the centre of a device designed around the guiding theme of the peregrination of images and subjects. The mobility of the cultural and figurative heritage of the West can be read on three levels, corresponding to the three images on the plate: the toing and froing between the heavens and earth, begun in antiquity, of mythological figures and vice versa (the map of the constellations); the topographical representation of the main places where forms and classical subjects found fertile ground for development and different expression of their symbolic meaning (the *Wanderkarte* of the Mediterranean); the transmission and the re-emergence of the figures of antiquity in a specific historical and cultural context, that of Medicean Florence, embodied in the genealogy of the Medici-Tornabuoni family.

### 3. WRITING FAMILY HISTORY: THE COAT OF ARMS OF A FAMILY OF MERCHANTS AND PATRONS, PROTAGONISTS OF THE RENAISSANCE

From the sky to earth, from the macrocosm to the microcosm, from cosmography to cartography, to the diagram of the family tree. The choice of the Florentine family, so important not only objectively in the history of the Renaissance but also for Warburg's personal studies, is perhaps a self-quotation, almost comparable with a cameo: it is significant that he himself sketched the family tree of the Florentine family (as he did the *Wanderkarte* in 1911, in collaboration with his wife Mary), chosen, not fortuitously, as a model. The impression is that the discourse broached via images in Plate A, as well as in the introductory group of the first three plates A, B and C, is also intended to illustrate an anthropological tendency, typical of human behaviour since the beginning of civilization, to seek orientation in the world.



The family tree of the Medici-Tornabuoni family, sketch by Aby Warburg (London, The Warburg Institute).

While representing through genetic filiations and matrimonial ties a privileged physical medium for the transmission and re-emergence of antiquity during the Renaissance, therefore, the noble Medici-Tornabuoni family is perhaps not very different to the observer from the genetic and acquired relationships (in Saxl's words, "fathers and sons and grandchildren") that the tribes of Central America, well known to Warburg, entrusted to pictograms, another form of writing at once institutional, religious and schematic and effective for delineating and defining the boundaries of the clan. (However, the *Vorstellung* of the coat of arms was already used in antiquity to visually connect the genealogical patterns of the *imagines maiorum*: see. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, XXXV, 6: "stemmata vero lineis discurrebant ad imagines pictas").

A NARRATIVE OF SKY PILGRIMS AND MERCHANTS WHO TRAVEL BY LAND AND SEA, AND OF MEN WHO STUDY AND MEN OF ENTERPRISE

The final image on Plate A focusses on the Medici-Tornabuoni family emblem, and is an Ur image of the deepest roots of the Atlas of Memory. A circular movement from this very viewpoint, however, makes it possible to regain a general perspective of the cosmos during the Renaissance: Warburg's account of the vicissitudes of the families of merchants, bankers, notables and patrons — which becomes the beating heart of Mnemosyne (see Itinerary V — *The irruption of antiquity*: Plates 37, 38, 39, and Itinerary VII on *Nike and Fortuna: Markets, angels, nymphs and warriors* — Plates 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 49) —, gives a portrayal of an entire socio-cultural universe and of an era. The relationship of the family with religion, artistic patronage and the re-emergence of the forms of pagan antiquity in contemporary art provides Warburg with a range of symbolic meanings that enable him to get to the heart of the mind-set of that distant past.

With regard to the Tornabuoni commission of the Birth of John the Baptist by Ghirlandaio in Santa Maria Novella and, more generally, the Florentine materials in Plate 45 and Plate 46 of Mnemosyne Atlas, Warburg himself writes in his notes for the conference held at the Bibliotheca Heriziana (Warburg [1929] 2014):

We can observe, in two different ways, attempts to exorcise the demonic aspects of life in motion. On the one hand, there are the stories of Lucrezia Tornabuoni (which erase the dark side of human figures running, advancing, bearing things, although their provenance is tragic).

On the other hand, from the point of view of the artist, it is necessary that the figure of Victory on the Roman triumphal arch be reintroduced as the housewifely person responsible for providing food, a useful symbol in the daily life of Renaissance Florence. The angry words of Savonarola drive out this attempt to deal with the demonic in a familiar way.

Once again, the breath of life that animates the figures of Antiquity comes back to reactivate, in the graceful shapes of the nymph-maid so dear to the Early Florentine Renaissance, the pathetic temperament that was also related to pagan demons. Tornabuoni family's genealogy comes to indicate, paradigmatically, the re-emergence of expressions of the Classical legacy in the genetic code of Western culture, as a set track for the proper spiritual orientation of every "good European".

On a more subjective and personal level, as Kurt Forster (1999) demonstrates, Warburg himself, despite being indifferent to the "neo-Renaissance" of his own time, "felt he was an intellectual student, a descendant of the humanists in the age of industrialization". It was not just about his intense and passionate studies, but about his intimate relationship with the subjects and themes of his research. Warburg refers to the Birth of John the Baptist by Ghirlandaio in Santa Maria Novella, (commissioned by the Tornabuoni), in a letter from his correspondence with André Jolles (cit. in Gombrich 1970):

That your pagan storm bird (the maidservant in the Birth of the Baptist), can burst into this slow respectability, this controlled Christianity, reveals to me the enigmatic and illogical traits of the simple humanity of the Tornabuoni family.

Of his highly personal relationship that Warburg had with the enterprising Middle class of Medicean Florence, Gertrud Bing, would write (Bing 1960):

Every word he wrote about Florence bears the imprint of a very personal work as is often encountered in scientific papers. You could almost say that with his work on Florence, Warburg wrote his *Buddenbrooks*. Even in the last years of his life, his language, his gesticulations, his whole attitude made him pass for a Florentine in Florence, and with his thin body and his dark, expressive head, in Florence he stood out from other people less than in Hamburg.

Having returned from his theoretical journeys on the routes of the gods and ancient symbols that migrate from antiquity to the modern age, Warburg's interests focus on the microcosm of the human sphere and in particular

on the routes — entrepreneurial, artistic and genealogical — of a leading Renaissance family. Moving his take to the Medici-Tornabuoni family, Warburg “writes his Buddenbrooks”, and speaks of himself as a passionate scholar and as a lay, heterodox member of an influential family of Jewish wanderers, merchants, bankers. Having taken up residence in Hamburg, they became during those years protagonists in an important chapter in German history that begins with the founding of the University in the city (Levine 2013).

The autobiographical signs that Warburg scatters throughout the first plate of the *Bilderatlas* (Hamburg shown as a the final destination of the route on the map; his paradigmatic choice of the family tree of a Florentine family that had been a privileged focus of study for him), remind us that the Atlas-machine does not aim to reconstruct an irretrievable truth from the past. The impulse that motivates the study is his search for imprints, the inspiration of precious historical events that reveal thoughts and actions in which we can recognise slices of our own narratives as they surface as traces of memory, and outline, via fragments, the project of Mnemosyne.

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