

Peter Davies  
Myth, Matriarchy and Modernity

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Peter Davies

# Myth, Matriarchy and Modernity

Johann Jakob Bachofen in German Culture  
1860–1945

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## Note on translation

The reception of Bachofen's work is a complex process of textual reference, quotation and borrowing of ideas, words and phrases for new purposes and in new contexts. For this reason, aspects of this process can be harder to follow in translation. I have endeavoured to provide a usable translation for all the texts I analyse here, following these principles: quotations from critical works and anthropological or political texts have been translated fully, while for literary texts and others where the focus is on particular qualities of language, I have provided a translation but have also left the original in place. My translations make no claim to reproduce the literary qualities of the original.

I have used published English translations wherever possible: that is, where they are readily available and seem to me to be satisfactory. I have always provided the original German for quotations from Bachofen's works, and have used Ralph Manheim's English translation where possible: *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967). For texts by Bachofen not included in this anthology, the translation is my own.

When quoting Bachofen's works, I have referred to the 10-volume Collected Works (*Gesammelte Werke*) of Bachofen (Basel: Schwabe, 1948-): at time of writing, this edition is still not complete, and so it has occasionally been necessary to refer to older editions of individual works. In particular, for Bachofen's important autobiographical letter to Friedrich Karl von Savigny, I have used the unsatisfactory edition published by Alfred Bäumler under the title *Selbstbiographie* (*Selbstbiographie und Antrittsrede über das Naturrecht*, ed. Alfred Bäumler, Halle/Saale: Niemeyer, 1927). I discuss this edition in the text. Where I am discussing one of the many other selected editions of his works, I always make this clear in the text. The following abbreviations are used to refer to Bachofen's most commonly quoted works:

*Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*): MR

*Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten* (*Essay on the Funeral Symbolism of the Ancients*): GS

'*Selbstbiographie*' (the autobiographical letter to Friedrich Karl von Savigny): SB

The English translation in *Myth, Religion and Mother Right* is referred to in the text as *Myth*.



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Wunderliche Zeit, die so erschüttert ist, daß sogar antiquarischer Staub  
Klangfiguren bildet.

Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*

In den Bachofen mit dem Kerl!

*Schwabinger Beobachter*



## Preface

### An Uncomfortable Influence

While researching this book I have occasionally found myself speculating about how the nineteenth-century Swiss jurist and classicist Johann Jakob Bachofen would react to the traces of his work in best-selling novels such as Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* or Anne Rice's *Vampire* series. Bachofen never founded a school or established himself as one of the great discourse patriarchs like Freud or Marx, and his reputation suffered in comparison with the radicalism of Nietzsche's thinking, which had, after all, arisen from a similar set of concerns about the accuracy of our view of the ancient world. For this reason, his presence in the cultural life of the twentieth century and beyond is in many cases more diffuse and harder to pin down than that of Freud, Marx or Nietzsche, and yet the idea that the ancient world was shaped by matriarchal societies very different from our own has proved remarkably persistent, despite its current lack of 'respectability' in the mainstream of contemporary archaeology. This study is not intended as a contribution to the debate about the historical existence of matriarchies and Goddess worship, but instead is an attempt to trace and explain the persistence of this idea in a particular cultural context.

The influence of Bachofen's work on attitudes to myth, culture and history in the German-speaking world has been considerable, whether in archaeological or historical debate about the accuracy of his view of human history, or, more often, in the attractiveness of his ideas and language for highly politicised conflicts over the nature of the modern world.<sup>1</sup> After a surge of interest in the 1960s and 70s, which saw feminist writers reading Bachofen through the lens of Engels's *Ursprung der Familie (The Origin of the Family)*<sup>2</sup>, recent discussion has taken a more skeptical turn: focussing largely on his most influential work, *Das Mutterrecht*

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<sup>1</sup> For consideration of the state of debate on the archaeological evidence (or lack of it) for the existence of matriarchal cultures in the ancient world, see Uwe Wesel, *Der Mythos vom Matriarchat: Über Bachofens Mutterrecht und die Stellung von Frauen in frühen Gesellschaften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. 1999) and Brigitte Röder, Juliane Hummel and Brigitta Kunz, *Göttinnendämmerung: Das Matriarchat aus archäologischer Sicht* (Klein Königsförde/Krummwisch: Königsfurt, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (London: Penguin, 1971); Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972); Richard Fester, Marie König, Doris Jonas, David Jonas, *Weib und Macht: Fünf Millionen Jahre Urgeschichte der Frau* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1979); and Ernst Bornemann's vastly over-ambitious attempt to invent himself as the Karl Marx of the feminist movement, *Das Patriarchat: Ursprung und Zukunft unseres Gesellschaftsystems* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1975).

(*Mother Right*), writers have concentrated on revealing the ideological underpinnings of his world-view, which is seen as little more than an elaborate attempt to shore up patriarchal hierarchies at a time of rapid social modernisation.<sup>3</sup> An opposing view, that shades into New Age views of myth that read Bachofen through texts such as Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, uses the theory of ancient matriarchy to underpin a radical critique both of a universal patriarchy and of liberal and social constructivist theories of gender identity: writers such as Heide Göttner-Abendroth have tended to want to rescue Bachofen for a myth-oriented critique of rationalism and for a system based on eternal male and female principles.<sup>4</sup>

One characteristic of this discussion is that notions of 'truth' in Bachofen's work are often inextricably entwined with judgements about the political usefulness or otherwise of the work; in the contemporary context this will depend whether the writer subscribes to liberal notions of gender equality or to some form of 'difference' feminism. Certainly, the notions of gender difference that Bachofen sets out in much of his work, and which I will discuss below, hold little of use for contemporary readers not attracted by notions of abstract, universal polarities. Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit devotes a chapter of her 1976 work *Sexismus: Über die Abtreibung der Frauenfrage* (published in English as *Sexism: the Male Monopoly on History and Thought*) to the influence of Bachofen's work, challenging the notion that it can be anything other than damaging to the aims of emancipation:

Feminism must be protected from the ideas of an inhibited eroticist who, only because of the inaccessible esotericism and unreadability of his writings, has been turned into a legend for having written a work that served the liberation of women.<sup>5</sup>

The German cultural context has also presented problems for historical accounts of Bachofen's influence, since any theory that relies on notions of women's separate nature and nurturing role is inevitably tainted by association with National Socialism. Janssen-Jurreit's assertion, 'that Bachofen's mysticism and mother veneration inspired a number of Fascist writers, thereby damaging the women's cause in a variety of ways,'<sup>6</sup> is surely correct, though it is by no means the whole story. While debate on the history of gender identities in Germany has

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<sup>3</sup> Critical voices, reaching back to Simone de Beauvoir's dismissal of the notion of a golden age of matriarchy in *Le Deuxième sexe*, were raised by Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971); and Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit, *Sexismus: Über die Abtreibung der Frauenfrage* (Munich: Hanser, 1976), *Sexism: The Male Monopoly on History and Thought*, tr. Verne Moberg (London: Pluto, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> See Heide Göttner-Abendroth, *Das Matriarbat: Geschichte seiner Erforschung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1988) and *Für die Musen: neun kulturkritische Essays* (Frankfurt a.M.: Zweitausendeins, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Janssen-Jurreit, *Sexism*, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

moved on, discussion of Bachofen is sometimes still polarised between his critics and those who want to ‘rescue’ his reputation.

The status of the theory of ancient matriarchy in contemporary scholarship varies from discipline to discipline: this was the case in the early twentieth century as well, and is an important factor in the rapid spread of the idea from an obscure philological debate to the cultural mainstream. Bachofen’s appeal always lay in the way that his work cut across and challenged traditional academic discipline boundaries, and could be used to question what is seen as a one-sided emphasis on rationalism as the only acceptable basis for knowledge. It is for this reason that the opposing sides in the current discussion seem so often to talk past each other, since they employ very different approaches to the value of evidence and the nature of historical truth. There is an interesting parallel with the 1920s, as will become clear in later chapters, in that matriarchy theory came under fire within the developing disciplines of history, anthropology, and Classical and Germanic philology, while persisting as a discourse of utopian opposition on the margins of these disciplines, crossing the boundaries between scholarship, literature, religion and politics.

In contemporary archaeological debate, academic theorists, such as Heide Göttner-Abendroth, who assume the existence of an identifiable matriarchal cultural stage before the imposition of patriarchy in the ancient world, have found their theories critiqued by scholars who question their interpretations of a sparse base of evidence, suggesting that they have imposed a pre-formed theoretical structure onto fragmentary evidence that does not support it. For example, Beate Wagner-Hasel has proposed a different account of the emergence in Greek society of stories of matriarchies and Amazon peoples, while Brigitte Röder, Juliane Hummel and Brigitta Kunz have undertaken a thorough critique of the use of archaeological evidence such as the so-called ‘Venus statuettes’ to point to the existence of a uniform matriarchal social structure in the Palaeolithic period.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, anthropologists have challenged the notion that the social structures of non-Western societies have to be thought of as either matriarchal or patriarchal, and have instead developed methods of analysing power relationships that do not rely on Western models of political authority. Susanne Lanwerd describes the importance of Bachofen’s work for anthropologists in this way:

The influence of *Das Mutterrecht* ensured that scholars became aware of other forms of family structure, enabling them to begin to cast doubt on the naturalness and eternal validity of the patriarchal family.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Beate Wagner-Hasel, *Matriarchats teorien der Altertumswissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992); Brigitte Röder, Juliane Hummel and Brigitta Kunz, *Göttinnendämmerung*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Lanwerd, *Mythos, Mutterrecht und Magie: Zur Geschichte religionswissenschaftlicher Begriffe* (Berlin: Reimer, 1993), p. 78.

A parallel debate amongst Biblical scholars has concentrated on two related areas: firstly, the analysis of Biblical texts that are held to reveal a conflict between the patriarchal, Mosaic religion and the earlier, matriarchal Goddess-worshipping cultures that it repressed; and secondly, the re-imagining of God in the feminist spirituality movement. In the first case, a violent controversy erupted over the question of whether the accusation of Jewish responsibility for patriarchal oppression amounted to anti-Semitism,<sup>9</sup> and in the second, the attempt to redefine 'God' according to 'feminine' principles has been criticised by Cynthia Eller for reproducing a patriarchal view of women's nature as being defined around motherliness and nurturing.<sup>10</sup> Reactions to these criticisms have ranged from Göttner-Abendroth's stress on the scholarly foundations of her work and Helga Laugsch's careful weighing-up of the arguments of what she calls 'pro-' and 'anti-matriarchy groups',<sup>11</sup> to responses that reject a strictly critical approach to evidence as an inadequate, masculine, logocentric view of knowledge. In essence, the disagreement focuses on two related questions: the usefulness or otherwise for feminist politics and scholarship of a theory that posits utopian alternatives to patriarchal social structures based on an inherently female psychology, with male and female, patriarchy and matriarchy, theorised as eternal oppositions; and the value of a form of knowledge that elides the distinction between intellect, intuition, myth, history and spirituality. More detailed political accounts of the debates, approaching the question from opposing points of view, can be found in the works by Helga Laugsch and Cynthia Eller cited above.

The questions that preoccupy contemporary scholars working with or against matriarchy theory are similar to the questions that formed the context for the reception of Bachofen's work a century ago: Is there an 'objective' knowledge about history, and if so, how does one gain access to it? Do the critical, evidence-based methods of historians and archaeologists necessarily serve particular institutional or political interests, while making a claim to universality? Is knowledge neutral, or is it sexed (i.e., are there female and male knowledges based on fundamental differences in the way men and women think?) or gendered (i.e., to what extent does the implicit or explicit association of forms of knowledge and ways of thinking with men and women reflect power structures and the subordinate position of women?)

