

# Globalized Antiquity

Uses and Perceptions of the Past in South Asia,  
Mesoamerica, and Europe

Edited by

Ute Schüren, Daniel Marc Segesser, and Thomas Späth

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# Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Figures

List of Contributors

Introduction: Antiquity, Globalization, and Constructions of the Past  
in South Asia, Mesoamerica, and Europe  
*Ute Schüren, Daniel Marc Segesser, Thomas Späth*..... 13

## Part I Constructions of the Past in and about South Asia

Between Uniqueness and Diversity – Historical Developments  
and Historiography in South Asia: A Brief Introduction  
*Daniel Marc Segesser*..... 23

Chapter 1 Historical Traditions: Were They Absent in Early India?  
*Romila Thapar*..... 39

Chapter 2 Constructions of the Past in and about India: From Jahiliyya  
to the Cradle of Civilization. Pre-colonial Perceptions of India  
*Jamal Malik*..... 51

Chapter 3 Ancient History as a Means of Transforming Colonial India  
in the Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries  
*Daniel Marc Segesser*..... 73

Chapter 4 The Concept of a Classical Age in India's Contemporary Politics  
*Jakob Rösel*..... 93

Chapter 5 The Politics of National Histories in Urban Space:  
(Re-)Constructing Islamic Architecture in Early Post-colonial Delhi  
*Clemens Six*..... 127

## Part II Mesoamerica and Constructions of the Past

Mesoamerica: A Brief Introduction  
*Ute Schüren*..... 149

Chapter 6 Primordial Times in Mesoamerican Memory:  
Monuments, Tombs, and Codices  
*Maarten E.R.G.N. Jansen* ..... 157

## Contents

Chapter 7 Imagining a Nation: Elite Discourse and the Native Past in Nineteenth-Century Mexico <i>Wolfgang Gabbit</i> .....	189
Chapter 8 Decolonizing Memory: The Case of the Ñuu Sau (Mixtec People), Mexico <i>Gabina Aurora Pérez Jiménez</i> .....	211
Chapter 9 On the History of Archaeological Research in Mesoamerica, with Particular Reference to Pre-Columbian Maya Civilization <i>Jeremy A. Sabloff</i> .....	219
Chapter 10 Heirs of the Ancient Maya: Indigenous Organizations and the Appropriation of History in Yucatán, Mexico, and Guatemala <i>Ute Schüren</i> .....	231
 Part III Images of European Antiquity and the Perception of Non-European Cultures	
European “Classical Antiquity”: A Brief Introduction <i>Thomas Späth</i> .....	253
Chapter 11 The Path of Ruins in the Graeco-Roman World <i>Alain Schnapp</i> .....	259
Chapter 12 Füssli, Schlegel, and Lucian: A “True Story” about Late Eighteenth-Century Fragmented Antiquity <i>Manuel Baumbach</i> .....	281
Chapter 13 The Making of a Bourgeois Antiquity: Wilhelm von Humboldt and Greek History <i>Stefan Rebenich</i> .....	297
 Conclusion	
Chapter 14 Provincializing Antiquity? Uses of the Past Compared <i>Thomas Späth</i> .....	319
Index of Personal Names .....	339
Index of Geographical Names .....	343
Index of Subjects .....	346

# List of Figures

Fig. 1: Physical map of South Asia	25
Fig. 2: Languages in modern South Asia	28
Fig. 3: Map of Mesoamerica	148
Fig. 4: The destruction of the world by water, Codex Vaticanus A, f. 4v.	162
Fig. 5: The opening sentence in Codex Yuta Tnoho (Vindobonensis), 52	166
Fig. 6: First sunrise, Codex Yuta Tnoho (Vindobonensis), 23	168
Fig. 7: Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, the gold pectoral	172
Fig. 8: Priest Lord 5 Alligator offering his blood to the Sacred Bundle, Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 25	173
Fig. 9: Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, Bone 203i: Lady 9 Reed is born from the Tree of Origin	175
Fig. 10: The Tree of Origin, Codex Yuta Tnoho (Vindobonensis), 37	175
Fig. 11: The war against the “Stone Men”, Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 3	176
Fig. 12: Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, Bone 203b: the “Stone Man” binds and conquers towns	176
Fig. 13: Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, Bone 174a: Lady 9 Reed comes down from Heaven and defeats the “Stone Men”	176
Fig. 14: Lady 9 Reed, Goddess of Flints and Arrowheads, Patron of the Town of Blood (Tonalá), Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 51	177
Fig. 15: Lord 5 Flower of the “Xipe Dynasty” marries Lady 4 Rabbit, Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 33	178
Fig. 16: The landscape of Monte Albán in Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 19b, left-hand side	180
Fig. 17: The landscape of Monte Albán in Codex Tonindeye (Nuttall), 19a, right-hand side	181
Fig. 18: Tomb 7 of Monte Albán, Bone 124	182-183
Fig. 19: Cartoon: the philologist’s caricature on an ‘ancient’ potsherd	283
Fig. 20: Johann Heinrich Füssli, <i>Der Künstler verzweifelt vor der Größe der antiken Trümmer</i> (“The artist moved to despair by the grandeur of ancient ruins”)	284

