Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods
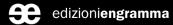
La Rivista di Engramma
191

æ

La Rivista di
Engramma
191
aprile/maggio 2022

Aby Warburg:
His Aims
and Methods

edited by
Monica Centanni and Giulia Zanon

edizioni**engramma**

Contents

Collateral effects of the "visibile parlare" (Dante, Pg. X, v. 95)

Aby Warburg's insight about the visual matrix of the Legend of Trajan's Justice

Monica Centanni

A neglected Warburgian hypothesis

Frequently, texts generate images; sometimes images generate texts. This is the case with the Legend of Trajan's Justice, which in all probability originated not from a text but from an archaeological image. The question is: which image? From which find or monument did the Legend develop? An analysis of the passages that Aby Warburg dedicates to this matter in his writings provides a simple and clearly evident answer: a convincing answer, that until now has not been taken into adequate consideration and that I think is relevant to bring to light.

The Legend of Trajan and the Assumption of the Emperor in Dante's *Paradise*

Let us briefly summarise the coordinates of the question. The Legend of Trajan – of his justice, of the salvation of his soul, even though the Emperor was a pagan – is made up of the assembly of two different parts: the first is the episode of Trajan doing justice to the widow, who asks for justice for the death of her son. The second is the discovery of the emperor's speaking tongue by Gregory the Great, who performs the miracle of resurrecting and baptising Trajan, opening the gates of Paradise for him. The legend as a whole is so fortunate that it brings the Roman Emperor straight into Dante's Paradise, right into the eye of the eagle of Justice, who so speaks recalling the episode of the "widow":

> Dei cinque che mi fan cerchio per ciglio, / colui che più al becco mi s'accosta, / la vedovella consolò del figlio / ora conosce quanto caro costa / non seguir Cristo, per l'esperïenza / di questa dolce vita e de l'opposta (*Pd*. XX, 43-48).

Of those five flames that, arching, from my brow, / he who is nearest to my beak is one / who comforted the widow for her son; / now he has learned the price one pays for not / following Christ, through his experience / of this sweet life and of its opposite *Pd.* XX, 43-48) [Translation by Allen Mandelbaum, 1984*].

In the Comedy, however, the most extensive description of the Legend, and in particular of the episode of the meeting between the widow and the Emperor, is in the passage in Canto X of *Purgatory* where Dante, climbing the path of the Purgatory mountain, sees three bas-reliefs representing examples of humility: the New Testament account of the Annunciation, with Mary and the angel; the Old Testament account of the broken dance of David stigmatised by his wife Micol (on the meaning of the three *Exempla humilitatis*, as opposed to the sin of Pride of the penitent souls in sector of *Purgatory*, see Vescovo 2022, in particular pages 52-53). These are the verses dedicated to Trajan:

Quiv'era storïata l'alta gloria / del roman principato, il cui valore / mosse Gregorio a la sua gran vittoria; / i' dico di Traiano imperadore; / e una vedovella li era al freno, / di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore. / Intorno a lui parea calcato e pieno / di cavalieri, e l'aguglie ne l'oro / sovr' essi in vista al vento si movieno. / La miserella intra tutti costoro / pareva dir: "Segnor, fammi vendetta / di mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond' io m'accoro"; / ed elli a lei rispondere: "Or aspetta / tanto ch'i' torni"; e quella: "Segnor mio", / come persona in cui dolor s'affretta, / "se tu non torni?"; ed ei: "Chi fia dov' io, la ti farà"; ed ella: "L'altrui bene / a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?"; ond' elli: "Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene / ch'i' solva il mio dovere anzi ch'i' mova: / giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene". / Colui che mai non vide cosa nova / produsse esto visibile parlare, / novello a noi perché qui non si trova (*Pg.* X, 73-96).

And there the noble action of a Roman / prince was presented he whose /worth had urged on Gregory to his great victory / I mean the Emperor Trajan; and a poor / widow was near his bridle, and she stood / even as one in tears and sadness would. / Around him, horsemen seemed to press and crowd; / above their heads, on golden banners, eagles / were represented, moving in the wind. / Among that crowd, the miserable woman / seemed to be saying: "Lord, avenge me for / the slaying of my son, my heart is broken."

/ And he was answering: "Wait now until / I have returned." And she, as one in whom / grief presses urgently: "And, lord, if you / do not return?" And he: "The one who'll be / in my place will perform it for you." She: / "What good can others' goodness do for you / if you neglect your own?" He: "Be consoled; / my duty shall be done before I go: / so justice asks, so mercy makes me stay." / This was the speech made visible by One / within whose sight no thing is new, but we, / who lack its likeness here, find novelty (*Pg.* X, 73-96) [Translation by Allen Mandelbaum, 1982*].

Later on, I will return to some of the details of Dante's description.

A visual matrix of the Legend: Giacomo Boni's pioneering insight (1906)

1 | Relief from the Arch of Constantine proposed by Giacomo Boni as a model for the Legend of Trajan and Dante's description (from Boni 1906, 38).

With regard to the second part of the Legend – Trajan's speaking tongue; his resurrection; the salvation from Hell—scholars have been arguing that the matrix undoubtedly referred to the hagiographic tradition of Pope Gregory the Great. As for the first part of the tale—the story of the "widow" – scholars agree that, in all likelihood, its matrix is of a different nature. The story, in fact, although widespread in a large number of texts, would arise not from a text but from an image (a recapitulation of the sources on the legend, is in Cetto 1966, 94 ff; Whatley 1984; Settis 1995; a summary of the *status quaestionis* in Centanni 2022).