This study will explore the roots of these ideas in the German-speaking world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, showing how Bachofen's work was read in the context of debates about modernity, myth and history, feminism and anti-feminism, utopianism and critiques of rationalism.

<sup>9</sup> See Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt: feministische Theologie in der Verantwortung für die Geschichte* (Munich: Kaiser, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past won't give Women a Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Helga Laugsch, *Der Matriarchats-Diskurs in der zweiten deutschen Frauenbewegung* (Munich: Utz, 1995).

Karl Meuli has written, ‘whoever made the attempt to write a full account of the influence of *Das Mutterrecht* would have also to write a history of modern ethnology and sociology’<sup>12</sup>: instead of rising to this impossible challenge, this study will concentrate on a number of key areas in discussions about history, cultural and political theory, psychoanalysis and literature, while referring to important developments in other fields where they provide necessary contextualisation. In any case, Meuli perhaps overestimated the direct ‘influence’ of Bachofen’s work on ethnology and sociology: this study proceeds from the view that argument over the ‘influence’ of Bachofen is part of an ideological struggle over the nature, meaning and consequences of modernity. Identification with, or rejection of, the example of his personality and method (the two are rarely disentangled from each other) entails taking up a position in this struggle.

This study does not follow a strict chronology, but instead traces particular debates and disciplines, showing how they overlap, and analysing certain individual texts in detail in order to show how they treat the ideas. Literary analyses are either treated in their own right in separate sections or interspersed in the chapters where the texts seem to intervene in a specific debate. Since much of the material is little-known and beyond established canons, I have mostly refrained from making explicit judgements about the ‘importance’ of a particular text or writer, concentrating instead on considering the status of reference to Bachofen in each case. One of the motivating forces behind this study was to demonstrate the vast range of uses to which Bachofen’s work was put in the first half of the twentieth century, and to bring to light sources that have escaped consideration in accounts centred on well-known interventions by writers such as Thomas Mann. In particular, there is a significant amount of work by women writers which has received little or no consideration, and which unsettles any attempt to explain Bachofen’s popularity in simplistic political or psychological terms. Rather than attempting a comprehensive account of all the canonical literary works in which reference to Bachofen is identifiable, this study attempts to identify patterns of influence and interpretation that may form the basis of further studies of individual works.

The first chapter summarises Bachofen’s biography and the aspects of his work that are of most relevance for this study, and introduces the considerations of myth, modernity and gender that can be traced through the reception of his work. The second chapter presents the early reception of his work in a variety of disciplines and discourses (anthropology, historical jurisprudence, cultural history and the early Marxist reception), showing how discussion about the relationship between sex, gender, history and social structures laid the groundwork for the twentieth-century reception of matriarchal ideas. The next chapter traces the discussion about matriarchy within the Women’s Movement from the beginning

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Meuli, ‘Nachwort’ to *Das Mutterrecht*, GW 3, 1011-1128 (p. 1117).

of the century until the 1930s, demonstrating the uses to which the theory of matriarchy could be put by maternalist feminists. Following this, I discuss the implication of the matriarchal ideas in literary narratives of masculinity at the turn of the century, examining in detail the reception of Bachofen's work by the writers of the Munich 'Kosmische Runde' and in Viennese modernism. This chapter then moves on to explore images of mythic motherhood in the work of a number of women writers, and proceeds from here to a discussion of the ambivalent status of matriarchy in the development of psychoanalysis. An account of the work of the radical psychoanalyst Otto Gross leads into a section on the Expressionist reception of Bachofen, and from there to an account of the literary reception in the 1920s, and the key debate about matriarchal myths in the 1920s between Thomas Mann and his anti-republican opponents. Finally, I explore attitudes to matriarchy in the Third Reich, concluding with a discussion of the literary reception of Bachofen by writers in Germany and in exile.

Seeking to reduce the dynamic complexity of the reception of Bachofen's work to a single theoretical or ideological concern would be futile: as will become clear, reference to Bachofen is not clearly associated with any particular political position. Rather, it is in this diversity that one finds the key to understanding the central role that reference to Bachofen plays in many cultural and political debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Aside from a brief period around 1900 when the theory of ancient matriarchy gained broad acceptance in a number of scholarly disciplines, it has always been associated in some way with opposition to the mainstream, and more often than not, with ideological rejection of the conditions of modernity itself. However, these conditions are interpreted in many different ways, and reference to Bachofen's work tends to appear where modernity is interpreted as a system built on a one-sidedly 'masculine' rationalism: consequently, a stance of social, political or cultural opposition can be supported with reference to a repressed, mythic 'feminine'. Links can then be established between the female/male opposition and other concerns: authentic vs. inauthentic experience; intuition vs. reason; collectivism vs. individualism; myth vs. history; 'wholistic' approaches to knowledge vs. disciplinary specialisation; and many others. Yearnings, often vague and ill-defined, for a more authentic mode of existence beyond that offered by a modernity experienced as troubling and fragmented can be given concrete form with reference to Bachofen's system or to his example as a scholarly outsider. The ambiguity and richness of Bachofen's work provide fertile ground for interpretations that reflect the desires and longings of writers from all ends of the political spectrum; obscurity and inaccessibility of the work are part of the attraction. Nobody would have been more surprised than Bachofen at the strange twists and turns taken by the reception of his work in the twentieth century.

# Chapter 1

## Bachofen in the Nineteenth Century: Myth, Gender, Modernity

Johann Jakob Bachofen's monumental work, *Das Mutterrecht*, was published in 1861 in Basel, where he was professor of Legal History. Lionel Gossman has referred to nineteenth-century Basel as 'the sulking corner of Europe'<sup>1</sup>, since its intellectual life was influenced by a number of bad-tempered critiques of positivism and modernity. In the work of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Bachofen, the German bourgeois tradition of Enlightenment rationality begins to gnaw away at its own contradictions and limitations, with consequences that were only to unfold fully after the thinkers were dead. My assessment of Bachofen's work begins therefore with the observation that his nineteenth-century ideas had very twentieth-century consequences. Since this is principally a study of the reception of his work, I will concentrate on those texts that had an impact in the decades up to 1945, and will discuss details of biography and intellectual influence only to the extent that they affect the reception.

Johann Jakob Bachofen was born on 22 December 1815 into a wealthy Basel family, part of the city's old patrician elite whose wealth came from the textile industry, from the city's vital trading position at the head of the Rhine, and above all from the legal structures that restricted outside access to their trade privileges. The structures of thought that arose from such a position of paternalistic privilege, as well as from pride in the city's Swiss identity as a centre of German culture beyond the reach of the authoritarian German monarchies, had a profound effect on Bachofen's attitudes to his work, and threats to these privileges came to seem like catastrophic irruptions of modernity into a harmonious world.<sup>2</sup>

Bachofen's mother, Valeria Merian, died in 1856, and his dedication of *Das Mutterrecht* to her has led to much loosely psychoanalytical, and generally worthless, speculation about the causes of his preoccupation with the Maternal in history: part of the purpose of this reception study is to show that conceptions of

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), p. 411. Gossman's study is the most detailed and sympathetic account of the conservative-humanist city culture that formed Bachofen and his contemporaries, for better and worse.

<sup>2</sup> See Gossman, pp. 97f., and Philipp Sarasin, 'Basel: Zur Sozialgeschichte der Stadt Bachofens', in Barbara Huber-Greub (ed.), *Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887): Eine Begleitpublikation zur Ausstellung im Historischen Museum Basel 1987* (Basel: Historisches Museum Basel, 1987), pp. 28-40.

the Maternal have complex social roles that are not reducible to individual psychology. As the eldest son, the young Johann Jakob was to be groomed to take over the family business, which meant a ‘humanist’ education in Classical philology and a combination of scholarly, legal and practical study. In Basel (1834), Berlin (1835-37) and Göttingen (1837-38) he studied law, philology, history and ancient history, and took his legal exams in Basel in 1838. These disciplines, and the centres of intellectual activity in which he studied, were becoming central to German intellectual self-understanding in the mid nineteenth century, and the scholars he heard in Berlin – in particular Boekh, Ranke and Savigny – had an important influence on his work, as I will show below. In Göttingen, he observed at first hand the political unrest around the liberal professors – the ‘Göttingen Seven’ – who were removed from their posts by the Prussian authorities.

Another key political event in this period was the civil strife in 1833 that led to the splitting of the canton of Basel into two, the more liberal Basel-Landschaft and the more conservative Basel-Stadtteil.<sup>3</sup> Around one hundred people were killed in the fighting, and conservatives such as the Bachofens saw this as evidence that liberalisation and democratic structures brought only strife and violence: a view that they had acquired during the Napoleonic Wars, and which seemed to be confirmed later by the uprisings of 1848. Bachofen’s critical view of the later Roman Empire is clearly influenced by these events.

From 1838, Bachofen spent two years furthering his legal education and making business contacts in Paris and the UK (he spent time in London, at the Bodleian library in Oxford reading on English legal history, in Cambridge, and made trips to Liverpool and Glasgow). In 1841 he attained a Chair at the University of Basel, was appointed a judge in the criminal court a year later, and in 1844 took up a seat on the city legislative council, the *Grosser Rat*. However, he felt obliged to step down as professor and member of the council after attacks on his appointments began in the liberal press, which – with some justice – complained that this was just another example of the patrician elite furthering its own interests. After this, he dedicated himself to his scholarship, and to his position as judge. Here we should note that Bachofen, as well as many of his later admirers, had a tendency to exaggerate the extent of his distance from public life after the 1840s: as I will show, this sense of romantic isolation was key aspect of the ideological reconstruction of Bachofen’s image in the 1920s.

Bachofen visited Italy for the first time in 1842/3, and returned several times afterwards, as well as making a trip to Greece in 1851: his autobiographical reflections on these journeys were only published posthumously, playing a role in

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<sup>3</sup> See Georg Kreis and Beat von Wartburg (eds.), *Basel: Geschichte einer städtischen Gesellschaft* (Basel: Merian, 2000), pp. 178-83.

the reception of his work in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> I will discuss below the way in which he writes these experiences into the story of his career. He was married late, in 1865, to Louise Burckhardt, and, after he stepped down as a judge in 1866, he dedicated himself solely to scholarship. After he died in 1887, his widow oversaw the further publication of his works until her death.

### Works

None of Bachofen's works were widely received in his lifetime, and after his death, when the reception began to gather pace, only a small number of works – usually in highly abridged form – formed the basis of the controversies over his ideas that persisted through the twentieth century. A satisfactory complete critical edition of his works is only just being completed: I discuss the origins of this edition in the final chapter of this book, since work on it began in the early 1940s.<sup>5</sup> This edition also contains more complete accounts of individual works and their genesis than can be discussed here.<sup>6</sup>

Bachofen's earliest publications were in Roman Law, a field that had both scholarly and practical value until the study of historical jurisprudence established itself later in the century as a discipline independent of the practice of Law in countries with Roman Law constitutions. Bachofen shared the sense of many of his contemporaries that the Roman state, at particular stages, provided a model for others, and that debate over Roman Law and customs had immediate contemporary political relevance for the modern world. In his unpublished *Politische Betrachtungen über das Staatsleben des römischen Volkes* (*Political Observations on the political life of the Roman people*) he expressed the anti-imperial, anti-populist conservatism that he never abandoned.<sup>7</sup> The parallels that Bachofen draws in this work between the later Roman Empire and the politics of the nineteenth century give the lie to attempts to portray him as an unworldly or apolitical writer.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Selbstbiographie und Antrittsrede über das Naturrecht*, ed. Alfred Bäumler (Halle/Saale: Niemeyer, 1927); *Griechische Reise*, ed. Georg Schmidt (Heidelberg: Weissbach, 1927).