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# Introduction:

## Antiquity, Globalization, and Constructions of the Past in South Asia, Mesoamerica, and Europe

*Ute Schüren, Daniel Marc Segesser, Thomas Späth*

During the past decades, competing perceptions and constructions of history have emerged as one of the most prominent fields in the humanities and social sciences. “Western” academic discourses and the associated politics of writing about societies and their past have often been described as influential and dominant. Their impact, which can be measured in the writings of non-Western social scientists responding to, adopting and transforming these discourses, has to be analysed by taking into account the growing networks of knowledge and the ways of collecting, organising and transferring this knowledge (e.g., archival politics, research designs, or educational systems) in the context of increasing globalization. The history of these processes is strongly related to power structures and political developments on both the national and global scale. Thus, post-colonial perspectives highlight and criticise particularly the colonial and imperialist relations behind the production of knowledge in humanities. They also question forms of authorship, methodology as well as scientific categories, and deconstruct the supposed objectivity of scientific discourse. These criticisms have valuably stripped many writings of their power and ideology and can enable one to see what will survive (and might be useful or not).

Concerning the “Western” historiography of foreign cultures shaped by colonialism, it is intriguing to ask not only how influential such historiography was and still is, but also by which discourses it has been informed. Therefore, the Western narrative should be qualified and compared to historiographical narratives in different times and regions. This is also fruitful for an analysis of these discourses from a more general perspective: what can we learn by contextualizing and analysing the global relatedness of such discourses and their reception? How does a simple story gain historical and ideological significance? What can we learn about the ways of empowering a narrative? What is the role and impact of religion, for example, in this process? How is the construction of a narrative related to political and economic interests? Which methodologies can comprehend and explain the discursive constellations of these narratives and their constructions of historical realities?

Inspired by post-modern and post-colonial critics of the dominant Western canons in the fields of historiography, philology, anthropology, and archaeology, this book looks at the genealogies of ideas and ideologies behind various canons and aims to explore

different historiographies by focusing on “antiquity.” Antiquity is an especially powerful concept because it represents a remote historical – and sometimes mythical – past and is thus a symbol of endurance and the manifestation of epochal standards. It is often associated with ideas of a “Golden” or “Classic Age” that boosts the past into an inaccessible sphere of enduring or even “eternal” normative qualities. According to Jamal Malik (one of the contributors to this volume), allusions to a classical antiquity are references to a structured form of historiography charged with additional meanings, having its own history of accumulated interpretations and amendments, bolstered by great age. Compared to historical categories of a shallower time depth, antiquity is presented as too distant for being disturbed and stained by contemporary quarrels about ideology or truth.

However, as some authors in this book point out, all historiography, including the remote past of antiquity, is closely related to the present. Antiquity functions as a “monumental” point of reference and orientation for the present due to its normative qualities. On the other hand, contemporary perceptions and negotiations about right or wrong and the correct way of interpreting reality – including, excluding or inventing, idealizing or demonizing knowledge concerning history – inform changing views of antiquity. As history in general, antiquity is shaped by the power relations fostering or backing the dominance of certain interpretations as a way of politically legitimizing certain actions in the past and/or present, or of enhancing their status. Thus, the distant past is not only a chronological reference point that describes a certain time period, but it also proves to be a site of competing interpretations; it is both an object and a means of a struggle for power and hegemony.