As far as I know, the first idea on the matter came from Giacomo Boni, who in 1906 published an article in "Nuova Antologia" on the Legend of Trajan. Boni referred to the passage of Dante's *Purgatory* in which the episode of Trajan and the widow who asks him for justice for her murdered son is described with precision (on Boni's contribution on the subject, see Pilutti Namer 2019, 101-104). Boni is the first who proposes to look for a visual, non-textual matrix of the Legend of Trajan, indicating some possible

models: a bas-relief from the Arch of Trajan in Benevento; some coins of Trajan or Adrianus with a Province kneeling at the Emperor's feet and a relief on the Arch of Constantine, which Boni describes in this way:

> Il penultimo rilievo, a sinistra di chi guarda dal Colosseo [...] rappresenta una donna scapigliata, povera a panni ed a cintura, seduta in terra, il gomito sinistro appoggiato a una ruota, il braccio destro alto, tesa la palma verso quattro personaggi uno dei quali, l'imperatore dal paludamento sovrapposto alla tunica, sembra darle ascolto. [...] Questo bassorilievo poteva aver tratto l'attenzione dell'*ultimus Romanorum* [Gregorio] che ivi presso trasformava la sua casa in monastero: poteva integrare la leggenda della vedova, dopo che le tre porte di bronzo chiudenti il sepolcro di Traiano furono svelte, ed andar scordato quando la leggenda ebbe sviluppo suo proprio. Nessun'altra scultura romana ricorda meglio la descrizione dantesca (Boni 1906, 36-39).

In short, the model that could have inspired the Legend of Trajan's Justice would be one of the bas-reliefs of the Arch of Constantine, which Boni identifies precisely [Fig. 1]. So it was Boni who first proposed to look for a visual and non-textual matrix of the Legend of Trajan. Therefore, the entry into the critical debate of the idea that the history of Trajan's Justice is a sort of fortunate, albeit erroneous, 'caption' produced by an archaeological image, is due to Boni. Hence, the hypothesis accepted by scholars of Dante without special in-depth analysis. According to this thesis, the origin of the legend has to be linked to a bas-relief on a Roman triumphal arch, showing the Emperor and a kneeling female figure next to him, probably is the allegory of a subjected Province:

> L'origine della leggenda si pensa sia da collegarsi a un bassorilievo di un arco trionfale romano, in cui è raffigurato l'imperatore e accanto una figura femminile inginocchiata, forse una provincia sottomessa (Saffiotti Bernardi 1971, *ad voc.* "Gregorio I").

In the conclusions of Boni's article, in relation to the bas-relief he identified as the visual matrix of the legend, we read: "Nessun'altra scultura romana ricorda meglio la descrizione dantesca" ["No other Roman sculpture better resembles Dante's description"]. Therefore, Boni suggests

that Gregory would have had confirmation of the tradition of the Emperor's Justice by looking at the Arch of Constantine itself (Boni 1906, 36-39).

Certainly, Boni's intuition is brilliant, but his identification of the specific bas-relief from the Arch of Constantine for which he claims the most certain proximity to the description in Dante, does not seem at all convincing.

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: the proposal developed by Salvatore Settis (1995)

About the sources of the Legend in general, so wrote Salvatore Settis:

> La sua origine e stata variamente discussa, spesso cercandone nuclei, o 'precedenti', in fonti più antiche, in greco: un passo di Dione Cassio (LXIX, 6) che racconta un aneddoto sul regno di Adriano, la vita di Giovanni Elemosinario scritta verso il 620 da Leonzio vescovo di Napoli, un episodio della vita di Eraclio narrato dal patriarca Niceforo ai primi del IX secolo […]. Altri hanno preferito battere altre strade, ora additando paralleli di questa storia in Persia e in India, ora lungamente cercando, sulla suggestione tutta visiva di quel famoso passo di Dante, la possibile origine della storia nel *corpus* della tradizione iconografica antica: una spiegazione eziologica, secondo la quale una qualche immagine di una donna di fronte a Traiano (o a un altro imperatore) avrebbe 'prodotto', per essere compresa e spiegata, l'intera leggenda, e generato dai muti marmi il celebre colloquio (Settis 1995, 39-40).

In other words, Settis accepts and raises Boni's hypothesis according to which some image of a woman in front of Trajan, or in front of another emperor, could have 'produced' – and this should be understood and explained – the whole legend. In this regard, Settis observed:

> La mossa più appropriata sarebbe certo di spostare l'attenzione dalla ricerca di un'improbabile "fonte unica", in immagine, della leggenda di Traiano (di cui andrebbe verificata l'accessibilità nel momento in cui si vuol collocare l'origine della storia) a una SERIE iconografica, dove una scena del tipo che abbiamo in mente ricorresse di frequente. Meglio se questa serie fosse, per caratteristiche tipologiche, diffusa non (o: non solo) su monumenti

inamovibili (come un arco trionfale), ma (o: ma anche) su *media* di larga
circolazione (Settis 1995, 40).

Thus, rather than the search for an improbable "unique source", in a
specific image, of the Legend of Trajan, the attention should be placed on
the "iconographic series" appearing not only on immovable monuments,
such as triumphal arches, but also on widely circulated media. In this
sense, Settis, expanding and discussing with precise accuracy the
iconographic series already proposed by Boni, indicates some models on
medals and sarcophagi. These are some of the works called into question
[Fig 2].

2 | Four scenes related to Trajan's Justice, from Settis 1995, Figs. 15-18:
– Medallion of Constantine with the personification of London (*Londinium*) kneeling
before the emperor (London, British Museum).
– Medallion of Valentinian and Valens with City kneeling before the emperor (in
exergo, *Tellus*).
– Roman sarcophagus with 'biography' of a general (Los Angeles, County Museum
of Art).
– Drawing from a Roman sarcophagus now in Los Angeles (Windsor, Royal Library).