<sup>5</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols., ed. Karl Meuli et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1948-). Where possible, I will always refer to this edition when making textual references to Bachofen's works, as well as referring to the particular edition of the individual work that is being discussed. For ease of reference, this edition of *Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*) will be referred to in the text as MR, and *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten* (*Essay on Ancient Mortuary Symbolism*) as GS. Where possible I have referred to the only available English edition, which includes extracts from various works by Bachofen: *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992). This edition will be referred to in the text as *Myth*. Otherwise, the translations are my own.

<sup>6</sup> See also Philippe Bourgeaud, Nicole Durisch, Antje Kilde and Grégoire Sommer, *La mythologie du matriarcat: L'atelier de Johann Jakob Bachofen* (Geneva: Droz, 1999), and Gossman, pp. 109-200, for fuller accounts of Bachofen's life and works.

<sup>7</sup> *Betrachtungen über das Staatsleben des römischen Volkes*, GW 1, pp. 25-78.

It was during the 1850s that he began to formulate the ideas that led to his most influential works. In his autobiographical writing, he suggested that this new direction was influenced by visionary experiences of Roman Antiquity that gave him access to ‘deeper’ truths beyond rational enquiry: I will discuss this claim in the section on his letter to Friedrich Karl von Savigny. Bachofen began to search for different forms of evidence, and different ways of interpreting sources, than those allowed by the rigorous, critical historiography associated with great names such as Theodor Mommsen (of whom more below), whose authoritative multi-volume *Römische Geschichte* (*Roman History*) set standards that Bachofen wanted to challenge.<sup>8</sup> He began to think of funerary inscriptions and myth, which critical historians had dismissed as irrelevant, as holding the key to understanding older layers of history concealed beneath the documented surface, as well as to people’s subjective experiences and inner life.

In the early 1850s, Bachofen was combining these concerns with a developing interest in what he was beginning to think of as the origins of human religion in the worship of a single earth goddess, the ancestor of all later female deities. He abandoned a manuscript on the history of Italy in 1855, which was already several hundred pages long, seemingly under the impression that the new idea made his previous scholarship irrelevant, and required a new method. Through a careful process of comparison and reconstruction, analogous to the etymological procedures followed by scholars trying to reconstruct the earliest human languages, Bachofen claimed to be able to strip away later accretions and identify common features across cultures that pointed to a common origin. His method also required a good deal of intuitive interpretation of symbols, as I will show below: it is ultimately a combination of a variety of methods: euhemerism (the theory of myth that holds that there is a kernel of historical truth at the foundation of any mythological narrative, which can be revealed through critical enquiry); a Romantic theory of myth and symbol, perhaps influenced by Creuzer, that holds that myths are narrative interpretations of an original symbolic language, and that symbols are therefore a means of access to ‘deeper’, more ancient levels of experience; a characteristically nineteenth-century comparatist method that seeks common origins across a vast range of material; and a Romantic historical scheme that traces the development of human consciousness through history, treating each stage as an organic whole. It is a hugely ambitious attempt to marry both Enlightenment and Romantic myth theories, and to strike a balance between source criticism and intuitive interpretation.

Bachofen presented his initial findings in September 1856, to the *Versammlung deutscher Philologen* in Stuttgart, where his work was generally well received. His initial title was *Über das Wesen des Weiberrechts* (*On the Nature of the Law of Women*), implying that the position of women as women, rather than

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<sup>8</sup> Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1854-1856).

women as mothers, was the key to understanding social structures.<sup>9</sup> As Bachofen wrote to the publisher Cotta in August 1857, ‘understanding the status of women in human society is vital for understanding the culture of any period. Any phenomena that relate to this status should be studied with care’.<sup>10</sup> Here, Bachofen is trying to persuade Cotta to publish the manuscript that would eventually become *Das Mutterrecht*<sup>11</sup>, and so he rhetorically overstates his case: nevertheless, it is clear that he feels that he is having to convince a sceptical mainstream. Cotta had already rejected the manuscript once, dashing Bachofen’s hopes of publishing in a significant German publishing house and of taking up a position at the centre of German intellectual culture, rather than existing at the margins. Eventually, in 1859 and 1861, the two works were published in Switzerland that would form the basis for his later reputation, *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten* (*Essay on Ancient Mortuary Symbolism*) and *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (*Mother Right: an Investigation into the Matriarchy of the Ancient World in its Religious and Legal Nature*).

Both of these works employ the same fundamental historical scheme, which I will set out below, but they approach the subject from different angles, and employing different types of source material. Simplifying the matter somewhat, one could say that Bachofen sets out his symbol theory in GS, and his reading of myth and history in MR, though there is necessarily significant overlap between the two. Before discussing the specifics of these works, it would be worth here setting out the skeleton of Bachofen’s theory of matriarchy.

### Bachofen’s three-stage system

The richness and complexity of Bachofen’s exploration of the cultures of the ancient world in fact rests on a deceptively simple scheme, which is held to reveal a set of universal laws of development. However, he is also aware of the need to find a balance – not always successful – between maintaining his grip on his overall theory and exploring areas of complexity, ambiguity and, in the terms of his theory of gender difference, androgyny. In essence, Bachofen sees the root of all human cultural development in a religious conflict between male and female principles that extends its influence over legal structures and the regulation of family life: religion and religious experience and conflict is at the root of social change. In the tradition of the speculative historiography of the Romantics, he

<sup>9</sup> The text of his talk can be found in *Verhandlungen der 16. Versammlung deutscher Philologen in Stuttgart* (1857), pp. 40-63. Cf. Karl Meuli, ‘Nachwort’ to *Das Mutterrecht*, GW 3, pp. 1011-1127 (p. 1093).

<sup>10</sup> Letter to Johann Georg von Cotta, 17.8.1857, GW 10, pp. 163-65 (p. 164).

<sup>11</sup> The development of the manuscript of this work is set out in Karl Meuli’s ‘Nachwort’, p. 1096.

constructs on this basis a three-stage model, which also includes periods of transition.

The first stage, which he refers to as ‘hetaerism’, is characterised by sexual freedom, nomadism and a daily struggle for existence; this is the stage at which human culture is closest to earth-bound materialism, there are no family ties and no understanding of paternity. Children are therefore cared for communally in groups of women who are subordinate to a single dominant male, and private property is unknown. The key to the transition to the next stage is the moment in which the experience of motherhood is extended into an ethical dimension (I will discuss the sources and implications of this ethical ‘maternalism’ below):

In der Pflege der Leibesfrucht lernt das Weib früher als der Mann seine liebende Sorge über die Grenzen des eigenen Ich auf andere Wesen erstrecken [...] Von [dem Weib] geht jetzt jede Erhebung der Gesittung aus, von ihm jede Wohltat im Leben, jede Hingebung, jede Pflege und jede Totenklage. (MR 20)

Raising her young, the woman learns earlier than the man to extend her loving care beyond the limits of the ego to another creature [...] Woman at this stage is the repository of all culture, of all benevolence, of all devotion, of all concern for the living and grief for the dead. (*Myth* 79)<sup>12</sup>

This second stage, ‘Gynaïkokratie’ (gyneocracy, or rule by women) or ‘Mutterrecht’ (mother right: Bachofen himself never uses the term ‘Matriarchat’ (matriarchy), though this term is commonly used in the reception of his work), is brought about when women object to insecurity and sexual domination, and bring about a religious and legal revolution in which they dominate state and family institutions, in which inheritance is passed exclusively down the female line, and in which women introduce the religious requirement of monogamous marriage as a way of ending the abuse of men’s physical dominance.<sup>13</sup> However, what is originally a state of relative harmony eventually degenerates into abuses and corruption, and is in its turn overthrown and repressed by the extreme patriarchal societies of the ancient world, namely Hellenistic Greece and Imperial Rome: the extremity of Amazonism, in which women seek violent separation from men, is a reaction to this struggle, but it is also a sign of the inevitable overthrow of mother right. Bachofen also suggests that the frenzied, sexualised cults of gods like Dionysos, which were often dominated by women, served to pave the way for women’s acceptance of patriarchal rule.

What is important for our purposes is not the truth or otherwise of Bachofen’s model, but the way in which he describes the conditions of matriarchy, and the fact that ‘mother right’ is *not* the original state of society, but a

<sup>12</sup> The translation is somewhat deceptive here: Bachofen’s text implies that women are responsible for cultural progress (‘Erhebung’, raising), while the English term ‘repository’ suggests a more passive role. The twentieth-century reception of Bachofen, to which this translation belongs, has often missed Bachofen’s view of women as creators, rather than simply bearers, of culture.

<sup>13</sup> One of the fundamental flaws in Bachofen’s argumentation is in his assumption that matrilinear inheritance of wealth or family name is necessarily a sign of matriarchal social hierarchies.

middle stage: men are not capable themselves of making the first great cultural advance from 'hetaerism' to settled, cultured and law-bound matriarchies, but submit themselves to the new religious law introduced by women. For Bachofen the conservative Swiss Christian patrician, there can be no doubt that this development represents progress towards a purer spiritual principle, since he sees 'Muttertum' (motherhood/motherliness) as 'material-corporeal' and connected with the earth, whereas 'Vatertum' (fatherhood/fatherliness) is 'spiritual' and strives towards the heavens (MR 19; *Myth* 78). He explains that this difference arises from the fact that the mother is always certain of her intimate connection to the child, but that if the father wishes to create rights for himself in the family, he has also to create a set of more abstract social and legal principles to demonstrate his ownership (paternity is seen here as a convenient legal fiction). There is a link here to the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's influential distinction between 'Gemeinschaft' (community) and 'Gesellschaft' (society), which also plays a role in the reception of these ideas.<sup>14</sup> In Bachofen's scheme, humanity progresses from the worship of a single, wholly earthly mother goddess, though millennia of division and complex conflict between male and female principles, towards the worship of a single, spiritual, paternal God:

Aber die Bestimmung des Menschengeschlechts liegt darin, das Gesetz des Stoffes mehr und mehr zu überwinden und sich über jene materielle Seite seiner Natur, nach welcher es mit der übrigen animalischen Welt zusammenhängt, zu höherer, rein menschlicher Existenz zu erheben. (MR 379)

But the destiny of humanity is to overcome progressively the law of mere matter and rise above the material side of its nature that connects it to the rest of the animal world, and to attain a higher, purely human existence.

Karl Meuli describes Bachofen's system of progress from earthly to spiritual as a 'Platonism filtered through Plutarch'<sup>15</sup>: certainly, Plutarch's Neoplatonist account of Egyptian religion in *Isis and Osiris* is a key source for Bachofen, which he supplements with an Aristotelian view of the masculine principle as the moulder of passive, feminine matter.<sup>16</sup> However, Bachofen's system does relativise this polarity somewhat by claiming that it is women who bring about the first great spiritual advance from an earthbound state of nature.

Unusually for a nineteenth century system-builder, Bachofen states very clearly that progression from one stage to another is never peaceful, and does not happen in an abstract realm of the spirit, but involves very real violence, conflict, resistance and repression of what came before, and progress is always threatened with regression to previous states: it is this awareness that makes his work

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Abhandlung des Communismus und des Socialismus als empirischer Culturformen* (Leipzig: Fues, 1887).

<sup>15</sup> Karl Meuli, 'Nachwort', GW 3, p. 1091.

<sup>16</sup> See Susanne Lanwerd, *Mythos, Mutterrecht und Magie: Zur Geschichte religionswissenschaftlicher Begriffe* (Berlin: Reimer, 1993), p. 77.

attractive for both Marxism and psychoanalysis. Previous states of consciousness are not gently ‘aufgehoben’ in the Hegelian sense, but are violently repressed in an attempt to deny their very existence: however, myths, if we know how to read them, contain traces both of the previous stage and of the violence of its repression. Similarly, remnants of archaic social institutions in patriarchal society (such as the Delphic oracles, the Vestal Virgins, etc.) are both pointers back to previous conditions and institutions through which women were compensated for the loss of their authority.

