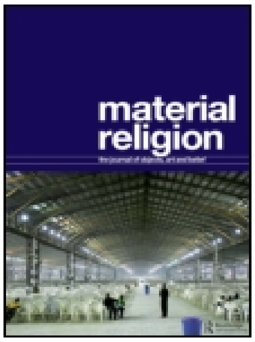

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Religion in the ancient levant confronting gazes now and then

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religion in the ancient levant

confronting gazes now and then

christoph uehlinger

It is a pleasure to interact with Stordalen's "Locating the Textual Gaze," not least because many of its challenging questions and programmatic statements call for critical reservation and the exploration of alternative options as much as for agreement.[1] Within the limits of this short note, I shall address only three aspects: (1) Stordalen's epistemological starting-point, which is based on a certain view of (or narrative about) the history of (mainly "Western") critical knowledge on ancient Near Eastern cultures; (2) the textual gaze's "availability" for studies on ancient Levantine religion; and (3) a few reflections on what increasing attention to the material and visual cultures of ancient Levantine societies might imply.

(1) While it is certainly true that "current knowledge of ancient Near Eastern religion was to a large degree produced by written sources," one may point out that this has not always been the case. As a matter of fact, before ancient Near Eastern writing systems were decoded and languages understood in the nineteenth century, serious knowledge about ancient Near Eastern civilizations had already been produced and mediated through material and visual culture. Of course, the case of Egypt, for which Napoléon Bonaparte's *Description de l'Égypte* (1798–1801) provides the most notorious example, cannot be generalized for other parts of the Middle East, where monumental ruins remained essentially buried in the ground until their discovery by Paul-Émile Botta, Austen Henry Layard, and others (Larsen 1996). Still, early interaction of learned Westerners with the ancient Near Eastern past was usually mediated first by monuments, artifacts, and images. Whether carved in sculptures or on minute cylinder seals, they allowed their early observers to gain insights through images—insights which were only forgotten or relegated once philologists had taken control over ancient Near Eastern studies and tied them closer to biblical studies. That they could do so was due to the rules and conventions that governed the organization of knowledge in nineteenth-century European universities and learned societies, which had installed philology-oriented history to the detriment of previous antiquarian (and ethnographic) approaches.[2] Going back to (and beyond) the writings and drawings of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explorers and accompanying artists is thus more than an anecdotal exercise, or a pastime of students of nineteenth-century Orientalism (Bohrer 2003; Larsen 2009). It can provide actual opportunities of genuine learning from people whose education had prepared them to more systematic and careful ways of looking than those of our contemporaries. While everyone agrees that learning ancient scripts and languages is instrumental to (religio-)historical research, it is time to rehabilitate (or rather, reinvent) timely ways and methods of learning how to look at images and other artifacts beyond any single "school."

(2) As it happens, textual information on ancient Near Eastern civilizations and societies, including the field of religion, has never simply been "the most available perspective upon a world where some 5 percent or less was literate." Much more material, whether artifactual or pictorial "evidence" (and hence perspectives or at least means for various perspectives), not to speak of other data, is theoretically available for scientific scrutiny, but it remains relatively underexplored among historians (including historians of religion). "Availability," hence, is socially produced, and it is quite obvious that the ways in which we organize availability do affect knowledge and scholarship on religion in the ancient Levant to a large extent.

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Stordalen is right to note that "technological, social, and political dynamics contributed to forming the currently available records, which privileges the medium of the text and gives a profiled and uneven reflection of life and religion in the ancient world." Incidentally, however, this does not only pertain to processes of archive-keeping, historiography, and canonization in antiquity; it is also true when applied to the modern study of the ancient Near East and the past of Levantine religion.

(3) Religion and its histories (whether of first-millennium Levant or of other times and regions) will be conceptualized differently once we opt for systematically including archaeological evidence, both material and pictorial, in the study of ancient societies. When patiently looked at and critically analyzed, images allow us to reconstruct ancient gazes, gazes that were obviously embedded in cultural conventions on what to look at, how to look and represent it, etc. Hence the necessity to consider images as sources in their own right, whether within a "media studies" (Uehlinger 2005), a "visible religion" (Uehlinger 2006a), or other approaches. Since selection by definition implies the privileging of certain perspectives, one crucial issue in this regard will be how to identify and classify the pertinent source material. It is therefore essential that a scholar's starting-point should always be the broadest possible documentation; hence the essential function of establishing *corpuses* of artifact-classes for all ensuing research, such as Othmar Keel's *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel*.[3] Other biases will catch you before long.

With the hindsight of twenty years since its initial publication, I freely acknowledge a number of conceptual and methodological problems and pitfalls involved in our *Gods and Goddesses* (Keel and Uehlinger 1992). To name but one major issue: to what extent is it legitimate and useful to consider images above all for their "pictorial contents," so to speak, as if detached from their material support? To be sure, we often proceed that way when reading texts, whether epigraphical or literary and particularly so when dealing with "canonical" texts; and I would argue that this can make sense in certain circumstances, since a text (or an image, for that matter) is not necessarily confined to any one material realization. I would also argue, however, that we might probably get closer to ancient social realities when giving equal attention to the strictly material dimensions of ancient images (and other artifacts), once we go "down" to process-based questions such as the availability of raw materials at certain places, the processing skills required by craftsmen (and hence issues of workshop organization), the networks in which artifacts were produced, distributed and consumed, the *habitus* (plural) of making use and sense of objects within certain habitats, etc. That is, aspects of methodic attention which, incidentally, might as well be applied to ancient texts, whether inscriptional or literary.

It remains to be tested whether ancient material artifacts, including images and texts, will positively respond to Stordalen's five-tiered matrix of levels of social communication (from family to empire). It seems to me the model as such has much to commend itself, as it promises to overcome simplistic dichotomies of "official" vs. "popular" in the study of ancient Levantine religion.[4]

notes and references

[1] I especially welcome Stordalen's theoretical background in French critics such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault—big names of course but who, beyond any *effet de mode*, would deserve more substantial reception among historians of ancient Levantine societies and religion, including biblical scholars.

[2] It would take some decades before the social sciences would "strike back," and even longer before their arrival in the study of Levantine history and archaeology.

[3] This conviction continues to be a driving principle for the *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* series.

[4] On the condition that we avoid the traps of ethnicity-based taxonomies, see Uehlinger (2006b).

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