I believe that in this search for the model – the matrix of the text – what is
misleading is the gender of the characters in the Legend of Trajan: the
Emperor on horseback, a male figure; the "widow" prostrated at his
feet, i.e. a female figure. In particular, the idea of the "kneeling
woman" has led scholars to look for the model in a scene that included a
female figure, recalling the iconographic scheme, very common especially
on coins and medallions, of the Province kneeling before the Emperor. But
the reference to the iconographic scheme, with respect to the dictate of
the legend, is very weak: the analogy between the text and the image that
would have inspired it is reduced, in short, to the pair involving a female
figure kneeling before a male figure, identifiable as a Province making an
act of submission before the *Princeps*. In the relief from the Arch of
Constantine identified by Boni as the one that would "most closely

resemble the Legend of Trajan", the Emperor is standing; in the series produced by Settis the Emperor is on horseback. However, the mounted army crowd around the leader is missing.

The trap, I suggest, lies in the search for an archaeological model involving a kneeling woman who would then be misinterpreted as the "widow". But in this case (as in many others) the principle of *cherchez la femme* leads onto the wrong track. The misinterpretation of the image that gave rise to the medieval legend also lies in the misinterpretation of the gender of the figure in the model. In all likelihood, it was not a female figure, but a male figure, dressed according to the iconography of the 'barbarian' and, as such, misunderstood with a female figure because of his clothing.

The visual matrix of the Legend can therefore be sought in one of those "mute marbles" (so wrote Settis) that must have been accessible and visible throughout the late ancient and medieval ages. And in all probability the image-matrix is on the Arch of Constantine, but it is not the image that Giacomo Boni had identified by following the misleading trail of the female figure at the Emperor's feet.

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: Aby Warburg's hypothesis (1914-1929)
We owe to Aby Warburg the most plausible identification, in my opinion, of the matrix-image of the story of Trajan's Justice. The proposal, original and brilliant, was put forward by Warburg in five "texts", among his writings, and the Note on the Panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. They are:

– The text of a lecture given in 1914 in Florence, entitled *Der Eintritt der antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance* (*The Entry of the Idealizing Classic Style in the Painting of Early Renaissance*).
– The text of the lecture, *Die römische Antike in der Werkstatt Ghirlandaios* (*Roman Antiquity in the Workshop of Ghirlandaio*), given on 19 January 1929 in Rome;
– the Diary of the "Italian Journey", written together with Gertrud Bing between the end of 1928 and the summer of 1929;
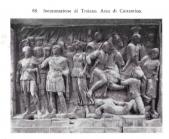– The text of the *Einleitung der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (*Introduction to the Mnemosyne Atlas*) (Juni 1929 = WIA III.102.3-4);
– The Notes on *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Panels 7 and 52, dated 1929.

It should be pointed that all these texts are not real essays intended for publication, but originate as lecture notes, diary entries, and notes. With regard to four of the texts mentioned above (the annotations of the 1929 Lecture in Rome; the Diary notes on the trip to Italy; the text of the *Introduction* to Mnemosyne; the Notes for the *Bilderatlas* Panels), they are all texts that remained unpublished until a few years ago. For the first paper – the 1914 Lecture in Florence – the text was conceived as a real essay, but due to a troubled publishing history, it too was destined to remain unpublished, with the exception of the excellent Italian edition Bing 1966 (see below the Note to editions of the 1914 Lecture).

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: Aby Warburg's first hypothesis (Florence, 1914)

87. Vittoria di Traiano sui Daci. Arco di Costantino.

88. Incoronazione di Traiano. Arco di Costantino.

3 |"Victory of Trajan over the Dacians. Arch of Constantine" (caption of Fig. 87, by the Bing edition 1966); "Coronation of Trajan. Arch of Constantine" (caption of Fig. 88, by the 1966 Bing edition).

Since the text of 1914 Lecture is very important and is Warburg's first and most extensive consideration of the Legend of Trajan, it is useful to recapitulate why it remained unpublished until very recently (the bibliographical data of the troubled publishing history are in a dedicated note at the beginning of the Bibliography of this contribution). In the first edition of Warburg's works, published by Teubner in 1932, we find only a very brief summary of the text (the same one that had been published in a journal in 1914, after Warburg's Lecture at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence). The same summary appears in the only edition of Warburg's essays in English available so far, edited by Kurt W. Forster for the Getty Institute in 1999. Meanwhile, the complete version of the essay, together with its apparatus of figures, was first published in the 1966 Italian volume edited by Gertrud Bing.

Only in 2010 was the complete text published in the De Gruyter edition by Martin Treml et all. In 2001, an English translation of the essay was

published in a volume edited by Richard Woodfield (the English version of the quoted passages follows this edition).

I wanted to reconstruct the editorial history of Warburg's 1914 Lecture in order to underline a fact. With the exception of Bing 1966 edition, until Treml 2010 edition, there has been no integral edition of 1914 essay, completed with figures, which in this case are anything but an accompanying apparatus (as often happens with Warburg's works), and constitute an integral and fundamental part of the text. These gaps and delays in Warburg's editions can partly explain why Warburg's so important insight into the visual pattern of the Legend of Trajan has not been taken up in the critical literature on the subject, neither among Dante scholars nor among archaeologists.