He achieves his ends by developing a series of brilliant readings against the grain of Greek and other myth cycles. He asks why it is that so many cultures have myths in which a male principle achieves victory over the female – amongst his examples for the Greek world are the Athenian myths in the *Oresteia* cycle and the defeat of Amazon peoples by the Apolline heroes Theseus and Achilles – and this question takes him in the opposite direction to what, for example, a psychoanalytical approach would have to say about this. For Bachofen cannot believe that a patriarchal society could imagine the possibility of structures other than its own (here, he is clearly drawing on his view of his own society). Therefore, the myths must represent the assimilated memory of something historically real, rather than the product of a society’s collective sexual anxieties: they are, in fact, stories told by the victors of history to explain their origins. Bachofen takes the step of historicising mythical narratives, rather than locating them in some inaccessible past, and claims that Athenian society, as the highest expression of the paternal (‘vaterrechtlich’) principle, is shaped not by any eternally valid ‘classical’ values, but to a great extent by its overcoming of an earlier, matriarchal culture.

Important symbols and images are associated with each of the three stages. The first is purely earthly, connected in Bachofen’s language with vegetation, moors and marshes, ancient mother goddesses and the mysterious, random processes of creation: ‘Die volle, noch keinerlei Beschränkung unterworfenen Natürlichkeit des reinen, sich selbst überlassenen Tellurismus’ (The full, unrestricted naturalness of pure tellurism, MR 40, *Myth* 97). In the second stage, matriarchy, images of agricultural fruitfulness dominate, and the goddess has become a benevolent dispenser of plenty, taking her place in a pantheon of other deities; the image associated with this stage is the moon, half way between the earth and the sun. In the final, patriarchal stage, we find that earth images are subordinate to the masculine, Apolline principle of light and sun, formal clarity and abstract thought. The whole process represents the ‘Losmachung des Geistes von den Erscheinungen der Natur’ (the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature, MR 54, *Myth*, p. 109).

However, the Romantic Bachofen cannot resist the attraction of his own ideas. His method requires not only the assembling of evidence and argument, but also a good deal of intuitive involvement with his subject matter. His

discussion of the dominant patriarchal principle is sometimes in negative terms, for its repression of its origins and its inability to perceive the glories of the type of society it overcame. It was certainly an act of intellectual courage for a man of his background to suggest that his research had shown that monogamous marriage is not a natural, eternal form, but a thoroughly political institution.<sup>17</sup> At times, his discussion of the second stage makes it sound less like a time of female domination than of a natural balance between the sexes: for him, ‘völlige Gleichberechtigung der Frauen’ (equal rights for women) is a ‘ganz natürliche Auffassung des Geschlechtsverhältnisses’ (wholly natural view of the sexual relation) which the Roman world destroyed (MR 63, *Myth* 118), though one should of course remember that the ‘natural’ does not here have the unequivocally positive connotations that it would take on later in the century.

Similarly, the matriarchal period represents ‘allgemeine Freiheit und Gleichheit’ (universal freedom and equality), while the paternal principle is ‘individuell-beschränkt’ (individual and restricted). This is the point from which Marxist views of Bachofen proceed, namely in his description of matriarchal society as a form of *Urkommunismus*: ‘Aus dem gebärenden Muttertum stammt die allgemeine Brüderlichkeit aller Menschen, deren Bewußtsein und Anerkennung mit der Ausbildung der Paternität untergeht.’ (The idea of motherhood produces a sense of universal fraternity among all men, which dies with the development of paternity.) The ‘Einheitlichkeit der Masse’ (undifferentiated unity of the mass) characteristic of *Mutterrecht*, is in *Vaterrecht* subordinated to the ‘Prinzip der Gliederung’ (principle of articulation, MR 21, *Myth* 80). A view of human society progressing from original unity to modern individuality and differentiation is a key element in nearly all receptions of Bachofen’s work, whatever the discipline or political standpoint: it is seen either as positive progress or regrettable decay, but it is always part of an argument over the nature of modernity, rather than about the ancient world, and it will return again and again in the chapters that follow.

That Bachofen saw his work as an intervention in contemporary politics is shown by the closing sentence of *Das Mutterrecht*, in which he warns against the desire to return to matriarchal conditions, hoping ‘daß die jetzt zu ihrem Ende gelangte Untersuchung für das Verständnis des Altertums überhaupt fördernd und auch für die tiefere Kenntnis des Entwicklungsgangs der heutigen Welt, welcher französische Schriftsteller die Rückkehr zu dem Isisprinzip und zu der Naturwahrheit des Mutterrechts als alleiniges Heilmittel anempfehlen, nicht ohne Frucht sein wird’ (that the work that has now reached its conclusion will not only be of benefit for our understanding of Antiquity, but will also contribute to a deeper knowledge of the modern world’s laws of development; a world to which

<sup>17</sup> This is the point which inspired Friedrich Engels’s *Der Ursprung der Familie*, a work which represents one of the earliest positive receptions of Bachofen’s work.

French writers have recommended a return to the Isis principle and the natural truth of mother right as the only possible remedy, MR 927).<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the contradictions in his work, though, it is clear that Bachofen sees the modern world as too decadent to understand the glories of the past: ‘Das gynaikokratische Weltalter mit seinen Gestalten, Taten, Erschütterungen ist der Dichtung gebildeter, aber schwächerer Zeiten unerreichbar’ (The matriarchal age, with its figures, deeds, upheavals, is beyond the poetry of cultivated but enfeebled times, MR 25, *Myth* 84). By implication, Bachofen pulls off the Hegelian trick of claiming that his work embodies the moment when the ‘world spirit’ becomes self-aware: he has recognised the structure and meaning of human history, but the society in which he lives is not spiritually capable of receiving this knowledge. I will show what he means by this later in this chapter.

### Myth, scholarship and modernity

Although the *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten* appeared two years before *Das Mutterrecht*, it is the latter with which Bachofen’s name is most often associated. Both works emerge from the same complex of ideas, but *Das Mutterrecht* sets out Bachofen’s system with more clarity, and aspires to be a general survey, rather than a response to individual symbols and myths. The most reproduced, and referred-to, part of his work is the introductory essay in *MR*, which sets out the system I have outlined above (relatively) plainly, and introduces a myriad of case studies taken from across the ancient world, in which a vast range of mythological figures and narratives are placed at various points on the scale.

The introduction attempts to place the system on a persuasive, scholarly footing, insisting on the consistency of its method and of the evidence presented: in this, it differs from the presentation of *GS*, which starts from a much more subjective experience. In fact, as is often the case, the introduction was written after the completion of the rest of the work. As Bourgeaud, Durisch, Kilde and Sommer note, ‘this introduction allows Bachofen from the very beginning to create an illusion of a completed work, although the text itself gives every indication of being a thought process in constant and abundant development’.<sup>19</sup> This is useful, since the introduction does little justice to the richness and ambiguity of Bachofen’s reading of myth, but it does underestimate the extraordinary control that he exercises over the mass of material that he brings

<sup>18</sup> ‘Französische Schriftsteller’ refers to Jules Michelet and Emile de Girardin, whose works on the ‘feminine’ in history had been published while Bachofen was working on *MR* and *GS*: Jules Michelet, *La mer* (Paris: Hachette, 1860); Emile de Girardin, *La liberté dans le mariage par l’égalité des enfants devant la mère* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1854). English translation lightly altered.

<sup>19</sup> Bourgeaud et al., p. 13.

together in *MR*, and the importance of the overarching system for the interpretation of the mythical narratives and figures that he considers.

In *MR*, as elsewhere, Bachofen insists on the historical existence of the periods he describes, on the universality of the system – ‘Überall System, überall Zusammenhang, in allen Einzelheiten Ausdruck eines großen Grundgesetzes’ (everywhere there is system, everywhere cohesion, in every detail the expression of a great fundamental law, *MR* 17, *Myth* 76) – on the originality of his work, and, perhaps most significantly, on the fact that it is an alien world that requires scholars to reassess everything that they have previously known:

Eine unbekannte Welt öffnet sich vor unsern Blicken. Je tiefer wir in sie eindringen, um so eigentümlicher gestaltet sich alles um uns her. Überall Gegensätze zu den Ideen einer entwickelten Kultur, überall ältere Anschauungen, ein Weltalter selbständigen Gepräges, eine Gesittung, die nur aus ihrem eigenen Grundgesetz beurteilt werden kann. Fremdartig steht das gynaiokratische Familienrecht nicht nur unserm heutigen, sondern schon dem antiken Bewußtsein gegenüber. (*MR* 9)

An unknown world opens before our eyes, and the more we learn of it, the stranger it seems. Everything contrasts with the idea of a highly developed culture; everywhere we find older conceptions, an independent way of life that can only be judged according to its own fundamental law. The matriarchal organisation of the family seems strange in the light not only of modern but also of classical ideas. (*Myth* 69)

Bachofen here critiques a scholarship that has formulated its methods and assumptions with reference to the familiar world of Greco-Roman civilisation, rendering it unable to perceive the things that the Greeks and Romans were themselves unaware of. The world revealed in *MR* cannot be explained with reference to later cultures: it has its own laws, and its own ‘Gesittung’ (a favoured word of Bachofen’s, indicating a unified world-view based on the correspondence of religious and legal principles). In fact, the later cultures – their world-view and the structure of their laws and institutions – can be explained from the earlier cultures that they overcame and whose memory they have repressed: ‘Das römische Paternitätssystem weist durch die Strenge, mit welcher es auftritt, auf ein früheres, das bekämpft und zurückgedrängt werden soll, hin’ (The strictness of the Roman patriarchal system points to an older system that had to be combated and suppressed, *MR* 16, *Myth* 75).

For Bachofen, most historical work on myth misses the point, producing only ‘unbrauchbare Notizen [...] deren täglich wachsende Zahl den zerstörenden Fortschritt der sogenannten kritischen Sichtung des überlieferten Materials bekundet’ (the discard pile whose steady growth marks the destructive progress of the so-called ‘critical’ approach to mythology, *MR* 12f., *Myth* 72). Instead, the material of myth is as useful as any document for historical evidence, if we know how to read it:

Die mythische Überlieferung [...] erscheint als der getreue Ausdruck des Lebensgesetzes jener Zeiten, in welchen die geschichtliche Entwicklung der alten Welt ihre Grundlagen hat, als die Manifestation der ursprünglichen Denkweise, als

unmittelbare historische Offenbarung, folglich als wahre, durch hohe Zuverlässigkeit ausgezeichnete Geschichtsquelle. (MR 13)

The mythical tradition may be taken as a faithful reflection of the life of those times in which historical antiquity is rooted. It is a manifestation of primordial thinking, an immediate historical revelation, and constantly a highly reliable historical source. (*Myth* 73)

Bachofen's emphasis on the 'truth' of myth, and the inadequacy of the modern scholarly understanding of myth, will play a vital role in the reception of his ideas. His view oscillates between insisting on the objective, documentary value of myth as evidence, and on a more intuitive, subjective approach, in which myth is understood as a fundamentally different, non- or pre-rational mode of thought and expression. In *MR*, he presents the first case, suggesting simply that modern scholarship has rejected a significant evidence base because of its own prejudice:

Unsere moderne historische Forschung, in einseitiger Ausschließlichkeit auf die Ermittlung der Ereignisse, Persönlichkeiten, Zeitverhältnisse gerichtet, hat durch die Aufstellung des Gegensatzes zwischen geschichtlicher und mythischer Zeit und die ungebührliche Ausdehnung der letztern der Altertumswissenschaft eine Bahn angewiesen, auf welcher tiefes und zusammenhängendes Verständnis nicht zu erlangen ist. (MR 15)

Preoccupied as they are with the facts, personalities, and institutions of particular epochs, our modern historians have drawn a sharp distinction between historical and mythical times and prolonged the so-called mythical era out of all proportion. Along these lines any penetrating and coherent understanding of antiquity is impossible. (*Myth* 75)

He suggests here that there is no objective distinction between 'historical' and 'mythic' time, but that scholars have created an artificial distinction through their own prejudices: the rigorous source-criticism being developed by professional historians in the mid-nineteenth century is seen here as simply a means of reinforcing those prejudices and creating artificial distinctions. The reception of Bachofen's work outside the fields of professional scholarship tends to take another line, however, suggesting that myth *is* a reflection of a fundamentally different world-view, a pre-logical, intuitive, symbolic mode of thought: this is not how Bachofen himself expresses it in *Das Mutterrecht*, though other works, such as *Gräbersymbolik*, suggest this interpretation.

