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Classical Studies and Philology
4.1 Quellenforschung

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A century ago, one of the most important modes of research in the professional study of Greco-Roman antiquity as well as in a number of other fields was a recently developed specialty called by its admirers (back then it had no opponents) ‘Quellenforschung’. By decomposing the compilatory handbooks produced by the erudition of late antiquity into their various sources and establishing the relations of dependence among them, the adepts of this method sought to trace back reports about a variety of aspects of the ancient world – primarily philosophy and history, but also religion, law, sculpture, and other matters – to their earliest origins. They were convinced that they would thereby place themselves in a position to assess with greater precision the reliability of those reports and would hence be able to make claims of greater validity about those aspects of antiquity.

Nowadays, Quellenforschung is not dead, but it seems moribund. It has moved from the fashionable center of classical studies to the swamps at their periphery; it is practiced by relatively few scholars and seems to be ignored, if not held in suspicion or contempt, by most. Yet, until recently at least, many of the results experts in this field obtained a century ago or more have continued to provide a seemingly solid foundation for studies in a wide variety of disciplines within classical scholarship and beyond it in related and dependent areas of research for which classical scholarship seems itself to have functioned not only as a model but also as a source. Why this has been the case deserves analysis and reflection, and not only because of the implications of these developments for these disciplines themselves.

What are the Quellen of Quellenforschung? The notion that authors use sources is neither novel nor exciting. Derrida was not – indeed, on principle could not possibly have been – the first to proclaim citationality as a fundamental feature of language, nor to point to the countless paradoxes and problems that arise from it. For every way that an author can use a source – indicating
it clearly, blurring the limits of who said what, citing it verbatim or paraphrasing or distorting or even inventing it, pretending to have used it when he did not, pretending not to have used it when he did, misunderstanding it slightly or greatly or completely, deliberately or inadvertently – can cause difficulties for those readers who want to know not only what is being said, but also and especially just who it is who is saying it.² In premodern times, these difficulties were greatly exacerbated by the absence of such generally agreed upon, unambiguous typographical signals as single and double quotation marks, ‘x’, “x”, «x», etc.³ Thus, in the ‘Introductory Remarks’ to his Guide for the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides writes,

There are seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work. The first cause arises from the fact that the author collects the opinions of various men, each differing from the other, but neglects to mention the name of the author of any particular opinion. In such a work contradictions or inconsistencies must occur, since any two statements may belong to two different authors. [...] Inconsistencies occurring in the Mishnah and Boraitot are traceable to the first cause. You meet frequently in the Gemara with passages like the following: ‘Does not the beginning of the passage contradict the end? No; the beginning is the dictum of a certain Rabbi; the end that of another’; or ‘Rabbi (Jehuda ha-Nasi) approved of the opinion of a certain rabbi in one case and gave it therefore anonymously, and having accepted that of another rabbi in the other case he introduced that view without naming the authority’; or ‘Who is the author of this anonymous dictum? Rabbi A’. ‘Who is that author of that paragraph in the Mishnah? Rabbi B’. Instances of this kind are innumerable.⁴

But if sources and confusions are anthropological universals, the search for ancient sources is a cultural phenomenon which has gone in and out of fashion and Quellenforschung in particular is a specific scholarly technique with its own history quite limited in space and time – if not with legally valid certificates of birth and death, then at least with a roughly dateable rise and fall.

One deep-seated psychological basis for the search for earliest sources is the conviction, already widespread in antiquity, that the best wisdom is a dead one. If (as many old men who think themselves wise suppose) old men are wiser than young men, then perhaps old cultures are wiser than young cultures, too. Herodotus and Plato were impressed by how much more ancient Egyptian culture was than Greek, and were not the only classical Greek authors to pass on to their Greek readers various stories about Greek institutions whose sources lay in a primeval barbarian past (and which, depending upon the point of view, were
therefore either legitimized or delegitimized). In the cosmopolitan, rootless Hellenistic period, the compensatory demand for the αἴτια (‘causes, origins’) was satisfied both by Greek poets and scholars and by foreigners who supplied more or less authentic versions of ancient barbarian wisdom, Egyptian, Phoenician, Babylonian, and so on. But it was above all during late antiquity that Chaldaean oracles, Orphic poems, Hermetic revelations, Pythagorean speculations, and other genuinely preserved or, more often, piously forged texts satisfied a need, concentrated in but by no means limited to the Stoic and especially Neoplatonist philosophers, for primitive sources of a wisdom uncontaminated by (and hence redemptive of) quotidian realities.