Reinterpretations of the past, as this volume shows, are especially evident in times of political conflict and social change. References to the past underpin one’s own collective identity and serve as a means for legitimizing social differentiation or adaptation in processes such as ethnogenesis or nation-building, centralization or regionalization, religious institutionalization or secularization. This is not true only for contemporary national societies exposed to large-scale globalization processes, but can also be observed in the pre-Columbian societies of Mesoamerica, where forms of knowledge and historiography circulated within and among regions. Historiographies might represent local or regional perspectives differing from the views of the political centres. Official and dissident historiographies coexist, but certain authorities (rulers, elders, religious specialists, even non-humans: such as gods, animals or spirits) might monopolise the authority for the transmission of historiography. Historiographies are often age- and gender-biased and represent only the perspectives of elites controlling access to certain media and historical canons. While some conceptions of history have been introduced by force from the outside, other external influences might have been partly or entirely appropriated, internalized or modified or completely rejected.

Being socially constructed, a certain concept of antiquity has to be kept vivid by referring to it. As Jakob Rösel points out in his contribution, the reworking and institutionalizing of the history of a certain group needs a shared awareness or consensus to function. Antiquity is constructed and ideas of antiquity are transmitted by different media, such as

the remains or reconstructions of archaeological sites, artefacts such as pottery or sculpture, images, oral traditions or performances such as song, dance, rituals, and written records. While some media are enduring and fixed, others are perishable and mobile. Some are sacred and arcane, others are directed to a general audience or considered profane. The language used might be either elaborate or colloquial. As several contributions to this book show (e.g., Jansen, Schnapp, Six, Thapar), ancient architecture is a powerful material manifestation of history endowed with specific symbolic meanings. Its re-use, restoration, and even reconstruction can refuel and strengthen associated political ideologies or affiliations with the venerated forefathers or mothers, as in the case of tombs or holy sites. Romila Thapar, for example, argues that particular text genres may point to different functions. The degree of historicity (in its modern, Western meaning) varies tremendously and is often difficult to discern in the sources, since information about contemporary emic conceptions are lacking and the sources are often incomplete. Comparing the media construing the past – the images of the Mexican codices, the remnants of an ancient European sculpture, the various texts forming part of a written tradition, the different oral traditions – conveys important methodological insights: how media transmit and reproduce the past already contains possible alternative notions of time in general. Various conceptualizations of time in South Asia, Europe, and Mesoamerica can be discerned, which reveal a complex interplay of linear, circular or spiral chronologies, a division of time into eras, and a special emphasis on ruptures in the sequence of time (such as a sequence of world ages and their respective destructions).

This book explores the perceptions and representations of the deep past in different cultures. We ask how the understandings of antiquity, its significance, timing and content varied and still vary culturally, as well as the conceptions of time in general. Scholars have hitherto considered how the ethnographic and philosophical texts of Greek and Roman antiquity have shaped the European gaze at foreign cultures. However, the construction of antiquity beyond Europe has remained largely uninvestigated. The effect of autonomous (in this case Mesoamerican and South Asian) notions of the past on European concepts of antiquity has also largely been ignored. In contrast, this volume develops a comparative and explicitly transnational perspective on the multiple constructions of history and uses of the past in Mesoamerica and in South Asia, and on the role played by the European notion of antiquity in this context.

Many studies on globalization and world history contribute to the tendencies to standardize and generalize cultural models. While the present volume considers these tendencies, it also seeks to identify the entanglements as well as the concrete peculiarities in and differences between the various cultural areas studied. It discusses the impact of European conceptions of antiquity on colonial and post-colonial societies and, conversely, the impact of non-European perspectives on European constructions of antiquity. The essays collected here do not take the employment of the European concept of antiquity and history in different regional contexts for granted but instead explore and present alternative and competing historiographies.