The 1859 work, *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten*, takes as its starting point a more personal experience, namely the contemplation of funeral art at the Villa Doria Pamfili in Rome. Bachofen interprets the scenes depicted there as illustrations of an Orphic mystery ritual, in which the soul of the departed descends to an encounter with the maternal origins before being purified in an ascent to eternal life, breaking the chains of the cycle of death and rebirth. Funeral symbolism is seen as a means of accessing levels of historical experience deeper than the modernity of the Romans who erected these monuments: as an

unchanging, and eventually barely understood, tradition, it allows the sympathetic scholar to reach back into an age that left no documentary evidence:

Über Grab und Grabkult haben die eilenden Jahrhunderte und alle Neuerungen, die sie mit sich führen, nur geringe Macht. Ihre Symbolik, in den ältesten Anschauungen unseres Geschlechts wurzelnd, reicht unverändert, wenn auch zuletzt nicht mehr verstanden, hinab in die Zeiten des sinkenden Heidentums und über diese hinaus in das neue Weltjahr, das Christi Menschwerdung eröffnet hat.<sup>20</sup>

The passing centuries and all the innovations they bring have little power over tombs and tomb cults. Their symbolism, rooted in the oldest intuitions of our race, passed unchanged, though ultimately no longer understood, into the era of waning paganism, and even into the new era opened by the Incarnation of Christ. (*Myth* 22)

From the beginning of the text, he makes it clear not only that his studies were inspired by a personal experience, but also that this personal, intuitive connection is an integral part of his method:

[Ich bin] vor allem einem Bedürfnis meiner eigenen Natur gerecht geworden, vielleicht aber auch dem höchsten Ziele aller Altertumsforschung, die Ideen früherer Geschlechter einer Zeit, die der Erfrischung gar sehr bedarf, in ihrer hohen Schönheit zu erschließen, näher gekommen, als es einer an der Form und der Oberfläche der Dinge haftenden Betrachtung erreichbar ist. (GS 9)

I have primarily acceded to a need inherent in my own nature, but perhaps I have also come closer to realising the supreme aim of archaeology – to grant an age that is so lacking in freshness access to the ideas of earlier ages in all their lofty beauty – than is possible through an approach limited to the form and surface of things. (*Myth* 23)

Characteristically, Bachofen links personal experience with broader social phenomena, portraying his method as a counter to the superficiality of modern, rationalist methods.

The text consists of two extended meditations on individual symbols and myths. The most influential section is the piece on the ‘Mysterienei’ (mystery egg), a black and white symbol of birth, rebirth and the androgyny of human origins: Bachofen interprets this symbol as a representation both of the origins of culture in ‘hetaerism’, and of human longings for a higher state of existence:

Das ist ja eben die hohe Würde und ahnungsreiche Fülle des Symbols, daß es verschiedene Stufen der Auffassung zuläßt und selbst anregt, und von den Wahrheiten des physischen Lebens zu denen einer höhern geistigen Ordnung weiterführt. (GS 19)

The sublime dignity and richness of the symbol reside precisely in the fact that it not only allows of but even encourages different levels of interpretation, and leads us from the truths of physical life to those of a higher spiritual order. (*Myth* 25)

Bachofen finds reminders of this symbol in symbolic representations across the ancient world, using what he sees as its ubiquity to demonstrate the universality of the theory. In fact, this is a circular argument: the ‘objectivity’ of the overall

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<sup>20</sup> GW 4, p. 9.

system supports the interpretation of the symbol, while the symbol demonstrates the truth of the system. This text, though, is significant for other reasons, namely for its linking of a variety of forms of historical narrative with an individual, spiritual journey: the literary reception of Bachofen's work profits from the rich possibilities offered by this combination of narratives. Bachofen here attempts to combine three forms of narrative: a story of continual progress and ascent from material to spiritual, maternal to paternal; a cyclical narrative in which previous conditions threaten to return and disrupt this progress; and a 'mystery' narrative of descent, encounter, purification and ascent. For Bachofen, the progression of history, though ultimately inevitable, is a risky business, full of violence, uncertainty, ambivalence and the danger of regression to past states: for example, he sees the decadence of the later Roman empire as an example of the re-emergence of previous, 'feminine' states of existence, and the penultimate chapter of *Das Mutterrecht* interprets Pythagoreanism as a 'Rückkehr [...] zu dem Prinzipiat und der Mysterienbedeutung des Muttertums' (return to the primacy and mystical significance of motherhood) and to the 'chthonischen Muttertum der Erde' (chthonic motherhood of the Earth, MR 875).

Bachofen sets out his ideas of decadence and return more extensively in a later work dealing specifically with Roman legends, *Die Sage von Tanaquil* (*The Myth of Tanaquil*, 1870), which explores the 'oriental' influence on Western culture in terms of the paternal West (embodied here in Rome and Christianity) gradually 'freeing' itself from the influence of the maternal East. Caesar, as the 'okzidentalische Held', achieved the liberation of the West from the East, but the later Roman fashion for 'Eastern' cults of mother goddesses is a sign of the Empire's decadence and of the dangerous return of earlier states of existence:

Durch seine Religionen sucht das Morgenland dem Abendland nochmals sein Joch aufzuerlegen. Welchen Siegeszug feiern nicht Asiens und Ägyptens Muttergottheiten! Bis in die entlegensten Teile der westlichen Reichshälfte wird der okzidentalische Geist von diesem vorzugsweise weiblichen, vorzugsweise hetärischen Pantheon mit einer Macht ergriffen, welche die veräußerlichten Gestalten des griechischen Volkskultus nie auszuüben vermochten.<sup>21</sup>

Through its religions the Orient attempted once again to impress its yoke on the Occident. The mother goddesses of Asia and Egypt advanced in triumph. Down to the remotest corners of the Western Empire the Occidental spirit was shaken by this eminently feminine, eminently hetaeric pantheon, which exerted a power never possessed by the externalising figures of the Greek national cult. (*Myth* 234)

This version of Bachofen's scheme, which has been given a further ideological twist in its strict opposition between East and West, and in its view of the East as a threat to the West's self-determination, proved attractive to later writers, such as the Munich 'Kosmiker', who, reversing Bachofen's value judgements, celebrated the 'return' of the sexualised feminine in the decadence of the *fin-de-siècle*.

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<sup>21</sup> GW 6, pp. 38f.

Bachofen also describes the conflict in terms of stasis and movement, nature and history: 'Der Orient huldigt dem Naturstandpunkt, der Okzident ersetzt ihn durch den geschichtlichen'<sup>22</sup> (The West replaced the natural standpoint of the Orient by a historical view, *Myth* 236). This idea, which I will discuss later in the context of contemporary views of masculinity and femininity, provides important parallels with the language of psychoanalysis – the male child breaking with the Maternal through the Oedipal conflict – and with contemporary discussion of the origins of Jewish religion in the rejection of patriarchy. I will show in the following chapters how Bachofen's work is put to use in these discussions as a means of linking the psychological development of the individual with broader cultural processes.

Bearing in mind the precariousness of the progress made by humanity, and the fact that early, matriarchal conditions have a tendency to return at times of decadence, Bachofen provides an enormously influential interpretation of the mystery cults of late Antiquity (in the case of *Gräbersymbolik*, the Orphic mysteries): in essence, they allow individuals in patriarchal societies to rediscover the maternal roots of their culture (and, by implication, their own personality) through rituals of initiation and purification. Genuine individual salvation is, in this view, dependent not on a progressive distancing from the maternal origin, but on a renewed encounter with it, in which it is assimilated and overcome. We find here a clue as to the motivation behind *Gräbersymbolik*: scholarship is, amongst many other things, a personal spiritual journey in which the writer, inspired by an intuitive encounter with a set of symbols, rediscovers the buried origins of human culture, bringing them to light and assimilating them into a narrative of progress. Whereas culture as a whole does progress along the more or less direct lines set out in *Das Mutterrecht*, individuals in the patriarchal world have to make a potentially perilous spiritual and intellectual journey back to the Maternal: individual spiritual progress, and the spiritual 'health' of the culture, depend on the success of this journey. I will return to this question in the section on 'crosscurrents', below.

In *Gräbersymbolik*, Bachofen develops a more visionary, contemplative form of interpretation as a way of accessing the past, to set alongside the comparatist methodology set out in *Das Mutterrecht*: here, he relies on a critique of the language of rationalism that points forward to late nineteenth and early twentieth century views of myth:

Das Symbol erweckt Ahnung, die Sprache kann nur erklären. Das Symbol schlägt alle Saiten des menschlichen Geistes zugleich an, die Sprache ist genötigt, sich immer nur einem einzigen Gedanken hinzugeben. Bis in die geheimsten Tiefen der Seele treibt das Symbol seine Wurzel, die Sprache berührt wie ein leiser Windhauch die Oberfläche des Verständnisses. Jenes ist nach innen, dieses nach außen gerichtet. Nur dem Symbol gelingt es, das Verschiedenste zu einem einheitlichen Gesamteindruck zu

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<sup>22</sup> GW 6, p. 41.

verbinden. Die Sprache reiht einzelnes aneinander und bringt immer nur stückweise zum Bewußtsein, was, um allgewaltig zu ergreifen, notwendig mit Einem Blick der Seele vorgeführt werden muß. Worte machen das Unendliche endlich, Symbole entführen den Geist über die Grenzen der endlichen, werdenden in das Reich der unendlichen, seienden Welt. (GS 62f.)

The symbol awakens intimations; speech can only explain. The symbol plucks all the strings of the human spirit at once; speech is compelled to take up a single thought at a time. The symbol strikes its roots in the most secret depths of the soul; language skims over the surface of the understanding like a soft breeze. The symbol aims inward; language outward. Only the symbol can combine the most disparate elements into a unitary impression. Language deals in successive particulars; it expresses bit by bit what must be brought home to the soul at a single glance if it is to affect us profoundly. Words make the infinite finite, symbols carry the spirit beyond the finite world of becoming into the realm of infinite being. (*Myth* 50)

This rather beautiful passage betrays the influence of the Romantic myth theorist Georg Friedrich Creuzer, another intellectual outsider from a generation earlier, who developed a view of symbolism in opposition to rational critical methods. In his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen* (*Symbolism and Mythology of the Ancient Peoples, in particular the Greeks*, 1812), Creuzer developed a theory of the symbol as the earliest, pre-rational and pre-linguistic mode of human communication. Symbols are mute and connected with the earth, rather than the spirit, and are able to embody complex and even contradictory ideas within themselves without having to explain them. They precede language and myth, which are more discursive, but less powerful and immediate means of communication; in fact, Creuzer holds the oldest myths to be nothing more than ‘ausgesprochene Symbole’ (‘spoken/pronounced symbols’)<sup>23</sup>, serving to explain and interpret ancient symbols to people who, with time, have lost their immediate access to them.