In 1914 Lecture titled *Der Eintritt der antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance* (*The Entry of the Idealizing Classic Style in the Painting of Early Renaissance*), Aby Warburg draws attention to the reliefs on the Arch of Constantine as models for Renaissance painting. However, in the same lecture there is also a very important passage on the visual matrix of the Legend of Trajan's Justice. In the essay we find the description of two reliefs particularly relevant in relation to our theme:

> One of the reliefs shows the Emperor in the midst of the tumult of battle, jumping over a barbarian who has tumbled to the ground in front of him, while their leader is throwing himself towards the Emperor, begging for mercy. Another barbarian is desperately holding on to the neck of his horse which has collapsed; behind him, a second barbarian is trying to avoid the fate of his comrade, whose head has been taken hold of by an armoured cavalryman from the Emperor's retinue which is rushing into battle, in order to give him the coup de grâce. His impending and inevitable fate is indicated by the two decapitated barbarian heads which two legionaries are triumphantly holding up to the emperor. One can see another scene from a battle with the barbarians on the right of the other relief. One barbarian has already fallen, above him others are begging for mercy, one of them on their knees, another, vanquished by an armored legionary, is standing (Warburg [1914] 2001, 10).

Therefore, Warburg identified two reliefs from a Trajanic monument reused in the Arch of Constantine as important visual models for the triumph and battle scenes depicted by Quattrocento's painters. However, in Warburg's hermeneutic perspective, those reliefs are important not only for early Renaissance painting. In the same writing he proposed a connection between the Trajan reliefs of the Arch of Constantine and the series already recognised by scholars as the visual matrix of the Legend of Trajan's Justice:

Scholarly research has long perceived in this the echo of a triumphal arch that, just like the Trajanic relief, shows a victorious rider jumping over a fallen enemy, while another, begging for mercy, throws himself towards him. For in the medieval interpretation of such a group there arose the legend of the piety, in other words, the mercy, of Trajan. This example shows us how typically the Church subsequently transformed a brutal world conqueror, attacking in all pomp, into a devout Christian worthy of the intercession of Saint Gregory (Warburg [1914] 2001, 11).

Corresponding to these two important descriptions given in the Lecture are the two figures I reproduce from the Bing 1966 edition – as mentioned above, the first complete edition of the paper, including the images that originally accompanied the text of the Florentine lecture [Fig.3].

In both reliefs, Warburg highlights the presence of the Emperor on horseback, the scrum of the army around him, the body of a barbarian under the hooves of the Emperor's horse who ran him over, another barbarian kneeling facing the Emperor impetuously advancing, begging for mercy.

Particularly interesting for the evolution of Warburg's idea about the subject, is an observation on Botticelli's drawing for the Canto X of *Purgatory* in which the bas-relief with the episode of the Justice of Trajan appears. In the 1914 paper, Warburg wrote:

It is well known that Dante portrays this scene [Trajan's Justice] in the tenth Canto of Purgatory and, significantly, in the form of a sculptural relief. I shall show you shortly Botticelli's illustration from his famous series of drawings of the *Divine Comedy*. In his illustration of the legend it was the mass of

riders, pushing forward, that interested Botticelli just as much as the pious and just Emperor coming to a halt. Unlike Dante, Botticelli was sustained by the direct memory of the original dynamic Roman style, for he had already studied the ancient triumphal arch" (Warburg [1914] 2001, 11).

4 | Rome, Arch of Constantine. Bas-relief from a Trajanic monument, inserted in the main archway of the Arch, with the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS above it.
5 | Sandro Botticelli, drawing for Dante's *Purgatory* Canto X (1481-1495). Silverpoint, ink and pen on parchment, Berlin Kupferstichkabinett (detail).

Two observations in the passage from the 1914 Lecture are remarkable. The first is the underlining of the fact that Dante describes the Legend of Trajan as a "sculptural relief". The second is to point out that, in illustrating Dante's episode, Botticelli polarises a double movement – the impetuousness of the mass of horsemen; the pious Emperor "coming to a halt". Warburg also states that Botticelli knows how to bring to life the "original dynamic Roman style" because he knows antiquity from his personal experience since, during his stay in Rome, he "had already studied the ancient triumphal arch" (on the theme, see Perfetti 2022, in this issue of Engramma).

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: Aby Warburg's second hypothesis (Hertziana Lecture, 1929)
In 1914 Lecture, Warburg does not explicitly mention Giacomo Boni. A direct reference to the essay published in 1906 in "Nuova Antologia" is contained in the second text in which Warburg refers to our subject. This is the draft of the Lecture given on 19 January 1929 at the inauguration of the Reading Room of the Hertziana Library in Rome. The lecture, entitled *Die römische Antike in der Werkstatt Ghirlandaios* (*Roman Antiquity in the Workshop of Ghirlandaio*), was the first public presentation of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* project and it is, as well known, a sort of incunabulum of the *Atlas*' themes (De Laude 2014).

In the Hertziana Lecture Warburg returns again to the subject of the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine as a model for the Legend of Trajan, in this case explicitly quoting Boni's 1906 essay:

> What could be more natural for historians than looking around to see if a real ancient relief could have given rise to such an interpretation? The field of triumphal sculpture lends itself to such research; thus Giacomo Boni, in an illustrated essay published in "Nuova Antologia", had the happy insight of identifying Trajan, as he stands, for example, on a relief of the Arch of Constantine in front of the reclining Dacia, as the archetype of the Emperor helpful and mild (Warburg [1929] 2014, 23) [The English translations of the passages from the Hertziana's Lecture, based on 2014 De Laude edition, are by the author].