A direct affinity links this attitude with that of the Renaissance Neoplatonists, who, when they rediscovered Plato in the fifteenth century, read him through the lens of his late ancient commentators and inherited their antiquarian tastes, magnified now by the further historical distance. Pico della Mirandola, for example, uses a surprisingly sophisticated source analysis both constructively – in the nine hundred theses for which his oration De dignitate hominum was intended as a preface and which, derived from the comparison of surviving ancient philosophical texts, represented what these had in common and must presumably therefore have served as their ultimate sources – and critically – in his last work, an unfinished polemic against astrology in which he tried to demonstrate that this was not after all a science by investigating its origins and reducing it to its sources. Some other Italian humanists, above all Politian, made significant contributions in this field, but it seems thereafter not to have been immediately taken up in general but instead, with some exceptions like the study of Roman law, to have lapsed as a dominant mode of historical research for about two centuries. It was not until the Pyrrhonian skeptics of the latter seventeenth century that the general distrust of historical documentation and the search for new methods for validating and especially for falsifying ancient claims brought the question of the lost sources for extant documents to the forefront of scholarly consciousness.

It is in this context, and above all in the theological scholarship of the eighteenth century, that both of the two ultimate Quellen of nineteenth-century German Quellenforschung are to be found. For in fact Quellenforschung is methodologically a Siamese twin, whose two interdependent halves have rather different characteristics and pedigrees.

On the one hand, Quellenforschung seeks to break apart the transmitted ancient texts that their authors went to so much trouble to weld together out of the various sources they consulted. Such an analysis, which we may term ‘deconstructive’, attentively examines the text for any evidence of errors or inconsistencies – self-contradictions, variations in language or style, anachronisms,
etc. – which could suggest that different parts might have derived from different sources; yet at the same time it retains a conviction of the great value of that text despite its evident defects (for otherwise investigating it will lead not to analyzing its sources but simply to repudiating its authority). Precisely this fragile combination of rational analysis and stubborn faith is a characteristic feature of some religious traditions based upon a sacred text; and it was above all in the Hebrew Bible that the Enlightenment found ample opportunity to exercise its skills in this variety of source criticism. By careful analysis of textual anomalies Spinoza was able to demonstrate that the Pentateuch could not possibly have been written by Moses, but only by someone else who had lived much later, perhaps Esra; he thereby in effect replaced the notion of a unified text created all at once in a single act of divine afflatus by the image of a lengthy historical development involving contributions and modifications by human authors from different periods who were pursuing different interests. So too, Spinoza analyzed the Book of Daniel into one part (Chapters 1-7) derived in the Macabaean period from Chaldaean writings and another (Chapters 8-12) written by Daniel himself; he suggested that some later editor must have put these parts together and published them. But it was above all Henning Bernhard Witter and Jean Astruc, who in the early eighteenth century argued that the Pentateuch is a heterogeneous compilation. Astruc’s analysis of the text into Moses’ three sources – ‘mémoire A’ (which calls God ‘Elohim’), ‘mémoire B’ (which uses the term ‘Jehova’), and an additional ‘mémoire C’ (further subdivided into 8 rubrics) – was at first dismissed by such scholars as Johann David Michaelis, but by the last quarter of the eighteenth century had won acceptance, especially by the Göttingen specialist for the Hebrew Bible, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. It was in turn Eichhorn’s work which went on to serve as a model for Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795, in which the discrepancies and anomalies of the transmitted Homeric text were taken as evidence that it had been compiled out of earlier, originally independent songs and had acquired its present form in the course of centuries of transmission and modification. Wolf’s authoritative transference of deconstructive source criticism from the founding text of the theologians to that of the philologists ensured that the method of *Quellenforschung* would become canonical for nineteenth-century German classical scholarship.