These discourses of the past are examined for their importance in the construction of collective identities from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Analyses consider the transformations between the pre-colonial era, European colonial rule, independence movements and nation-building, as well as recent indigenous political movements. Thus, the contributions gathered here reveal the diversity and constant transformation of the uses of the past from pre-Islamic Indian empires to the election campaigns in contemporary South Asia, from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica to the references to historical traditions in the present-day struggles of indigenous peoples, as well as in the conflicting constructions of a classical antiquity in nineteenth century Europe. The comparative investigation of references to “antiquity” in Mesoamerica, Europe, and South Asia leads to an understanding of the local – or rather regional – constructions of the past. Its three-part presentation, each devoted to one cultural area, enables a twofold reading: on the one hand, readers may gather how from a diachronic perspective the construction and use of the past changed over time within the three cultural areas investigated; on the other, the individual contributions invite a comparative approach to these areas, and thereby reveal their structural similarities, differences, and the specific local uses of the past. By comparing three cultural areas and by exploring the functions of antiquity, the book provides cultural anthropology and post-colonial studies with historical foundations, implements the postulate of the local gaze at global phenomena for world history and globalization research, and connects traditional “Classics” with the present. It both diversifies and specifies the Eurocentric notion of (Graeco-Roman) antiquity, and thereby aims to contribute to a productive debate on the use of the (distant) past in globalized societies.

This volume is based on the results of a conference held in Berne, Switzerland in October 2010 where intense debate and a highly fruitful exchange of ideas took place. The three parts of the book concerning the cultural areas under discussion are introduced with brief overviews by the editors, which put the following contributions in their spatial and temporal context.

The first part then focuses on constructions of the past in and about South Asia. In the first chapter Romila Thapar shows that early India had not only a sense of history – a fact still contested by certain historians who accept only European concepts of historicity – , but also a great variety of ways of remembering the past. The chapter can therefore also be taken as an important further contribution to provincialize Europe in the way that Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for: to look at Europe as one, but not the only way of dealing with world history (see chapter 14). The second chapter by Jamal Malik discusses competing historical traditions of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, and analyses their changes in different periods. Malik shows that the positions of his protagonists towards Hindu, Greek and Islamic norms and their perceptions of the past differed significantly. Nevertheless, two major trends can be made out in this context. On the one hand this was the *adab* tradition, which increasingly defended the norms of *shari’ah* in their narrow judicial sense, on the other a set of Persianate norms of comportment informed by ethical literature, liberal Sufi discourses and a flexible interpretation of Islamic law, which Malik calls the *akhlaqi* tradition. Daniel Marc Segesser examines in chapter 3 how British and

Indian scholars used their findings on India's ancient past to legitimize or delegitimize the power of the East India Company in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He shows that the debates amongst British colonialists were not just a continuation of discourses in Europe, but were to a large part influenced by the transformation of the Mughal empire, which offered ample opportunities to understand the early history of India either as some sort of Golden Age or as something static and degenerate, from which the population of sub-continent had to be saved by colonial rule and colonial values. In the fourth chapter, Jakob Rösel highlights how pre-colonial history and the idea of a "Golden Age" provided important ideological resources for most of India's contemporary regional as well as national parties. Looking not only at the development of recent years, but also back into the nineteenth century Rösel claims that an ideal type of history – a Classical or Golden Age – served and serves as a moral example, as an intellectual reference point, as an historical norm and as an aesthetic canon. It worked and works as an indispensable creed that is based on the belief in a perfect past, a miserable colonial or post-colonial present and a shining future that can be realised by following the leaders of the respective parties. In the fifth chapter, which forms the last on South Asia, Clemens Six discusses how the newly independent Republic of India used the references to a pluralistic antiquity in order to construct an integrative national identity, and how this *construction* in a concrete sense finds its expression in the rehabilitation and restoration of ancient religious monuments and places of worship as an important action in the processes of state building under the first independent government. In a manner similar to Thapar and Malik, Six points to the importance of social and political contexts to the interpretation of history.

The second part focuses on constructions of the past in and about Mesoamerica. In the sixth chapter, Maarten Jansen analyses pre-Columbian perceptions of the past in southern Mexico. He describes how ideas about the beginning of the world, historic sites and symbols were employed by the ruling dynasties to foster their legitimacy. His main sources are archaeological remains (such as architecture, tombs, monuments, and other objects), the pre-Columbian codices, and documents from the Spanish colonial era. The seventh chapter deals with European perceptions of Mesoamerican cultures in colonial and post-colonial times. Wolfgang Gabbert shows that governments in Mexico as well as in Europe needed to develop a new integrating ideology to overcome existing social cleavages and to legitimate elite rule, once domination and inequality could no longer be explained simply by reference to God's grand design. He explores the development of *creole* nationalism in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mexico, and the roles played by the pre-Columbian past and the indigenous population in their national project. In the next chapter Aurora Pérez describes the reality of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, particularly of her people, the Ñuu Sau (Mixtec). She highlights the critical role that cultural heritage and history play in the formation of identity and in the development of consciousness as a people, and shows that colonial structures and ideologies still persist. She advocates a reappropriation of the past by contemporary indigenous people and the recognition of their cultural rights and heritage by the national government. Jeremy Sabloff discusses the conceptions of antiquity in the history of archaeological research on