As we read in this passage, Warburg precisely recalls the image of the standing Emperor and the Province subjected at his feet as a generic "archetype" of a good and charitable Emperor, in agreement with Boni. Further on, in the text of the lecture, Warburg points out that the Legend of Trajan's Justice had arisen from a reinterpretation, whereby Trajan's "ruthless character" in the Christian Middle Ages was transformed into the "Legend of his Justice" (Warburg [1929] 2014, 22).

Fifteen years after the Florentine Lecture (1914), in the Hertziana lecture of January 1929, Warburg again recognises Botticelli's particular ability to reproduce the polarity between the soldiers and the Emperor, between movement impetus and restraint:

> Botticelli's illustrations for the Divine Comedy lead to other considerations. A host of horsemen are rushing, with their commander who has to stop if he does not want to run over a woman who throws herself in front of him. It seems to me that a relief with the Emperor riding impetuously and sweeping away his dead enemies, which has already found a barbaric expression in Valens' medal, is an engram that defies the stylisation of the ethical level. Here we are faced with an energetic inversion of the meaning of ancient formulas of pathos: we will find other effects of this type in the Arch of Constantine (Warburg [1929] 2014, 23-24).

Carrying on the discourse already initiated (both in the text and in the accompanying figures) in the 1914 lecture, in the text from 1929 we read a clear evolution from the first idea, taken from Boni, that the visual model of the legend was the standing Emperor with the kneeling Province before him. Warburg now points out without hesitation that the relief from the Roman arch from which Botticelli took his inspiration depicts a scene in which the advancing Emperor sweeps away his enemies and their bodies lie under the hooves of his horse: it is the pathos of the victorious emperor that is also found as an engram in a "barbarian" style coin of emperor Valens. But the "engram", as such, can be declined in different and even opposite meanings. Therefore, Botticelli – Warburg points out – performs an "energetic inversion of the meaning of ancient formulas of pathos" and, unlike the ancient model, the Emperor holds back the horse instead of spurring it to run over the bodies of dead enemies.

So, the case-study of the visual matrix of the Legend of Trajan becomes a crucial example for Warburg, for the formulation of one of the guiding ideas of the *Atlas*: the energetic inversion.

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: Updating Aby Warburg and Gertrud Bing's proposal in their "Roman Diary" (1929)
The relevance of the case of Trajan's Justice to the hermeneutic model that Warburg was developing in the last months of his life is confirmed by a series of notes kept in the Diary that Aby wrote with Gertrud Bing during their stay in Rome. On 1 January 1929, Warburg notes in his Diary:

> My colleague Bing expresses her satisfaction with my Florentine conference of 1913 [*vere*: 1914]. The possibility of placing Trajan's Justice at the beginning (problem of energetic inversion. Donatello, Duccio) and the Dutch concave mirror (*Auffangspiegel*): Medea-Rembrandt should in the end, be considered (Warburg, Bing [1929] 2004, 35). [The English translations of the passages from the Diary, based on the 2004 Ghelardi edition, are by the author].

Now, the crucial theme is the composition and editing of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, and Warburg, at this stage of the work, plans to place Trajan's Justice at the beginning of the *Bilderatlas* as the starting point for the guiding theme of energetic inversion (the juxtaposition of Duccio and

Donatello, along the lines of energetic inversion, is extremely interesting, as is the idea of ending with Rembrandt's Medea). In a Note dated 14 January 1929, in the days immediately preceding the conference, we read these words from Warburg:

> If one were to conceive the conference from the purely historical-expressive viewpoint and choose as its title: the mneme that consciously forms – mneme (social) – memory, antithesis between victory [Sieg] and commotion [E*rgriffenheit*]; being vanquished/defeated [*Besiegtheit / Niederlage*] as an expressive value that configures a pre-conciliation, to all this would correspond: Introduction: energetic inversion; determination of the polarising value [*die polarisiende Werbestimmung*] (Warburg, Bing [1928-1929] 2005, 42).

In January 1929, at the phase of the work corresponding to the Hertziana Lecture, Warburg seemed convinced that the exemplary case of energetic inversion represented by Trajan's Justice – and in particular the dialectic between the pathos of the victor and the pathos of the vanquished – could be the Leitmotiv to the architectural structure of the *Bilderatlas*. In a note dated 28.1.1929 (after the Hertziana conference) we read the following dialogue:

> Gertrud Bing | The text of the Atlas was made possible by the introduction to the conference, but if it is to become a methodological introduction to the whole work it still has to be considerably expanded. Directional indication. [...] The introduction to the first table seems to me an almost complete elucidation of the concept of energetic 'inversion', to which, however, I would add the interpretation of typological thinking.
> Aby Warburg | It is just as easy to confuse the emperor who restores the province (element of the woman lying on the ground) with the type of Christ who frees the patriarchs.
> Gertrud Bing | An introduction to each of the remaining seven plates (now again corrected in detail) could form a large part of the text of the Atlas and I would be in favour of writing it now that the photographs are on display and the room is available to us (Warburg, Bing [1928-1929] 2005, 45-46).

It is worth noting Gertrud Bing's solicitude in encouraging Warburg to write the text of the Introduction to the *Atlas* now, when the panels are

still exhibited for the Hertziana conference, before the cues and ideas born so vividly from that occasion fade away, and the treasure of the work of those days is dispersed in an ungovernable labyrinth inhabited by ever new ideas, and dense with infinite branches of the paths of research.

Back to our theme, it should be observed that in January 1929 Warburg still recalls the image of the Province kneeling before the Emperor (according to Boni's hypothesis). But the energetic inversion that is now at the heart of his hermeneutic system has no longer anything to do with the image of the kneeling Province and the merciful Emperor. It has to do, instead, with the image of another bas-relief on the Arch of Constantine, which shows the Emperor riding over the enemy.