But this method is only one of the two sources involved: for *Quellenforschung* not only tries to tear apart existing texts but also to reconstruct lost ones. How can one be sure that some passage in a surviving ancient text B was not invented by that text’s author but was taken over by him from some other earlier text A? Obviously, matters seem simple if text A is still available to us, so that we can determine that the two passages in question are identical. But suppose that text A
Quellenforschung has been lost. The standard technique of philological Quellenforschung involves comparing that surviving passage in one text B with some other similar passage in another surviving text B¹ (and with similar passages in surviving texts B², B³, etc. if available) and arguing that since (1) the similarity between these passages in B and in B¹ (and Bⁿ) is too great to be explained by chance and (2) the two surviving texts seem to be independent of one another in the sense that neither of them was the direct cause of the other, they must consequently both derive from some third text A, earlier than both of them but subsequently lost, which can be reconstructed on the basis of this comparison. This is the ‘reconstructive’, synthetic method of Quellenforschung, and it explains why so many works of late-nineteenth-century German scholarship bear an uncanny visual resemblance to the menus in Chinese restaurants: the page is divided into two (or in some cases three or even more) narrower columns, printed in parallel with one another; and the reader is invited, if not to choose one item from Column A and one from Column B, then at least to be convinced by the apparent evidence of the similarity of the various columns that there must have been a lost progenitor responsible for both. Here too the source for the technique is to be found in theological scholarship – but this time, concerning not the Hebrew Bible but the Christian New Testament. For the life and teachings of Jesus were validated by not just one, but four canonical Gospels; and these inevitably were very similar to one another in some regards, rather different in others. Ultimately, the Chinese menus of German Quellenforschung go back to the synoptic harmonies of the Gospels: early modern theologians printed the four Gospels in parallel columns, placing reports of the same events next to one another and balancing solitary reports in one or more Gospels by blank spaces in the others. Their intent was to prove the miraculous preestablished harmony of the Gospels and to create a divinely sanctioned mega-text in which all the individual reports could supplement one another: where two reports agreed, they corroborated one another reciprocally; where one was silent, divine providence had ensured that another would speak. But in the course of the eighteenth century, the same printing technique came increasingly to produce quite a different effect upon its readers: differences between the Gospels began to look like discrepancies, and similarities came to seem less the work of divine wisdom than the product of shared earlier human sources. Already in 1761 Johann August Ernesti had asserted in his Institutio interpretis Novi Testamenti that the primary purpose of the interpreter of the New Testament, as of any other text, was to determine the original intention of its human author. By the end of the eighteenth century, New Testament scholars like Ritschl had begun the hunt for the lost sources of our Gospels – after all, were not their human authors even closer to the holy events they described than any text that had reached us?
The relationship between theology and classics continued to remain often quite close through the nineteenth century. But the fact that the apparent results of source criticism inevitably raised unsettling questions for dogmatic theology meant that it was not until toward the end of the nineteenth century that the historical-critical method could come to dominate biblical studies; and it is only nowadays that most academic scholars, at least, are fully convinced of the historically composite, derivative nature of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. By contrast, Wolf’s transference of the method to the field of ancient pagan literature meant that it could flourish there in a theologically neutral atmosphere: in classical studies Wolf’s treatise was immediately hailed as epoch-making and served as a model for numerous other studies. The Homeric epics were the first and most prestigious test case: their analysis into the smaller, earlier songs that were thought to have been their direct sources occupied many of the finest minds of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German classical scholarship. But in the early decades of the nineteenth century this particular variant of source criticism was applied not only to Homer but to many other problems as well: for example, by Lobeck and K.O. Müller to the analysis of the ancient reports concerning Greek religion and by Friedrich Welcker to the reconstruction of the history of Sappho’s reputation in antiquity and of the lost masterpieces of Athenian tragedy. Toward the middle of the century, Karl Lehrs programmatically adopted and refined Wolf’s method and applied it to the field of ancient scholarship on Greek poetry; its application to other subdisciplines of ancient scholarship, such as Greek philosophy or historiography or Roman copies of Greek sculptures, was only the logical next step.

In these fields, much of the work that was done by the practitioners of Quellenforschung has proven to be of enduring value. But consideration of even the more successful examples of this method suggests not only how it was conceived by its adepts and why it seemed so attractive to generations of philologists – but also why in the end it could not help but achieve results which were rarely more than possible and all too often were simply arbitrary. The wave of popularity of this particular mode of source criticism, which began at the turn of the nineteenth century and started to crest in the second half of that same century, was already subsiding in the first half of the twentieth century. Why?