Creuzer fits this theory into a narrative of historical decline away from the immediacy of contact with nature embodied in the symbolic mode of communication, which is associated with the original inhabitants of Greece, the Pelasgians (the Greeks’ mythologizing name for the people they believed they had replaced when they migrated to Greece: a term that will recur frequently in the reception of Bachofen’s work). Creuzer suggests that a usurping group of oriental priests imposed a new religion on the Pelasgians, but myths arose since the people were now caught in a state of conflict: they were unable to understand abstract reason and argumentation, but had lost contact with their original symbolic mode of communication due to the experience of disruption and change. Myths explain and interpret an ancient symbolic language in narrative form: they are thus a necessary compensation for loss. Bachofen rejects the specifics of Creuzer’s historical narrative, but the view of the symbol that is

<sup>23</sup> Georg Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 4 vols. (Leipzig and Darmstadt: Heyer & Leske, 1812, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1819-21), p. 91.

expressed in *Gräbersymbolik* is very close to Creuzer's, with the addition of the idea that the contemporary scholar is able to experience something of this holistic, intuitive original immediacy through the contemplation of symbols.<sup>24</sup>

Bachofen's admirers sometimes draw on the ideas expressed in works like *Gräbersymbolik* in order to make the claim that he is a true visionary tragically constrained by nineteenth-century scientific rationalism. Thomas Gelzer suggests that Bachofen's work demonstrates a contradiction between two modes of writing, which he identifies using the Neo-Platonist terms 'exoteric' and 'esoteric': the 'exoteric' works like *Das Mutterrecht*, written for broad public consumption, suffer from a contradictory attempt to demonstrate the truth of a visionary experience using empirical evidence, while the more personal, 'esoteric' works contain the visionary centre of his work for the benefit of a select few.<sup>25</sup> Ernst Howald makes a similar point: 'What makes his work special is its mythopoeia. Of course, his myth-making is limited by his desire to be a historian, and by his dependance on the documents left behind by the Greek and Latin writers; but this is merely his raw material, with which he can work creatively and with mastery.'<sup>26</sup>

This strikes me as a way of evading the kind of confrontation with evidence that Bachofen demands of us: after all, he wishes his work to become a standard history demonstrating a new, rigorous method. He shows an intellectual honesty in showing the evidence he uses, leaving himself open to potential contradiction and argument: it is notable that the final years of his life were spent not in 'deepening' the visionary aspects of his work, but in learning the methods of a new discipline, anthropology, in order to give his arguments a more rigorous basis. There seems to me to be no contradiction in trying to find evidence and develop methods to demonstrate the truth of an intuitive vision; where problems arise in Bachofen's work is in the interpretation of evidence in the light of a pre-conceived speculative historical system.

<sup>24</sup> There is much more to be said on the influences on Bachofen's view of myth (Bourgeaud et al., pp. 45-64 is particularly useful here) but it is Creuzer who is most significant for the reception of Bachofen's work: the symbol theory that Bachofen draws from him plays a vital role in the ideologised debate on myth, symbolism and the critique of language in the wake of Ludwig Klages's re-reading of Bachofen, after 1900.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Gelzer, 'Die Bachofen-Briefe: Betrachtungen zu Vision und Werk, Wirklichkeit und Leben J.J. Bachofens anhand von Band X der *Gesammelten Werke*', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, 19 (1969), 777-869 (823-824). See also Walter Muschg, *Bachofen als Schriftsteller* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1949).

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Howald, *Nachwort* to vol. 4 of Bachofen's *Gesammelte Werke*, pp. 507-65 (p. 560).

## Bachofen's 'autobiography'

Bachofen's long letter to Friedrich Karl von Savigny, from 1854, has occupied an important place in the scholarly and political struggles over his work, and has often been held to contain the key to his writing and personality: it has generally been used to demonstrate that Bachofen was a visionary thinker at heart, rather than a scholarly rationalist. Its significance is such that it is worth discussing it separately here, less for what it says about Bachofen, however, than for its importance in the reception of his work.

Bachofen's work, in particular *MR*, bears the imprint of the ideas of Savigny and the *Historische Rechtsschule* (Historical School of Law), according to which the legal systems of individual peoples were the key to understanding their character and development. Rather than considering that law should be a reflection of immutable, universal moral principles, Savigny argued, following Herder, that each 'Volk' had its own particular genius, expressed in its culture and legal customs and structures. These develop organically over time, but are always an expression of the spirit of the people, which is an organic structure in which each part expresses the whole and the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, it is possible to examine a single piece of evidence and locate it securely within a broader historical narrative, thus establishing its meaning; it is also possible to make statements about the mentality of a particular people as it develops through time, since this is expressed in its legal norms.

Bachofen begins by stating that his interest in Roman Law was guided less by its application in nineteenth century legal practice than by a fascination with the subject in its own right: 'Das Antike was der Reiz, der mich fesselte, nicht das heute Anwendbare' (What interested me was the ancient world itself and not the applicability of its lessons to present day needs). This goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of contemporary historical methods as the dogmatic imposition of modern ideas onto the ancient world:

Immer mehr gelang es mir, von dem modernen Standpunkt abzusehen, und ihm in allen Stücken den antiken zu unterstellen. Daher nistete sich bei mir ein stets wachsender Widerwille gegen alle modernen Systeme ein. Ich hätte das Kleid gerne in seinen ursprünglichen Falten gesehen und erachtete jeden Versuch, den Stoff heutigen Begriffen mundgerecht zu machen für nichts besseres, als für eine das alte Verständnis erschwerende Entstellung.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Selbstbiographie und Antrittsrede über das Naturrecht*, ed. by Alfred Bäumler (Halle/Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1927), p. 13. At the time of writing, the volume of the Basel *Gesammelte Werke* that is to include this work had not appeared. For this reason, I have referred to the edition published by Alfred Bäumler in 1927. Bäumler's edition forms part of the ideological struggle over Bachofen in the 1920s, and is therefore not an ideal source to cite from; nevertheless, it is the most readily available version until the complete edition is ready. I will refer to it in the body of the text as SB.

More and more I came to disregard the modern point of view and subordinate it to ancient criteria. I felt an increasing distaste for all modern systems. I wanted to see the material in its original form, and looked on all attempts to adjust it to more modern conceptions as mere misrepresentations of a sort that was bound to frustrate any true understanding of ancient life. (*Myth 4*)

Bachofen's stated desire to understand the ancient world in its own terms is as disingenuous as any other historicism, but his insistence that the ancient world is an alien place, characterised by a mentality that modern Europeans cannot identify with, is an important critique of comfortable assumptions about the roots of European culture.

The letter portrays his studies and career to date as a process leading up to a moment of revelation. His archive work in London, Oxford and Cambridge is described in terms of a discovery of the true purpose of scholarship, which is to shape the development of the individual, rather than to train him for a particular profession: 'allgemeine Erziehung auf der Grundlage humaner Wissenschaften an der Stelle ausschließlich erzielter Fachbildung' (general education on a foundation of human sciences in place of mere specialised instruction.) He connects this idea with a view of the role of scholarship in a modern world that is dominated by economic pragmatism: scholars will have to become a 'Priesterschaft' (priesthood) without state support, permitting it to retain its independence and exercise free critique (SB 24, *Myth 8*). This is how Bachofen sees his own role as a private scholar, and it is a thoroughly political view of scholarship, rather than a state of visionary isolation.

Bachofen's first trip to Italy is described in terms of a standard trope in works in the German tradition, in which a visit to Italy is presented as a turning point in the writer's life. A reading of Winckelmann opens the door to an appreciation of Classical art, which complements the intellectual study of law: Bachofen here describes an ideal balance of head and heart which makes him receptive to his most significant experience, the discovery of Roman mortuary art and the contrast of its beauties with the 'Armut und Dürre unserer heutigen Welt' (poverty and barrenness of the modern world, SB 29, *Myth 10*). He refers to this experience as a 'geistige Revolution' (SB 34).

This account of Roman funeral symbolism contains key statements about Bachofen's method, which have been used to support the visionary reading of his work. He describes the symbolism of Roman graves as containing remnants of far older ways of perceiving the world, which chime in with the deeper levels of the human psyche:

In den Gräbern hat sich das Symbol gebildet, jedenfalls auch am längsten erhalten. Was am Grabe gedacht, empfunden, still gebetet wird, das kann kein Wort aussprechen, sondern nur das in ewig gleichem Ernste ruhende Symbol ahnungsreich andeuten. (SB 30)

The symbol came into being in the tombs and there it was longest preserved. The thoughts, feelings, silent prayers conceived over the tomb cannot be expressed in

words, only intimated by the symbol with its eternally unchanging earnestness. (*Myth 11*)

Composing this letter in 1854, Bachofen is rehearsing the arguments that will form the theoretical backbone of his *Gräbersymbolik*, an attempt to establish an intellectual system in support of what is claimed to be an intuitive approach to understanding the past. The autobiographical embedding of this idea is designed to establish its authenticity and its place in the humanist educational project Bachofen has described, and to position the writer in opposition to the trends of the time. He sets out an opposition between rational and intuitive approaches, with a clear preference for the latter:

Es gibt zwei Wege zu jeder Erkenntnis, den weitem, langsameren, mühsameren verständiger Kombination, und den kürzern, der mit der Kraft und Schnelligkeit der Elektrizität durchschritten wird, der Weg der Phantasie, welche von dem Anblick und der unmittelbaren Berührung der alten Reste angeregt, ohne Mittelglieder das Wahre wie mit einem Schlage erfaßt. An Leben und Farbe ist das auf dem zweiten Wege Erworbene den Verstandesprodukten mächtig überlegen. (SB 31)

There are two roads to knowledge – the longer, slower, more arduous road of rational combination and the shorter path of the imagination, traversed with the force and swiftness of electricity. Aroused by direct contact with ancient remains, the imagination grasps the truth at one stroke, without intermediate links. The knowledge acquired in this second way is infinitely more living and colourful than the products of the understanding. (*Myth 11f*)

This opposition will become one of the key features of a reception of Bachofen's work that employs it for radical critiques of a supposedly rationalist modernity; it is already ideological in Bachofen's account, but it will be radicalised by many of his twentieth-century followers. The key issue here is that it is a false opposition: the two modes of thought achieve the same end, and the intuition supports the truth of the intellectual structure, and vice versa. The radical conservative reception of Bachofen from Ludwig Klages onwards will claim, with reference to passages like this, that reason and intuition are incompatible and in opposition, and that reason is a damaging feature of the fallen state of modernity.

Bachofen finds striking metaphors to describe an intellectual and spiritual experience that is immediate and holistic, affecting mind, body and spirit together:

Wenn man eine Metallscheibe schlägt, so tönt das Erz fort, bis die Auflegung des Fingers den Schwingungen ein Ende macht. So berührt auch Rom den mit dem Altertum verkehrenden Geist. Ja ein Schlag folgt dem andern, bis alle Saiten des Menschen sich rühren und regen, und er zuletzt inne wird, was alles bisher in ihm schlief. (SB 32f.)

When you strike a bronze disk, it resounds until you set a finger on it to stop the vibrations. That is how Rome affects the spirit that lives with antiquity. One stroke follows another, until every corner of our soul is stirred and we finally become aware of all that was slumbering within us. (*Myth 13*)

This awakening of an inner harmony echoes the aim of harmonious personal development through *Bildung* (personal development through cultural education), but it implies that the experience is more immediate than the gradual process of learning that the standard narrative of *Bildung* requires: one can either read it as an attempt at synthesis, with the intuitive experience providing a premonition of what is possible when human potential is unfolded, or as the acknowledgement that the two forms of knowledge are incompatible. The combination of narrative structures that Bachofen employs in his work seem to be an attempt at synthesis, but there is a clear tension nevertheless, which his later interpreters take to further extremes.