Searching for a visual matrix of the Legend: Aby Warburg proposal in the *Introduction to Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929)

6 | Rome, Arch of Constantine, (315 AD). Bas-relief from a Trajanic monument, inserted in the main archway of the Arch, with the inscription LIBERATORI URBIS above it (with a clear reference to Constantine and not to Trajan).

The idea becomes more focused and precise in another text in which Warburg mentions the case of Trajan's Justice: the *Introduction to Mnemosyne Atla*s, dated June 1929:

Even the Church had managed to lend the self-glorification of the Trajan relief Christian sentiment, by means of a legend that was still alive in Dante. The famous story of the "Pietà" of the Emperor towards a widow who was pleading for justice is probably the subtlest attempt at transforming imperial pathos into Christian piety, through the energetic inversion of its meaning; the Emperor, bursting out of the inner relief, becomes an advocate of justice, and bids his followers halt, because the widow's child has fallen under the hoofs of a Roman rider. (Warburg [1929] 2017, 18).

Now the idea is clear and linear: it is the bas-relief "inner the Arch of Constantine" with the scene of the Emperor overwhelming the barbarian that triggers the "Christian conversion" of the scene and the reversal of history (on the "Christian conversion" of the Emperor in a merciful

figure, see De Laude 2022, 53-54). It is the relief of Trajan bearing the epigraph LIBERATORI URBIS that is the matrix of the medieval Legend of the Justice of Trajan.

But the hermeneutic circle is positively closed in the last two Warburgian "texts" that we finally call upon in this reconnaissance: the montages of two Panels from the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, and the Notes on them.

The visual matrix of the Legend: *Mnemosyne Atlas*' Panel 7 and Panel 52 (1929)

7 | Mnemosyne Atlas, Panel 7.

8 | *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Panel 52.

In the last version of the *Bilderatlas*, which was left incomplete at Warburg's death on 26 October 1929, the "Justice of Trajan" does not open the *Atlas* – as it should have done according to the project phase dated January of the same year, during the period of the Lecture at the Hertziana. However, the subject is very present in two Panels. The first one (Panel 7) is part of the group of archaeological Panels presenting "Ancient Prefigurations" (*Antike Vorprägungen*): Panels 4-8, including "Archaeological models and impressions from Antiquity".

The images on Panel 7 (as well as in all Panels of the group 4-8) are reproductions of various archaeological artefacts, many of which are known or at least accessible from the fifteenth century onwards, and could already have been known to the artists of the "early Renaissance". The Panel displays images that can be grouped into three strands. The first one consists in battle scenes and triumphal processions: the Arch of Constantine and some of its bas-reliefs (7_2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8); a relief from the Arch of Titus (7_5); a

statue of *Minerva Victrix* from Ostia (7_11); a series of coins (7_1, 20, 21: the last one is the "coin of Valens" mentioned by Warburg in the Hertziana lecture as an example of the series of the Emperor on horseback with the enemy at his feet). The second strand presents a series of scenes of apotheosis, victory and "elevation on shields": the Augustan Gem (7_10); the Tiberian Gem (7_11); a painting from Pompeii with Venus carried up in the sky by Zephyrus (7_9); a relief from the so-called "Arch of Portugal" (7_12); a relief with the apotheosis of Antoninus Pius and Faustina from the Antonine Column (7_13). The third strand consists of a series of illustrations on the theme of battle /triumph /apotheosis: a tenth-century Byzantine miniature with the elevation of King David (7_14); fifteenth and sixteenth-century drawings from Roman monuments (7_16, 17, 19), including drawings from the Antique by the Ghirlandaio's workshop that were the focus of the Hertziana lecture. A case apart is Appiani's nineteenth-century fresco in the Palazzo Reale in Milan with Napoleon's apotheosis (7_15), which represents the ultimate outcome of the imperial apotheosis model.

The Arch of Constantine occupies a prominent position in the assembly of Table 7: next to it is the zoom on the detail of the bas-relief inside the main archway with Trajan on horseback sweeping away the barbarian. The Notes on the Panel of Warburg and collaborators, collected by Gertrud Bing and Fritz Saxl, read:

> Antike Vorprägungen. Siegerpathos. Römischer Triumph. Triumphbogen.
> […]. Überreiten (Ancient prefigurations. Pathos of the victor. Roman triumph.
> Triumphal arch. [...] Overwhelm by riding).

Further on in the *Bilderatlas*, the theme of Trajan's Justice appears explicitly in Panel 52, which displays a series of representations of the medieval legend.

Panel 52 diplays a series of images of works almost exclusively on the theme of Trajan's Justice, demonstrating the exceptional fortune and diffusion of the Legend on a wide variety of media, from the first half of the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century: a "desco da parto" (birth tray) (52_1); a Tournai tapestry (52_16); a chest of drawers from the circle of Mantegna (52_11); Luca Signorelli'' monochromes for Orvieto Cathedral

with the three reliefs from Dante's *Purgatory* (52_5); a painting from the Köln Town Hall (52_17); pen and etching drawings from the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century (52_ 7, 8); a grisaille fresco by Mocetto (52_9); a drawing by Albrecht Dürer (52_19); a sixteenth-century etching (52_18). A parallel series is represented by the theme of Scipio's Continence, often combined with the one of Trajan's Justice: a fifteenth-century chest (52_3); a woodcut for a printed edition possibly by Plutarch (52_10); a painting by Beccafumi (52_14); a drawing by Albrecht Dürer and workshop copy for the Nuremberg Town Hall (52_20, 21); an etching dated to the seventeenth century (52_6). But in the Panel we also find Botticelli's drawing on Trajan's Justice for Canto X of the *Purgatory* (52_2), and, for a thematic contiguity, the chest on which Botticelli himself painted the exemplary feat of Lucrezia (52_4).