Quellenforschung was not only a specifically nineteenth-century German variant of the age-old scholarly technique of source criticism; it was also a peculiarly philological variant of a much more widespread development in nineteenth-century culture, the historicization of science. Like historical linguistics, historical geology, evolutionary biology, and a number of other contemporary sciences, Quellenforschung sought to bring order into a disparate and inconsistent mass of data by telling a genealogical narrative about the various steps by which
these data had gradually come about. *Post hoc, propter hoc:* the hypothesized diachronic, causal relations were thought to guarantee scientific validity even in the absence of any conclusive corroboratory evidence for the actual existence of the postulated origins and phases of development. *Quellenforschung* was thus part of a wider cultural movement that sought to translate questions of identity into ones of origin, and we can explain part of its fascination in terms of this larger context. But a seduction more specific to the particular discipline of classical philology is likely also to have been at work. Part of what attracted many classicists to *Quellenforschung* was, I would suggest, precisely what was in fact wrong with *Quellenforschung* – its evident similarity to the genealogical method of the study of the relations of dependence and affiliation among the manuscripts which transmit an ancient author. The similarity is manifest, but in fact it was misleading, and it necessarily limited the validity of any results this method could obtain.

The genealogical method of textual constitution is a modern response to a fundamental problem textual scholars have always faced: what to do when one manuscript contradicts another one in its reading in a certain passage. Already in the Renaissance, some scholars like Politian had recognized that in order to assess the value of a manuscript's readings it is important to try to determine what other manuscript it was copied from (its 'parent') and with which others it could be associated in order to be classified into a group of manuscripts sharing the same derivation ('families').¹⁰ But it was in eighteenth-century New Testament studies that such a recognition first attained not only philological, but also theological urgency, and it is in this field that the implications of such sporadic insights first began to be worked out systematically – thus Johann Albrecht Bengel postulated as early as 1734 what he called a *tabula genealogica* of all the New Testament manuscripts.¹¹ Throughout the early nineteenth century, German scholars gradually developed a philological technique for establishing such relations which climaxed in what was called Lachmann’s method, since it was Karl Lachmann’s edition of Lucretius (1850) which made the method famous by reconstructing, on the basis of the errors and contradictions among the surviving manuscripts of the poet, a highly detailed image of the hypothetical archetype which was their source. But already in the decades preceding that edition much of the conception and terminology was already familiar – for example, Friedrich Ritschl, wrote in his notebooks in 1837 in Italy that his aim was to produce ‘einen förmlichen genealogischen Stammbaum über die Abstammung und Verwandtschaft aller Väter, Söhne, Brüder, Enkel und Neffen in der großen Plautinischen Manuscriptenfamilie.’¹²

Lachmann’s method was widely hailed as the technique which permitted German Classical philology to establish itself as a reliable scientific enterprise;
and there can be little doubt that *Quellenforschung* derived a great deal of its attraction from its parasitic similarity to that technique – indeed, often it was unmistakably, if at times perhaps unconsciously, modeled upon it. Like Lachmann’s method, *Quellenforschung* too provide a set of procedures for resolving contradictions and inconcinnities, this time not between the textual readings of various manuscripts, but instead in the informational content supplied within and among various ancient works, and it inquired not into how manuscripts were copied from and related to one another, but instead into how one text copied its information from another (its source) and was related to other texts. Both methods combined an analytic procedure, attentively examining the extant documents for contradictions or discrepancies that could be used as evidence for different lines of derivation, with a synthetic one, hypothesizing shared common ancestors when comparison between two extant documents revealed similarities that were too marked to be ascribable to mere chance. Both methods attempted to harmonize chronologically a synchronic plurality of logically discrepant propositions, by transposing them into a diachronic genealogical narrative in which a number of individually coherent positions could be projected onto the same number of different speakers operating at different moments along the same temporal axis.

But a moment’s reflection suffices to suggest how implausible the assumptions underlying the applications of the principles of the criticism of textual variants to those of the criticism of sources really are. What author could possibly be as sleepy and as lazy as scholars imagined a late ancient compiler to be? Even if that were possible, why should that mean that he used only one main source rather than five or ten? Why should anyone go to the trouble of transcribing so completely some other man’s published and available work, and then publish it as though it were his own? Whom could he hope to fool? Would not anyone with the intelligence and energy to conceal the evidence for his plagiarism so thoroughly have preferred to deploy his capabilities in a more constructive and creative way? Might not the later author have had different sources available to him at different stages of his production of his text, or differing versions of the same sources? Might he not have used different methods in dealing with different sources, trusting some more, modifying others, correcting here and conflating there? Does it make sense to assume that any extant author must be purely mechanical and receptive, and that only ones that are entirely lost could have been creative and productive?

Such questions could easily be multiplied further, but the point should already be clear: that the only reason for making these presuppositions is not that they have been independently, empirically verified beforehand, but rather that it is only if they are admitted as premises that a certain kind of scholarly
procedure, which is attractive for other reasons, can be undertaken. But, in consequence, the results of *Quellenforschung* are not so much entirely false, nor certainly entirely true, as rather all too often just arbitrary. Until the sands of Egypt or the monastery libraries of Asia Minor finally yield up manuscripts that provide direct testimony of one of the postulated early sources of transmitted late ancient compilations, we shall never be able to test the results of the reconstructions of modern *Quellenforschung* – and this has not happened yet nor would any but the most incautious or wealthy wager that it will happen any time soon.13 This is no doubt one reason why the impetus toward this line of research gradually petered out, but it is not hard to think of other reasons as well. Where it was possible to attain relatively secure results, these were obtained fairly quickly; in most other cases the arbitrariness of the procedure and the fragility of the results became inescapably obvious; the sheer quantity of the texts that best lent themselves to this kind of analysis (largely late ancient prose compilations of earlier scholarship) was finite to begin with and eventually became depleted; the interests of many philologists shifted away from causal explanations of diachronic processes toward literary interpretations of synchronic structures; the effect of *Quellenforschung* was all too often to make the texts we actually possess seem not more interesting than we had thought beforehand, but much less interesting; and a wider skepticism set in, particularly after the nineteenth century, concerning the ultimate value of genealogical explanation as a whole, in this as in other fields.

In the end, what is perhaps most surprising is that *Quellenforschung* lasted as long as it did.14 Its survival was assisted by a combination of inertia, corporate solidarity, methodological naïveté, a concentration upon individual results rather than upon general premises, and the seductive paradigm of Lachmann’s method. Whatever results it obtained, its adherence to a set of unquestioned assumptions about how ancient scholars might have worked impeded for a long time detailed and pragmatic research into a much more important and interesting question: how ancient scholars actually did work, and, more generally, how the cultures of authors and readers have differed from period to period in history and from place to place in the world. That the presuppositions of *Quellenforschung* do not bear close examination and that its results were all too often possible but arbitrary certainly does not mean that everything it produced can simply be rejected as false. We all depend upon the results of *Quellenforschung* and make use of them in our own work, with greater or lesser degree of anxiety. I myself am currently preparing a new edition of the early Greek philosophers; and not a day goes by in which I do not employ the results and the techniques of *Quellenforschung*. Unfortunately, even if much of the work this method produced is likely to have been quite correct, we shall almost certainly never be in a position to tell just which
parts, or why. Hence scholars today have little choice but to continue to make use of the Quellenforschung of their predecessors – but with caution and doubt, and with the painful awareness that they are building not upon solid rock, but upon a swamp.

Notes

1. This paper represents a shorter and provisional version of a longer article to appear in its definitive form under the title ‘The Rise and Fall of Quellenforschung’ in a forthcoming festschrift.


3. The full history of the development of these conventions seems not yet to have been written. It would certainly cast an interesting light upon fundamental issues of identity, authority, and textuality, as well as upon the development of the concepts of copyright and legal ownership of intellectual products.


7. Spinoza, Tractatus theologico-politicus c. X §§ 19ff. See Kraus, Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung, 63.


9. Yet even here uncertainties can arise. Are the relative datings of the two texts secure? Can we be certain that the one text was not copied from the other one? Might the passage have been introduced from the one text into the other during the course of the latter’s transmission? What is the exact length beyond which textual coincidence cannot reasonably be ascribed to chance?


11. J.A. Bengel, Apparatus criticus ad Novum Testamentum, ed. 2 (Tübingen, 1763), 18 (first published as an appendix to the text of the Novum Testamentum Graecum [Tübingen 1734]). Cf. Timpanaro, La genesi del metodo del Lachmann, 24-25.
In the case of manuscript transmission, it has sometimes been thought that later papyri discoveries might definitively confirm or refute Lachmannian reconstructions of the archetype of surviving manuscripts, or conjectural emendations. But this is mistaken. In fact what papyri supply is nothing more than ancient, usually late ancient variants, witnesses to one of the ancient streams of transmission rather than the true original form of the text. They do not decide the question but offer further evidence that can strengthen or weaken hypotheses arrived at independently.

Here the contrast with the situation in textual criticism is instructive. Lachmann’s method has survived despite the doubts expressed about it from various quarters, and it flourishes in our own day, usually formalized and often computerized, among scholars who sometimes describe themselves as Neo-Lachmannians. Evidently, whatever its problems, the model was less problematic than the imitation.