Mesoamerica, especially in the Maya area. He argues that the elite background of European and North-American specialists decisively shaped the interpretation of archaeological findings. By comparing the Maya movements in south-eastern Mesoamerica (Mexico and Guatemala), Ute Schüren describes in the tenth chapter how indigenous organizations adopt transnational discourses in their political struggle. Such organizations refer to real or supposed traditions in order to claim specific cultural rights and historical justice. In particular, references to the ancient history of American civilizations are key elements for confronting Western allegations of barbarity or underdevelopment, and also for fostering ethnic pride and identity.

In the light of the various references to European antiquity in the chapters on South Asia and Mesoamerica, the third part of the book explores the construction of antiquity in Europe and how this construction became transformed through its confrontation with other concepts of the past. In Chapter 11, the archaeologist Alain Schnapp discusses the practices of ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures in remembering the past in monuments, written texts and songs. His contribution shows a pluralistic reference to the past that recalls what Romila Thapar develops about early India: imperial rulers erecting stone monuments show a prospective and voluntary shaping of their present considered as the past of future times; if Greek poets sing the glory of heroes of the past or if historians like Herodotus write down the human deeds, they take a retrospective attitude, which nevertheless is meant to preserve “past things” for subsequent generations, even more so with Thucydides who analyses the politics of warfare in order to establish the rules of the everlasting “human nature”. Roman conceptions seem to breach this future-oriented reference to the past: the “poetics of ruins” in Latin poetry occurs as a melancholy of transience. With German artists at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, one finds also a kind of melancholia in their disposition toward an antique past, turned, however, into the delight of the wholeness lost once and for all. In chapter 12, the philologist Manuel Baumbach examines the appetite for the fragmentary in the works of painters and authors at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Proceeding from Füssli’s painting of some broken parts of the colossal statue of Constantine to fragmented texts, he shows how German Romanticism dismantled “classical” Graeco-Roman antiquity by stylizing its fragmentary nature as a new quality. And he expounds his thesis that this praise of the unfinished can be found yet in the Second Sophistic and especially in the satiric texts of Lucian (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). In contrast, the ancient historian Stefan Rebenich demonstrates in chapter 13 how Wilhelm von Humboldt, Prussian minister for education and cultural affairs for some months in 1810, devised the image of an ideal Greek antiquity. His call for the study of Greek history pointed not only to individuals wishing to educate themselves by examining Greek culture and character, but established new conceptions of scholarship, nation, state, and society. Thus, classical antiquity became the pivotal reference for the nineteenth-century German bourgeois society: Greek antiquity was meant to serve as a model for the German nation, which was set against France and its association with ancient Rome. These three contributions dissolve the alleged unity of a classical European antiquity into various and controversial

facets, and thereby invite analytical comparison with the diverse uses of the past in South Asia and Mesoamerica.

In the final chapter, Thomas Späth, confronting Dipesh Chakrabarty's project *Provincializing Europe* (2000) and Jack Goody's *Theft of History* (2006), synthesizes the three parts of the volume. The overview of the contributions to the present volume suggests, that not only the South Asian and Mesoamerican cultures investigated construct the remote past in terms of competing and various perspectives, but that also the Western view of the past, often presented as unified standard, does not constitute a single homogeneous model. This book's deliberate approach to investigate the concept of antiquity in comparative studies and from a global perspective, where Europe is on the margins – and thus only one of multiple provinces – , allows to discover different modes of reference to the remote past, and an antiquity, which shows unexpected aspects. As can be seen in these contributions, antiquity is a result of constant negotiations between contradicting views, and is subject to changing actors (individuals, groups), their power relations and ideas. Thus, a globalized antiquity is plural, and a once-dominant representation of the past is never destined to last, giving way one day or the other to alternate conceptions of history: the study of antiquity from a global perspective therefore lends a fascinating perspective to studying the changing present.