The Notes on the Panel read:

> Gerechtigkeit des Trajan = energetische Inversion des Überreitens. Ethische Umkehrung des Siegerpathos.
> [Justice of Trajan = energetic inversion of overwhelming riding. Ethical reversal of the pathos of the victor.]

Compared to the considerations Warburg had developed on the subject of Trajan's Justice since the 1914 lecture, in the *Atlas* he takes a decisive step. The precise reference is to the "Pathos of the victor. Roman triumph. Triumphal Arch. [...] Riding on horseback" and again to the Justice of Trajan as a case in point of the "energetic inversion": the "ethical reversal" of the victor's pathos—the Emperor who, instead of violently overwhelming the enemy, brakes the impetus of his horse and performs an act of justice.

To sum up: the passages we have quoted from his writings and, above all, from the editing of Panels 7 and 52 of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, highlight Warburg's idea that the legend of the widow would have arisen from the inverted interpretation of the bas-relief LIBERATORI URBIS with Trajan's cavalcade, inside the archway of the Arch of Constantine. The barbarian asking for mercy from the Emperor, who is about to "ride him down", is misinterpreted, because of the style of dress and attitude, and transfigured into the "widow" who asks (and will obtain) justice from the

emperor. The body of the barbarian, already run over by the Emperor, becomes the dead son for whom the widow asks for justice.

The visual matrix of the Legend: Trajan's Justice as an exemplary case of "energetic inversion"
To accept Warburg's brilliant intuition, it is necessary, for once, to forget the subject, to apply the Panofskyan "principle of disjunction", and it immediately becomes clear that the visual model that gives rise to the Legend can only be the bas-relief LIBERATORI URBIS, since the Antiquity always been very visible and accessible. The impetus of the "riding over" (*Überreiten*), captured in the marble snapshot of the Roman relief, appears, in the eyes of Medieval and then Renaissance observers, as power restrained by pity. Or, to put it better in Warburg's words, the vitality of ancient pathos is translated into Christian clemency (on the energetic inversion, even in a Christian sense, see De Laude 2022, 55-56).

This is the paradigmatic case from which Warburg theorises the "energetic inversion"—the violent pathos of the victor becoming mercy and justice. In other cases it is a reversal of positive energy that is channelled into a murderous action: the enthusiastic maenads of Dionysus becoming the murdering of Pentheus and Orpheus; the pathos of the infanticidal mother, like Medea; the pathos of the "Headhunter", like Judith or Salome (Bordignon 2004; Seminario Mnemosyne 2014).

From image to word, and vice versa. From the misunderstanding of the image of Arch of Constantine comes the Legend, which in turn is retranslated into a figure by Dante, thanks to his visionary poetic imagination; hence Dante, from his vision, produces an "ecphrasis with a spectator" (I borrow the expression from the fine title of Vescovo 1993: for the relief of *Purgatory* X, see in particular pages 345-347). From Dante's ecphrasis, a new series of images starts and among these, the first, and most ingenious with respect to the probable visual model of the Legend, is the Botticelli's drawing. We have to follow Warburg's intuition: in illustrating the episode of the Justice of Trajan, Botticelli has in mind the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine which he "knew very well". It is Botticelli who, by referring to the relief of the Arch of Constantine as a model for the illustration of the passage from *Purgatory*, implicitly points us to the most probable visual matrix of the Legend of Trajan. Botticelli himself

activates a short-circuit that has to do not only with his prodigious sensitivity of the artist, but can also be compared to the enlightenment of the act of philological *divinatio*: here Sandro reveals his skill of "sofistico" scholar (according to Vasari's *Lives*) – he is not only an artist.

Very often texts generate images; sometimes images generate texts (which will in turn generate images). Aby Warburg's (underestimated) insight evidenced the power of the image contained in the visual matrix of the Legend itself. The reliefs of the Arch of Constantine have a great power, equal to that which, according to Dante, animates the bas-reliefs made by the hand of God on the cornice of *Purgatory*.

> Dinanzi a noi pareva sì verace / quivi intagliato in un atto soave, / che non sembiava imagine che tace (*Pg.* X, 37-39).

> After long interdict, appeared before us,/ his gracious action carved with such precision—/ he did not seem to be a silent image
> (*Pg.* X, 37-39) [Translation by Allen Mandelbaum, 1982*].

It was the "mute marbles" that generated the Legend, because those marbles were evidently not so silent, but their eloquence, retained in stone, was clearly perceptible and effective. Actually, they are *imagines agentes* able to produce new strings of Memory. As Dante states in the very passage of *Purgatory* in which he describes the relief of Trajan's Justice, the divine energy of the image is at the superlative degree of its power "on the edge of visible speech" – precisely, "sull'orlo del visibile parlare".