Bachofen continues with a discussion of his political views, which need not detain us here; it is important to note only that the experience of Roman funeral symbolism is portrayed here also as a political experience, leading him to reject his earlier liberalism and individualism in favour of a benevolent paternalism based on spiritual principles. For him, this is the only solution for a continent plagued by war, revolution, imperialism and despotism, and it also provides the only basis for a genuine understanding of the past:

Es gehört zu meinen tiefsten Überzeugungen, daß ohne gänzliche Umgestaltung all unserer Zustände, ohne Rückkehr zu der alten einfachen Seelenfrische und Gesundheit, nicht einmal eine Ahnung von der Größe jener alten Zeit und Denkweise möglich sein wird, da das Menschengeschlecht noch nicht, wie heutzutage, aus der Harmonie mit der Schöpfung und dem außerweltlichen Schöpfer gewichen war. (SB 44)

It is one of my profoundest convictions that without a thorough transformation of our whole being, without a return to ancient simplicity and health of soul, one cannot gain the merest intimation of the greatness of those ancient times and their thinking, of those days when the human race had not yet, as it has today, departed from its harmony with creation and the transcendent creator. (*Myth* 16)

If we connect this statement with the complex of narratives that I discussed in relation to MR and GS, we can say the following: the current state of the world is such that no connection with spiritual truths is possible for the broad mass of people: personal salvation therefore consists in a respectful, individual descent into an encounter with the past. Bachofen seems to see the mid-nineteenth century as a time in parallel with the decadence of the late Roman Empire, which was characterised by despotism and the rule of the masses, while a small spiritual elite found salvation through initiation into mystery cults.

All that is lacking in this letter is the explicit gendering of his philosophy of history and the theory of matriarchy, which he would present in its initial form in 1856, two years after the letter was written.

## Publications and editions

The full publishing history of Bachofen's works would require a chapter to itself, since it is complex and sporadic, and always intensely political. The publication of selections and abridged editions, including the letter to Savigny, through the first half of the twentieth century was an important part of the struggle over the reception of his works; the lack of an authoritative critical edition meant that many different writers were able to claim ownership of his work in order to support their own views, and to 'rescue' him from the grip of professional scholars, who treated his work as they would any other scholar's. It was this difficulty of access, as opposed to the very public availability of the work of Freud, say, that contributed to the view of Bachofen's work as a secret, esoteric knowledge: this impression is largely down to the work of Ludwig Klages, whose view of Bachofen had a profound effect on what came later, at least as far as the philosophical and literary receptions are concerned.

I will comment on individual editions in the context in which they arise, since they are part and parcel of the ongoing debate about his work, especially in the 1920s, when several abridged editions appeared. However, here is a brief overview, starting with the editions that were published during Bachofen's lifetime:

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| 1841 | <i>Das Naturrecht und das geschichtliche Recht in ihren Gegensätzen</i>  |
| 1850 | <i>Politische Betrachtungen über das Staatsrecht des römischen Volkes</i>  |
| 1851 | <i>Geschichte der Römer</i> (with Franz Dorotheus Gerlach)   |
| 1859 | <i>Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten</i>   |
| 1861 | <i>Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur</i> |
| 1862 | <i>Das lykische Volk</i>   |
| 1863 | <i>Der Bär in den Religionen des Alterthums</i>  |
| 1867 | <i>Die Unsterblichkeitslehre der orphischen Theologie auf den Grabdenkmälern des Altertums</i>                             |
| 1870 | <i>Die Sage von Tanaquil. Eine Untersuchung über den Orientalismus in Rom und Italien</i>                                  |
| 1880 | <i>Antiquarische Briefe. Vornehmlich zur Kenntniss der ältesten Verwandtschaftsbegriffe</i>                                |
| 1890 | <i>Römische Grablampen</i> (posthumous)  |

For some time after this, Bachofen's work was available only in scholarly libraries, and formed part of the conversation of professional scholars. As I will show, such scholars were well aware of the potentially radical consequences of their work, but it was not until Marxist writers such as Friedrich Engels and August Bebel began to refer to Bachofen and other ethnologists like Henry Morgan in their popular works that Bachofen's name reached a broader audience and gained a reputation for radicalism. Ever since, the reception of his work has often taken

the form of a claim to be rescuing a repressed form of knowledge from the grips of professional, scholarly rationalism.

After Bachofen's death, an edition of *Das Mutterrecht* appeared in 1897: *Das Mutterrecht* (Basel: Schwabe, 2nd ed, 1897). It was in this period that his work began to gain its reputation as an inaccessible repository of secret knowledge; the very exclusiveness of the work – its inaccessibility, both physically and stylistically – gave it a whiff of esoteric truths, which appealed to many writers and philosophers after 1900. Karl Wolfskehl's edition of Bachofen's letter to Savigny (Munich: Rupprecht-Press, 1923) plays up to this exclusivity in a very small, bibliophile edition that reflects his own attempt to claim Bachofen for his own. Only after this did further works begin to appear, with new editions by Manfred Schröter of *Okenos der Seifflechter* (part of GS) (Munich: Beck, 1923) and *Das lykische Volk und seine Bedeutung für die Entwicklung des Altertums* (Leipzig: Haessel, 1924). A rival, and complete, version of GS, edited by the Basel scholar C.A. Bernoulli, and with a foreword by Ludwig Klages, appeared in 1925 (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1925), setting off a flood of editions and abridgements which all served to support claims and counter-claims about Bachofen's significance for German culture. Most of the following editions aimed at popularisation, translating the Greek and Latin quotations and providing introductions and guidance for the reader.

Bernoulli published a substantial selection from Bachofen's works in three volumes, in 1926, to support his own work on myth and symbol (*Urreligion und antike Symbole: systematisch angeordnete Auswahl aus seinen Werken* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1926)), while in the same year appeared the most influential of these new editions, edited by Manfred Schröter, and with a book-length introductory essay by Alfred Bäumler: *Der Mythos von Orient und Occident: eine Metaphysik der Alten Welt: aus den Werken von J.J. Bachofen* (Munich: Beck, 1926): this version is a key intervention against Ludwig Klages's view of Bachofen, demonstrating the ways in which reference to Bachofen was employed in 'conservative revolutionary' and anti-republican thought. A briefer, more readable selection by Rudolf Marx appeared in 1927: *Mutterrecht und Urreligion: eine Auswahl* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1927). Alongside Bachofen's letter to Savigny and his account of his Greek journey, which appeared in 1927, and which I discussed earlier, the reception of Bachofen's work in the 1920s tended to develop within the field of tension created by these competing editions.

The year 1938 saw a new outbreak of the conflict between Swiss and German claims on Bachofen, with the publication in Nazi Germany of Wilhelm Keiper's unauthorised edition of Bachofen's *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig: Keiper, 1938). This edition provided the impetus for the ten-volume *Gesammelte Werke*, published by Schwabe & Co in Basel, and which is still incomplete at the time of writing.

After 1945, the rate of publication slowed down, but Marx's selection reached its 5th edition in 1954, and its 6th in 1984, and formed the basis of the

English version, in a translation by Ralph Manheim, published in 1967 as *Myth, Religion and Mother-Right* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967). Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs's abridged version of *Das Mutterrecht* has been the most commonly referenced version in the Federal Republic (*Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikeokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975)), and is usually read alongside his useful selection of materials: Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs (ed.), *Materialien zu Bachofens 'Das Mutterrecht'* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979). The success of Heinrichs's edition has meant that, in the Federal Republic, *Das Mutterrecht*, and in particular, Bachofen's introduction to the text, has come to stand for his work as a whole.

### Crosscurrents

During the first half of the twentieth century, Bachofen was often described as the 'discoverer' of mother right, but this is not a description he would have recognised himself, even though he does locate the origins of his work on the subject in a moment of inspiration and meditation. The Classical sources on which Bachofen draws, and through which he interprets other myths, have been discussed in detail elsewhere, and there is little to add here to the discussion of the rule of women by writers such as Aristophanes or Herodotus.<sup>28</sup> The idea of the existence of matriarchies or Amazon peoples seems to have arisen relatively late: writers in the 5th and 6th centuries BCE, such as Aristophanes, had written about Amazonism, while the word 'gyneocracy' arises in the 4th century, and idea constructed by writers in their reading of earlier sources in the light of their own time's concerns.<sup>29</sup> The term appears at a time of intense reflection on the nature of political and social systems, nature and authority, and the relationship between the domestic and public spheres. It is tempting to seek parallels with the mid-nineteenth century here, but such superficial analogy-seeking is rarely very enlightening. Instead, we should note that Bachofen reads texts such as Herodotus's account of Lycian matriarchy as reliably factual, ethnographical evidence, and literary texts such as the *Oresteia* as expressions of genuine, but repressed cultural memory; he then locates the 'events' extrapolated from these stories in a very nineteenth-century scheme of historical periods.

Representations of matriarchs and Amazons turned up frequently in European culture through the Middle Ages, but for our purposes, it is their re-emergence during a period of intense discussion over the meaning of modernity and the nature of gender difference that is of immediate significance. Modern authors had begun to take up the idea of matriarchy in comparative historical

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Beate Wagner-Hasel (ed.), *Matriarchatstheorien der Altertumswissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> See Bourgeaud et al., p. 28.

studies of the ancient world and the cultures encountered during the era of colonial expansion: the first, and in many ways most interesting of these is a remarkable text by the Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau, *Les Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (*Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, 1724).<sup>30</sup> Still working with the theory that all human races were descended from the tribes of Israel, Lafitau compares the religious life of the Iroquois amongst whom he had lived with the writing of Classical authors on the Pelasgian and early Greek cultures (matriarchal theories require that the Pelasgians are an identifiable ‘people’ whose matriarchal culture was replaced by the patriarchal Greeks). Lafitau, whose main interest is in showing that the Iroquois are not ‘barbarians’, but have a sophisticated religious life comparable to the Greeks’, and traceable to the same origins, spends little time on their social structures, but he does interpret their form of governance as a matriarchy in which women control property, and inheritance is passed down through the female line. Despite his sympathetic view of Iroquois society, this last point shows him to be a child of the Enlightenment with a notion of political authority based on individual property rights.

Nevertheless, Lafitau’s detailed account was influential, and he set out a comparatist method that continued to be employed by serious scholars until the end of the nineteenth century in their search for the supposed common origins of human cultures: where he was seeking confirmation of origins in the story of the Flood and the scattering of the tribes of Israel, later scholars will use the method to trace human history back far further than Biblical literalism allowed. Lafitau’s account also ensured that discussion of matriarchy and patriarchy becomes entangled with thinking about the relationship of property and politics, and not all scholars were able to distinguish between the rule of women and matrilineal inheritance structures. One who did was Adam Ferguson, whose account of the social structures of ‘rude nations prior to the establishment of property’ in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), takes up Lafitau’s work, but criticises the idea that the passing of inheritance down the female line must entail female political ascendancy: this important distinction was often forgotten well into the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

Bachofen did not read Lafitau until he had completed *Das Mutterrecht*, but he does refer to two authors whose work is influenced by this complex of ideas: the Basel scholar Johannes Müller, whose *Geschichte der amerikanischen Urreligionen* (*History of the original American religions*, 1855) takes up Lafitau’s account, and Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, who refers to Ferguson in an account of Greek myths of

<sup>30</sup> Joseph-François Lafitau, *Les Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris: Saugrain, 1724); *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, tr. William Fenton and Elizabeth Moore (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> See Adam Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. by Fania Oz-Salzberger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 82-83.

murderous women that are held to contain the memory of a Europe-wide system of matrilineal inheritance.<sup>32</sup> Welcker's work, in particular, contains much material that Bachofen refers to and expands upon in *Das Mutterrecht*.

There has been much debate about other possible 'influences' on Bachofen's work, for example on the extent of his debt to Romantic thinkers like Creuzer, or to the Swiss neo-humanist educational reformers; such questions are significant, but have been covered in much detail elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> In any case, discussion of Bachofen's 'influences' has often formed part of the politicised reception of his work, attempting to position him in opposition to 'modernity' or to 'rationalism'. I will approach the question from a different angle, which is of more relevance for an account of the reception of this body of work, namely by considering the intellectual and political currents that cross in his work, and which also cross in the complex patterns of reception from the late nineteenth century onwards. There is doubtless more that could be said on this subject, but I will limit myself to aspects that are of immediate relevance to the reception history of his work: methodological questions in the study of the ancient world and their ideological consequences; myth theory and neo-Romanticism; motherhood and the politics of maternalism; and the emergence of what is now thought of as a 'crisis of masculinity' in the late nineteenth century.

### Myth and modernity

In this section, I am going to look specifically at possible ways of understanding the revival of interest in 'mythical thinking' as an alternative form of knowledge in opposition to the dominant discourses of rationalist modernity. We therefore need an approach to the function of myth that allows us to understand its use as a resource at a particular historical moment of rapid social modernisation in the German-speaking world. In a renewed reception of Romantic theories of myth, thinkers began to develop theories that postulated that myth was far more than a primitive form of allegory or religious superstition, but was a form of knowledge as sophisticated as scientific rationalism. In their various different ways, the historical mysticism of Ludwig Klages, the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, or Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, amongst many others, postulated that myth demonstrated a way of thinking that did without the conceptual systems of rationalism, relying instead on the unity of subject and

<sup>32</sup> Johannes Müller, *Geschichte der amerikanischen Urreligionen* (Basel: Wieland, 1855); Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker, 'Anhang über den geschichtlichen Grund der Sage vom Lemnischen Männermord', in *Die Aeschylische Trilogie Prometheus und die Kabirenweibe zu Lemnos* (Darmstadt: Leske, 1824), pp. 585-602.

<sup>33</sup> For a useful account of Bachofen's debt to Romantic myth theorists, see Bourgeaud et al., pp. 45-64; a contrasting view, which places Bachofen much more specifically in the tradition of Basel neo-humanism, is provided by Gossman, pp. 67-90.

object and working with, rather than trying to overcome, ambiguity and contradiction.

All of these attempts to define mythical thinking work in some way with the traditional contrast between *mythos* and *logos*, although they are concerned to rescue myth from what they see as the condescension of the Enlightenment project of demythologisation. Bachofen also works with a form of this binary opposition between myth and reason, and so it may be misleading to found an analysis of his work on a further series of categories to differentiate between mythical and rationalist thinking. Instead, I am going to look at the conditions under which a view of myth as an alternative form of knowledge could become attractive to a scholar of Bachofen's background.

Bachofen is writing at a moment where nineteenth-century historical consciousness and system-building mingle with a renewed emphasis on mythic cultural memory: history is sacralised in the same way that the material of myth (and ideas of nature and motherhood) are sacralised. A post-Enlightenment culture that founds its self-understanding on demythologisation, that is, on the critical demolition of myth as a foundation of a community's lived experience, paradoxically frees the material of myth for creative reconstruction. Modern and modernist revaluations of myth are born out of this process: they are characterised by the consciousness of their own artifice, often hovering between a celebration of the liberation that this brings and a desire to find new foundations for their language to replace lost certainties.

Jean-Jacques Wunenberger has produced a useful model for understanding the stubborn survival of the material of myth in modern societies that can help us overcome any rigid conceptual opposition between *mythos* and *logos*. In this view, it is the methods of mythographic research that have led to this false opposition: by taking myth as their object of study, mythographers created the subject-object split that they claim mythical thinking does not suffer from. Instead, Wunenberger thinks of myth in terms of an inventory of material – image, reference, narrative and rhetorical gesture – that forms an endless, open text in productive tension with other types of discourse in a given society. The social production of knowledge and culture takes over, transforms and uses the material of myth, and then returns it in its transformed form to the 'mythic inventory'.

The process of 'demythologisation' has several unintended effects: once myths have lost their productive role within a society, they tend themselves to be 'mystified'<sup>34</sup>, in other words, located in a seemingly distant past from which they can exert a fascination over the present. Therefore, demythologisation does not necessarily lead to the impoverishment of myth, but leaves room for its revitalisation: myth undergoes a constant process of change within any given

<sup>34</sup> Jean-Jacques Wunenberger, 'Mytho-phorie: Formen und Transformationen des Mythos', tr. by Ruth Fischer, in Wilfried Barner, Anke Detken and Jörg Wesche (eds.), *Texte zur modernen Mythentheorie* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2003), pp. 290-300 (p. 291).

society, in which phases of demythologisation paradoxically provide the impetus for its renewal. More than this, Wunenberger argues that it is the very act of self-distancing from the material of myth that is the precondition of myth's survival and creativity in modern societies: 'Is it not the case that, in societies that have adopted rational, myth-critical thought, myths are transformed into material for other kinds of cultural activity, such as works of art or political myths: myths take on new ways of transmitting the imaginary. Paradoxically, the creativity of myth is founded on demythologisation.'<sup>35</sup>

The material of myth seems to be nothing but a stock of dead signs that can be raided for rhetoric, artistic play, analogy and illustration, but this material can come to life in rhetorical confrontation with rationalist discourse: myth tends to form a site of resistance to the structures in which it operates, and on which it relies for its continued existence. The abstraction, distance and deconstruction that theoretical discourse on mythology subjects myth to frees the material of myth for recombination in new types of symbolism and social function: 'The endurance of myth should not simply be explained by the theory of its passive, subterranean survival [into modernity], but also through its ability to become meaningful in new ways in entirely different cultural and historical contexts.'<sup>36</sup>

We can add to this by saying that, in the period in question, the renewed creativity of myth is *imagined* in exactly this way, as the subterranean survival of a form of thinking suppressed by rationalist modernity: this view is one of the defining features of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century revival of myth, and Wunenberger's model allows us to understand it without being beholden to its rhetorical oppositions. It is not so much that forms of conservative mythical thinking survived into modernity, but rather that the modes of Enlightenment rationality liberated myth to take on a range of new meanings and associations, providing a counterdiscourse that emphasises the distance between the present and a supposed originary state. We can therefore say that nostalgia is not simply a conservative response to modernity, but is a constituent part of it. We can now see Bachofen's work as a quintessentially modern project combining a rationalist historical method with a radical critique of rationalism, being led through the logic of an attempt to expose the concealed structures of the present to construct a vision of a past state of unity.

In Bachofen's work, the methods of nineteenth-century historical rationalism and their critique exist side-by-side in a historical system that elides history and myth. His approach to history is mythological and his approach to myth historical: the one conditions and is dependent on the other. This seems to me to be a point of criticism of theories of myth and history that have developed in the wake of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which historical narratives of progress are seen themselves as being as mythical as the mythical

<sup>35</sup> Wunenberger, p. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Wunenberger, p. 295.

narratives they replace. This view reduces the number of tools we have to understand what is going on in work like Bachofen's: the emplotment of past events onto a narrative connecting past with present, however artificial such a narrative may be, is very different from a mythical narrative that exists outside historical time but is seen as having immediate relevance for the present, and where every point in the narrative structure potentially has equal immediacy. Using the term 'myth' for both serves only to conceal the difference between very different attitudes to time. However, that is not to say that historical and mythical time are opposites or incompatible with each other, since historical narratives can take on mythical immediacy at certain times, particularly when they take on political relevance in particular social circumstances. In this way, Bachofen's carefully-constructed historical system, in which pieces of evidence are evaluated according to the developmental stage that they are seen to illustrate, becomes mythical at points when the narrative is constructed around a visionary identification between present and past. That the reception of his work has tended to see the visionary aspect as the key to an understanding of his ideas has much to do with the developing debate on the nature of modernity in Germany, and with the tendency of the rhetoric of that debate to assign to myth a role imagined as oppositional and irrational.

Mary Lefkowitz has noted that 'Bachofen's theories would be of purely antiquarian interest were it not that they continued to be taken seriously by scholars who were not familiar with the methods of ancient historians'.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, his work made little impact in the field in which Bachofen began, Ancient History: where his work was employed as evidence in scholarly argument, it tended to be in other disciplines whose approaches to evidence were different. Bachofen was certainly reacting consciously against the critical historiography of his time, but he still makes scholarly claims: it is only in the reception of his work that it is transformed into a critique of rationalism as such. Beate Wagner-Hasel puts it like this:

[Discussion of matriarchy] takes place on the margins of scholarly debate, amongst those whose methods, views of history or thematic emphases are unlikely to be accepted by the scholarly consensus, or who are themselves explicitly critical of scientific methods.<sup>38</sup>

Matriarchal ideas, along with specific claims made to ownership of Bachofen's work, are employed to critique a scholarship that is seen as dry, rational, masculine and alienated from 'life' or 'nature': they arise from a sense of modernity as a state of loss, of distance from origins or dissolution of seemingly

<sup>37</sup> Mary Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek myth* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Beate Wagner-Hasel 'Rationalitätskritik und Weiblichkeitskonzeptionen: Anmerkungen zur Matriarchatsdiskussion in der Altertumswissenschaft', in Beate Wagner-Hasel (ed.), *Matriarchatstheorien der Altertumswissenschaft* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992), pp. 295-373 (p. 297).

secure structures, and seem to offer a clear diagnosis, and potentially a solution too. As Wagner-Hasel puts it, matriarchy is ‘a mirror image or alternative to modernity, a place characterised by the deficits and contradictions experienced by Bachofen’.<sup>39</sup> In other words, particular conceptions of matriarchy – and by extension, the gendered conceptions of ‘life’, ‘nature’ or ‘myth’ that are implicit in them – reflect the contradictions and tensions of the modernity in which they arise. They are, therefore, a quintessentially modern form of nostalgia. I would suggest, however, that Wagner-Hasel’s view downplays the ideological intention behind many conceptions of matriarchy: matriarchal utopias and dystopias reflect a particular interpretation of modernity – as rationalist, utilitarian, masculine – rather than arising automatically from their complex context.

### The meaning of the past

To best illustrate how Bachofen himself formulated his ideas in reaction against what he saw as the conditions of modernity, I will discuss something seemingly trivial, namely his decades-long sulk at the success of his colleague and professional rival, the historian Theodor Mommsen. In letters to Heinrich Meyer-Ochsner, written shortly after the publication of *Das Mutterrecht*, at a point where his work was beginning to meet with scepticism amongst his colleagues, Bachofen expresses his intemperate rejection of Mommsen’s historical tour-de-force, *Römische Geschichte* (*Roman History*):

It is my duty to protest openly against a book like this. It is a scandal of the century that such a travesty of a book has been awarded prizes and praised as a significant achievement [...] I intend to expose the methods of this so-called historian and describe the impertinence of a modern empty-headed Berliner in its true colours. [...] Particularly sickening is the way in which Rome is reduced to the pet ideas of the most trivial Prussian liberalism [...] The only driving force in the life of Rome is trade and progress [...] The entire modern world in its stubborn Prussian arrogant hollow demagoguery is displayed in this book.<sup>40</sup>

What, apart from professional envy, could have led to the extremity of Bachofen’s anger at the success of Mommsen’s brilliant scholarship? Mommsen’s spectacular career and professorship in Berlin contrasted starkly with Bachofen’s own difficulties in Basel. Similarly, Mommsen’s approach to history formed the centre of mid-nineteenth century historical thinking, while Bachofen’s ideas and methods were largely ignored except for a small band of supporters on the margins of traditional scholarship. Mommsen was a key figure in the critique of

<sup>39</sup> Wagner-Hasel, p. 300.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Heinrich Meyer-Ochsner, 24.1.1862, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10: *Briefe* (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co., 1967), pp. 251f. Mommsen had just received an accolade from the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.