Bibliography

Note on the editions of Aby Warburg's Lecture at Florence (1914)

The paper *Der Eintritt der antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance* [1914] originated as the text of a lecture that Warburg gave on 20 April 1914 at the Kunsthistorisches Institue in Florence. In the journal "Kunstchronic" 25/33, 1914 only a Resumée, edited by Walther R. Biehl, was published. The same summary was included in the Teubner edition of the *Gesamellte Schriften* of 1932, on pages 173-176, and 367. The same

summary also appears in the English edition *The Renewal of pagan antiquity*, ed. by Kurt Walter Forster, Los Angeles 1999, pp. 271-273, 468 (note that all these partial editions are published without images). The first full edition of the text, retrieved from Warburg's writing preserved at the Warburg Archive in London (WIA III.88.1), is the Italian translation *L'ingresso dello stile ideale anticheggiante nella pittura italiana del primo Rinascimento*, in *La rinascita del paganesimo antico*, edited by G. Bing, translated by E. Cantimori, Firenze 1966, on pages 283-307: the edition includes all the original images that accompanied the writing). An English translation is published in *Art History as Cultural History. Warburg's Projects*, ed. by R. Woodfiled, Amsterdam 2001, on pages 7-31 (also this one has been published without images). The full original version of the text was published only in 2010, in Aby Moritz Warburg, *Werke in einem Band: auf der Grundlage der Manuskripte und Handexemplare*, hg von. M. Treml, S. Weigel, und P. Ladwig, Berlin 2010, 281-310.

References

Boni 1906
G. Boni, *Leggende*, in "Nuova Antologia di scienze, lettere ed arti" 126 (1906), 3-39.

Bordignon 2004
G. Bordignon, *L'espressione antitetica in Aby Warburg. La polarità semantica dei gesti dalle Pathosformeln all'arte del Rinascimento*, "La Rivista di Engramma" 32 (aprile 2004), 7-17.

Centanni 2022
M. Centanni, *L'"alta gloria" dell'impero e la visione di Traiano*, in *Dante e Roma*, a cura di M. Fagiolo, Roma 2022, 2-15.

Cetto 1966
A.M. Cetto, *Der Berner Traian- und Herkinbald-Teppich*, Bern 1966.

De Laude 2014
S. De Laude, *Aby Warburg, Die Römische Antike in der Werkstatt Ghirlandaios. Traccia della conferenza alla Biblioteca Hertziana di Roma (19 gennaio 1929), con una Nota al testo (e 'agenda warburghiana')*, "La Rivista di Engramma" 119 (settembre 2014), 8-29.

De Laude 2020
S. De Laude, *Il Medioevo Secondo Ernst Robert Curtius e Aby Warburg*, "Immagine e Parola" 1 (2020), 45-69.

Perfetti 2022
F. Perfetti, *Botticelli, and Trajan. An Open Note*, "La Rivista di Engramma" 191 (aprile/maggio 2022).

Pilutti Namer
M. Pilutti Namer, *Giacomo Boni, storia memoria archeonomia*, Roma 2019.

Saffiotti Bernardi 1971
S. Saffiotti Bernardi, *Gregorio I*, in "Enciclopedia Dantesca", vol. III, Roma 1971, 282-283.

Seminario Mnemosyne 2014
Seminario Mnemosyne, ed., *The Angel and the Head-huntress. A Reading of Plate 47 of the Mnemosyne Atlas,* "La Rivista di Engramma" 119 (settembre 2014), 71-88.

Settis 1995
S. Settis, *Traiano a Hearst Castle: Due cassoni estensi*, in "I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance", 1995, vol. 6 (1995), 31-82.

Vescovo 1993
P. Vescovo, *Ecfrasi con spettatore. Dante, Purgatorio X-XVII*, in "Lettere italiane", 45 (1993), 335-360.

Vescovo 2022
P. Vescovo, *Umiltà. Selve, spiagge e piante*, in *Santi, giullari, romanzieri, poeti. Studi per Franco Suitner*, a cura di G. Crimi, Ravenna 2022, 43-59.

Warburg [1914] 2001
A. Warburg, *The Entry of the Idealizing Classical Style in the Painting of Early Renaissance*, in *Art History as cultural History. Warburg's Projects*, ed. by R. Woodfiled, Amsterdam 2001, 7-31.

Warburg [1929] 2014
A. Warburg, *Die römische Antike in der Werkstatt Ghirlandaios. Traccia della conferenza alla Biblioteca Hertziana* (19.1.1929), a cura di S. De Laude, "La Rivista di Engramma" 119 (settembre 2014), 8-29.

Warburg [1929] 2017
A. Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas. Introduction (1929)* [WIA 102.1.1], Eng. trans by M. Rampley, "La Rivista di Engramma" 142 (febbraio 2017), 11-29.

Warburg [1929] 2012-
A. Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas, digital edition of Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed by. Seminario Mnemosyne, "La Rivista di Engramma" (in progress).

Whatley 1984
G. Whatley, *The Uses of Hagiography: the Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages*, "Viator. Medieval and Renaissance Studies", 15, 1984, 25-59.

For Text and Translation of Dante's Divine Comedy*, see*
http://www.worldofdante.org.

English abstract

The paper proposes the hypothesis of a visual matrix for the Legend of Trajan's Justice, also told by Dante in *Purgatory*, X. In particular, the author focuses on Warburg's insight – borrowed from excerpts of his papers, lectures and, in particular, the notes on Panel 7 and Panel 52 of his *Bilderatlas* – that the visual matrix of the Legend is a relief from the Arch of Constantine: not the figure of the kneeling Province and the merciful Emperor, but that of the Leader who "overwhelms by riding" his enemy. According to Warburg's hypothesis, Trajan's representation was reversed from a figure of violence into a figure of mercy: from the image of the Victor who overwhelms his enemies, into that of the just and merciful Emperor who gives justice to the widow for her murdered son. So, in Mnemosyne Atlas the reinterpretation of Trajan's relief from the Arch of Constantine is considered as a paradigmatic case of "energetic inversion".

Keywords | Trajan; Constantine; Aby Warburg; Dante; Botticelli.

191 • Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods