

Binary Opposition in Ancient Egyptian Mythology: A Feminist Historiographical Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores how gender is represented in Ancient Egyptian mythology through the concept of binary opposition and a feminist historiographical perspective. It employs a qualitative research design using textual and historiographical approaches. The primary data consist of selected Ancient Egyptian mythological narratives involving gods and goddesses. These texts are analyzed interpretatively through Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of binary opposition and Joan Wallach Scott's feminist historiographical framework. Within Ancient Egyptian civilization, mythology functioned not only as a religious system but also as a symbolic space in which social values and structures were expressed. The analysis identifies recurring oppositional patterns between masculine and feminine divine figures. Masculine figures tend to be associated with authority, control, and power, whereas feminine figures are more often connected with nurturing, protection, and relational roles. These distinctions indicate a hierarchical pattern in which masculine attributes are positioned as more dominant. From Scott's perspective, such representations can be understood as part of a broader construction of gender that reflects patriarchal tendencies within mythological narratives. Although some variations and ambiguities are present, the dominant pattern places male figures in more authoritative positions, while female figures are frequently defined in relation to them. Therefore, the study challenges the assumption that women in Ancient Egyptian society experienced full equality, particularly when examined through symbolic and narrative structures.

Keywords: Binary Opposition, Egyptian Mythology, Gender Representation, Feminist Historiographical, Structuralism

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Egyptian civilization continues to attract scholarly attention due to its rich cultural heritage and complex system of beliefs. The grandeur of the pyramids, the enduring fascination with figures such as Cleopatra, and narratives surrounding mummies, hidden treasures, and advanced knowledge have contributed to the lasting allure of this civilization (Setiawati et al., 2023). These elements, often romanticized in both academic and popular discourse, position Ancient Egypt as a civilization that appears both mysterious and remarkably sophisticated. However, beyond these widely circulated representations lies a deeper and more structured system of meaning, particularly embedded within its mythology. One of the most defining aspects of Ancient Egyptian belief is its strong conviction in the afterlife. The people of this civilization believed that life did not end with death, but instead continued in another realm, where the soul would undergo judgment by divine entities. Gods and goddesses were understood to hold authority over this process, determining whether an individual was worthy of entering eternal life (Pérez, 2015). Importantly, these divine figures were not perceived merely as symbolic constructs, but as real and active presences that could influence both spiritual and worldly affairs (Van Blerk, 2018). As such, mythology in Ancient Egypt functioned not only as a religious framework, but also as a system through which individuals interpreted existence, morality, and social order.

In broader theoretical terms, mythology can be understood as a cultural system that encodes values, norms, and power relations in symbolic form. It often serves as a medium through which societies articulate their understanding of the world, while simultaneously reinforcing structures of meaning (Naurzbayeva & Saikeneva, 2023). Within this framework, the

concept of binary opposition becomes especially relevant. Introduced within structuralist thought by Claude Lévi-Strauss, binary opposition refers to the way meaning is constructed through contrasting pairs, such as life/death, order/chaos, and male/female. These oppositions are not neutral; rather, they frequently reflect hierarchical relationships in which one element is privileged over the other (Aimukhambet et al., 2017). When applied to mythology, binary opposition allows for a deeper examination of how narratives are structured and how power relations are embedded within them. In the context of Ancient Egyptian mythology, the representation of gods and goddesses provides a particularly rich site for such analysis. Divine figures are often depicted with distinct roles, attributes, and symbolic meanings, which may implicitly reflect societal expectations and norms. For instance, the association of certain deities with authority, creation, or order, in contrast to others linked with chaos, emotion, or subordination, may reveal underlying patterns of gendered representation. These patterns, while presented in sacred narratives, may correspond to broader social realities experienced by individuals within that civilization.

Previous studies tend to place too much emphasis on Ancient Egyptian mythology through the lens of women's roles in society at the time. He (2023), for instance, explains that the goddess Maat who represents justice, balance, and order can be seen as reflecting the high status of women in Ancient Egypt. The reverence for Maat suggests that women were viewed as noble figures, capable of embodying divine qualities and taking on significant social responsibilities. Similarly, Bondarenko (2022) points out that goddesses such as Isis and Hathor symbolize women's rights and roles in that era. He illustrates this through the example of a queen who was believed to possess divine attributes, allowing her to hold religious, political, and social authority. Monges (1993) also highlights figures like Nut and Auset, arguing that their narratives reveal the important roles women played in society. From this perspective, he concludes that Ancient Egyptian mythology reflects a culture in which women could stand on equal footing with men, particularly in matters of governance and spirituality. That said, these studies fall short in one important aspect: they rarely compare these representations with the roles assigned to male deities. As a result, their conclusions about women's well-being in that period can feel somewhat premature.

This study adopts a feminist historiographical perspective to examine these dynamics more critically. Feminist historiography seeks to question dominant historical narratives, particularly those that overlook or simplify the experiences of women. In the case of Ancient Egypt, the civilization is often portrayed as relatively progressive in terms of women's status, especially when compared to other ancient societies. Women in Ancient Egypt could, in certain contexts, own property, initiate divorce, and even attain positions of political power (Khalil et al., 2017). However, such representations risk creating a generalized image of equality that may not accurately reflect the lived experiences of all women. Indeed, while it cannot be denied that some women achieved recognition and authority comparable to men, these cases were not universally representative. Social hierarchies, cultural expectations, and structural limitations likely continued to shape the roles and opportunities available to women in more subtle ways. Therefore, it becomes important to question whether the apparent balance in mythological representations truly corresponds to social equality, or whether it masks deeper forms of inequality.

Recent studies further demonstrate that the status of women in Ancient Egypt was characterized by both recognition and structural limitation. El-Hajrasi (2021), through an examination of artistic representations of Egyptian goddesses, argues that female divine figures occupied highly respected symbolic positions and were associated with protection, health, fertility, stability, and the journey to the afterlife. From a legal perspective, VerSteeg (2023) shows that Ancient Egyptian women possessed relatively extensive rights, including the ability to own and transfer property, enter into contracts, inherit wealth, testify in court, and participate

in certain judicial functions. Nevertheless, Mahmud (2021) reveals that these legal and symbolic privileges did not eliminate gender inequality, as education, administrative authority, and public positions remained predominantly controlled by men. Taken together, these studies indicate a complex relationship between symbolic reverence, legal agency, and actual social power. However, they primarily examine women through artistic, legal, and social perspectives without systematically comparing the attributes, functions, and authority assigned to male and female deities through the combined frameworks of binary opposition and feminist historiography. This limitation provides a specific foundation for the present study.

Despite the richness of Ancient Egyptian mythology and the growing body of research surrounding it, limited attention has been given to examining these narratives through the combined lens of binary opposition and feminist historiography. Most studies tend to focus either on the symbolic meaning of mythological figures or on the historical roles of women, without fully integrating these perspectives. This gap highlights the need for a more interdisciplinary approach that connects symbolic representation with historical reality. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the presence of binary oppositions within the figures of gods and goddesses in Ancient Egyptian mythology, and to explore how these oppositions may reflect underlying gendered inequalities. By doing so, it seeks not only to contribute to the understanding of myth as a cultural system, but also to critically reassess the assumption that Ancient Egyptian society was characterized by complete equality between men and women. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that inequality has been a persistent feature in human history (Bennett, 1989), and that even civilizations often perceived as advanced or egalitarian must be examined with a critical and subtle perspective.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design with a textual and historiographical approach. The primary data consist of selected Ancient Egyptian mythological narratives, particularly those involving the representation of gods and goddesses. These texts are analyzed as cultural artifacts that reflect symbolic structures as well as social values embedded within society. The analysis is conducted using the framework of binary opposition as proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. According to Lévi-Strauss (1963), myths are not merely fictional or sacred narratives but systems of thought that reveal the underlying structures of the human mind. Rather than focusing solely on the chronological sequence of mythological events, structural analysis seeks to identify the relationships between recurring elements that collectively produce meaning. Lévi-Strauss argues that these relationships are organized through binary oppositions, in which contrasting concepts function interdependently to explain how societies classify and interpret reality. Binary pairs such as male/female, power/subordination, order/chaos, life/death, and nature/culture are therefore understood not simply as literary devices but as symbolic structures that express shared cultural values and social organization. In the context of Ancient Egyptian mythology, this framework enables the identification of recurring symbolic patterns that shape the representation of gods and goddesses while revealing broader assumptions regarding gender roles, authority, and social hierarchy.

These oppositions are then interpreted through a feminist historiographical lens to examine how such symbolic structures may reflect or reinforce gendered inequalities. This study particularly draws on Joan Wallach Scott's concept of gender as a useful category of historical analysis. Scott (1986) argues that gender is not merely a biological distinction but a socially and historically constructed category through which power relations are organized and maintained. From this perspective, historical narratives and cultural texts, including myths, should not be regarded as neutral representations of the past but as discourses that construct and legitimize

understandings of masculinity and femininity. Applying Scott's feminist historiographical approach allows this study to examine how the binary oppositions identified in Ancient Egyptian mythology may reproduce, justify, or challenge gender hierarchies within the broader historical and cultural context of Ancient Egypt.

Furthermore, this study adopts an interpretative analytical method, focusing on uncovering implicit meanings rather than explicit narratives. By connecting mythological representations with historical contexts, this research aims to bridge the gap between symbolic analysis and the lived realities of women in Ancient Egyptian society. The integration of Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis and Scott's feminist historiographical perspective provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how mythological narratives both reflect cultural values and participate in the historical construction of gender, authority, and social order.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Ancient Egyptian society appears to have operated without rigid boundaries between the human, natural, and divine realms within its belief system. This observation arises from the understanding that divine power was perceived as present in all aspects of the universe (Allen, 2003). When all things are believed to possess a divine dimension, it becomes easier to construct gods and goddesses as symbolic representations of a particular phenomenon (Göçer, 2022). This process of symbolic formation is distinctive to each society, which explains the emergence of figures such as the rabbit-shaped goddess Wenut and the scarab-headed god Kheper, both of whom embody specific meanings within Ancient Egyptian culture (Bunson, 2002: 148-149). Even abstract concepts such as perception (Sia) or magic (Heka) were personified as divine entities, making them more accessible to human understanding (Hart, 2005: 76; 147-148). From this perspective, mythology can be regarded as a foundational lens through which the thoughts and lived realities of past societies may be understood. Ancient Egyptian mythology, like other mythological systems, also reflects a division of divine figures along lines of masculinity and femininity. This tendency emerges from the limitations of human perception, as individuals are unable to conceptualize entities entirely beyond sensory experience (Barrett, 2000). Because humans consistently observe biological sex in living beings, this framework is carried over into the construction of sacred figures. While the existence of divine beings in the form of gods and goddesses poses a compelling subject, this paper focuses specifically on examining imbalances in symbolic representation and functional roles within Ancient Egyptian mythology.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern of belief can be more deeply understood through a structuralist lens, particularly as articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. He suggests that mythology is not simply a collection of stories, but a structured system of symbols through which humans make sense of the world around them (Lévi-Strauss, 1955). In this context, the absence of clear boundaries between the human, natural, and divine realms in Ancient Egyptian belief does not appear as a coincidence, but rather as part of a broader way of thinking that emphasizes interconnectedness. Reality is not divided into separate domains but instead organized through symbolic associations that allow people to interpret complex experiences into more familiar terms. The transformation of animals, environmental forces, and even abstract ideas into divine figures can therefore be understood as a cognitive strategy, one that translates what is difficult to grasp into forms that feel tangible and relatable within everyday human experience. At the same time, this symbolic system is not neutral. The division of deities into masculine and feminine categories, for instance, may initially seem like a natural extension of human perception.

However, it also reflects deeper cultural assumptions about gender roles and power relations. Rather than merely describing difference, mythology often assigns specific qualities,

domains, and levels of authority to male and female figures, which can mirror the distribution of power within the society itself. In this way, mythological narratives do more than explain the world, they subtly legitimize certain social arrangements. Seen from this perspective, the portrayal of gods and goddesses becomes a meaningful site of analysis. The attributes attached to divine figures such as strength, creation, protection, or nurturing are not randomly distributed, but are often aligned with gendered expectations that exist in the human world. Over time, these repeated patterns can naturalize ideas about masculinity and femininity, making them appear universal or unquestionable. As a result, mythology can function both as a reflection of collective belief and as a mechanism that stabilizes and perpetuates social hierarchies, especially those related to gender.

The following table presents the binary oppositions observed between gods and goddesses (Wilkinson, 2003):

Masculine	Feminine
<i>Amun</i> (a mysterious creator god)	<i>Hathor</i> (Goddess of Music, Humanity)
<i>Banebdjedet</i> (Ram God, Vitality)	<i>Hatmehyt</i> (Goddess of Fish, Water)
<i>Geb</i> (God of Earth)	<i>Nut</i> (Goddess of the Sky)
<i>Shu</i> (God of Dry Air, Light)	<i>Tefnut</i> (Goddess of Moisture, Softness)
<i>Osiris</i> (God of Death, Afterlife)	<i>Taweret</i> (Goddess of Birth, Fertility)

The table above categorizes selected figures from Ancient Egyptian mythology according to their dominant masculine and feminine traits. This classification is based on the binary opposition framework proposed by Lévi-Strauss, as outlined in the earlier section of this subchapter. According to the table, deities associated with predominantly masculine traits include Amun, the creator god and supreme figure of the Ancient Egyptian pantheon; Banebdjedet, the ram god symbolizing virility; Geb, the god of the earth; Shu, the god of air and peace; and Osiris, the god of death and the afterlife. On the other hand, goddesses characterized by predominantly feminine traits include Hathor, one of the most revered deities representing humanity; Hatmehyt, the fish goddess associated with domestic affairs; Nut, the goddess of the sky; Tefnut, the goddess of dew and gentleness; and Taweret, the goddess of fertility and life. Briefly, this classification already suggests a division of roles between gods and goddesses within Ancient Egyptian mythology.

Amun is often portrayed as a distant and unreachable deity, who is primeval deity, the creator, and supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon. Amun is depicted anthropomorphically, often enthroned like a pharaoh with blue colored flesh, governing all other gods and human in his throne (Hart, 2005: 13). While Hathor represents a more immediate and human-centered presence in her mythology. Hathor is universal cow-goddess and representation of the mother of the pharaoh. Her nature is predominantly benign but in rare cases she does have a destructive streak like a mother. Hathor is the supreme goddess of sexual love in Ancient Egypt and have ability to encourage sensual joy by music and dancing (Hart, 2005: 61). As one of the most prominent gods and one of the most revered goddesses, this contrast seems to suggest that masculinity is associated with distance and transcendence, whereas femininity is linked to closeness and care.

A similar pattern appears in the figures of Banebdjedet and Hatmehyt who are married couples. Banebdjedet, manifested as a ram capable of overcoming harsh terrain. He is representation of strong sexual urges and social mobility in man (Hart, 2005: 44-45). Stands in for the contrast is Hatmehyt, who takes the form of a fish confined only to water. She is describing a good wife who stays in house and takes care of it when her husband is at his job (Hart, 2005: 66). This local divine pair conveys a broader idea: men are associated with strength and authority, while women are tied to stability and the domestic sphere.

The pairing of Shu and his sister-wife Tefnut reinforces this pattern more. Shu is God of sunlight and air who represents openness, light, and force. He is being task to raise his arms to support the sky-Goddess Nut whom he holds apart from her consort the earth-God Geb. He is also responsible for bringing Ra and the pharaoh into life every day. In the Underworld Shu is a dangerous god leading a band of torturers and executioners and whose slaughtering-block is a great peril for the deceased, but in the living world he respected for protection and magic against venom also who responsible for oxygen supply (Hart, 2005: 147). His consort, Tefnut is primeval goddess personifying moisture who associated with enclosure and softness. Her role was essential in the world because moisture was understood as a life-giving force that sustained fertility, vegetation, and cosmic order. She is also given tasks to create pure water for the king's feet from her vagina every morning. Her relationship with her father, Ra, was quite hostile to the point that she eventually fled to Nubia and had to be persuaded by Thoth to return (Hart, 2005: 156). This pair arrangement tells an echo of division between nation duty and domestic duty.

In Ancient Egyptian belief, the earth is symbolized by the god Geb, depicted as a male figure with green skin lying beneath the sky, just awaiting to be cultivated. This personification of earth can be read as a reflection of male authority over land and its power to use it. He is the president of the divine tribunal on the kingship and often to be dreaded because 'laughter' of Geb which figuratively evokes the devastating force of an earthquake (Hart, 2005: 59). In contrast, the sky is personified by the goddess Nut, who is human or cow with night sky like skin complete with star and constellation who arching her body over Geb, so they don't touch, often seen as a maternal figure and the source of life. She is one of the personifications of the cosmic elements evolved by the priests of Heliopolis to explain the physical universe. She also associates with night because she swallows her son Ra the sun God every dusk and gives birth to him again every dawn (Hart, 2005: 111). So, the earth is personification of duty and sky is for life and death itself.

A similar opposition can be found in the figures for Osiris and Taweret, two deities that seemingly unrelated but have connection in their function. Osiris is a famous god that represents death and rulership over the afterlife. He is the first human being mummified and the first human king on the earth. After his death, he becomes ruler of the Underworld, because undead can't live in the living world. He also knows to be the god who grants eternal happiness to the deserving dead and the final judge of the dead (Hart, 2005: 114). In other side, Taweret is minor character who help Horus defeat Seth and mostly associated with pregnancy, protection, and fertility. She took image of female hippopotamus with big breast and was the concubine of the god Seth but deserted him for Horus's side in the dispute over the Egyptian throne (Hart, 2005: 154-155). These two deities give impression for death, resurrection, and act of ruling is personified by a man who is one of the main characters in the mythology, in other side concept of childbirth, protection, and act of healing personified by a woman who is a side character that often associated with foreigner.

Discussion

Historical feminism, particularly within the framework proposed by Joan Wallach Scott, provides an important entry point for reading mythology as a gendered historical construction. In this perspective, gender is not treated merely as a biological distinction between men and women, but as a category of analysis through which social roles, cultural meanings, political authority, and institutional power can be examined. Feminist historiography argues that history

is never fully neutral, since it is often written, preserved, and transmitted through dominant perspectives that tend to marginalize women's experiences (Scott, 1986). Therefore, when applied to mythology, this approach allows myths to be read not only as sacred or symbolic narratives, but also as cultural texts that preserve, reproduce, and legitimize certain assumptions about gender, authority, and social order.

Mythology itself can be understood as a manifested concept of a society's collective life. It condenses social values, cultural memory, moral codes, political structures, and historical experiences into narratives that are easier to transmit across generations. In this sense, mythology is not merely a response to strange or unexplainable phenomena. It also functions as an instrument that gives legitimacy to norms, ethical systems, legal principles, social hierarchies, and forms of authority within a particular society (Carter, 2019). The power of mythology rests in its capacity to turn social values into stories, and then to present those stories as natural, sacred, and unquestionable truths. This is why mythology often becomes one of the most effective cultural mechanisms for preserving a society's worldview.

From that sense, formation of mythology is closely related to geographical and natural context. Humans do not imagine their gods and goddesses in isolation from the environment in which they live. Rivers, deserts, mountains, seas, animals, fertility, drought, lightning, and death shape how people understand divine power. The environment provides symbolic material through which society interprets difficult concepts. As Purzycki et al. (2022) suggest, religious ideas and divine figures are often shaped by the interplay of social ecology, lived experience, and culturally mediated spiritual imagination. Thus, mythology should be read as a meeting point between the outer world of nature and the inner world of society. It reflects how a civilization gives meaning to both its physical surroundings and its social structure.

This relationship can be seen clearly in Ancient Egyptian civilization. Egyptian mythology was deeply tied to natural elements, especially the Nile, the desert, animals, fertility, death, and regeneration. Many Egyptian deities were associated with natural forces and were often represented through animal forms familiar to the Egyptian environment. Seth, for example, can be understood as a symbolic response to the destructive power of the desert, storms, violence, and disorder. At the same time, Seth also became associated with foreignness and external threat, showing how mythology could transform geographical danger into political and cultural symbolism (Allon, 2007). By contrast, Ancient Greek mythology constructed divine figures in a more anthropomorphic manner. Greek gods were imagined with human emotions, desires, rivalries, and weaknesses. Figures such as Zeus did not only represent supreme authority but also reflected social assumptions about masculine power and patriarchal privilege. His repeated relationships with multiple women can be read as a symbolic normalization of male dominance, where the behaviour of the god becomes a divine precedent for earthly gender hierarchy (Marylin-Arthur, 1977).

From a theoretical perspective, this connection between mythology, social life, and the natural environment can be clarified through structuralism, especially the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Myth, in this view, is not simply a collection of stories, but a structured system of meaning built through patterns, contrasts, and relationships. Myths help society organize reality by placing opposing ideas into symbolic pairs, such as order and chaos, fertility and barrenness, inside and outside, civilization and wilderness, masculinity and femininity. In the Egyptian case, these oppositions are visible in the symbolic relation between divine figures and social values. Male deities are often associated with kingship, distance, force, movement, and public authority, while female deities are frequently connected with fertility, motherhood, protection, intimacy, and continuity. These symbolic patterns make the world easier to understand, but they also carry ideological consequences because they attach certain forms of power to masculinity and certain forms of care to femininity.

Seen through feminist historiography, these mythological patterns are not neutral. They reveal how gendered power relations were embedded within sacred narratives. The pairing of male and female deities in Ancient Egyptian mythology may appear balanced at first, since goddesses held important symbolic roles in fertility, protection, magic, and motherhood. However, this balance does not necessarily mean social equality. Women could be honoured within ritual, domestic, and symbolic spaces, while men continued to dominate formal political and public authority. This creates a form of gender ambivalence. Women were respected, but often within roles that confirmed their association with the household, reproduction, beauty, and male desire. Artistic representations from Ancient Egypt also reflect this male-cantered gaze, especially in depictions of young women with idealized, slender, and symmetrical bodies, often shown as dancers, attendants, or embodiments of feminine virtue (Shafik, 2020).

Therefore, mythology should not be treated only as a mirror of social life. It also participates in shaping and legitimizing social life. By repeatedly associating masculinity with authority and femininity with care, reproduction, and beauty, mythological narratives make these roles appear natural and inevitable. This does not mean that mythology creates patriarchy by itself, but it helps stabilize patriarchal assumptions by embedding them in sacred and symbolic forms. In the case of Ancient Egypt, the recurring opposition between male authority and female nurturance shows how mythology transforms social relations into divine order. Through this process, gender hierarchy becomes more than a social arrangement. It becomes part of a symbolic universe that is remembered, repeated, and inherited across generations

CONCLUSION

A society requires a concise medium through which its identity can be preserved, transmitted, and safeguarded from the passage of time. Mythology and legend have long fulfilled this function, serving as enduring repositories of a society's way of life, even when revisited long after society itself has disappeared. The narratives of gods and goddesses can be understood as reflections of human experience, as well as condensed representations of how individuals once perceived and responded to the challenges they faced. In this sense, Ancient Egyptian mythology is not merely a collection of fictional tales, but a reflection of a long-vanished human condition. Viewed through the framework of binary opposition, distinctions in the roles attributed to gods and goddesses in Ancient Egyptian mythology become apparent. Figures associated with masculine qualities are generally linked to authority and power, whereas those associated with feminine qualities tend to be connected to protection and nurturing. Although certain anomalies challenge this general pattern, they often reveal underlying rationales that remain consistent with broader constructions of masculinity and femininity. Beyond the division between public and domestic spheres, many goddesses are predominantly portrayed as mothers, wives, or attendants, figures whose significance is defined in relation to others rather than through individual prominence. This pattern indicates that Ancient Egyptian society continued to position men as dominant figures, thereby complicating the widely held assumption that women in Ancient Egypt enjoyed complete equality with men.

Like any scholarly work, this study is not without its limitations. It draws on only a small sample from the thousands of deities in Ancient Egyptian mythology, making it nearly impossible to fully capture the breadth of their roles, especially given the variations and contradictions that emerge across regions and historical periods. In addition, the complexity of Ancient Egyptian mythology often allows a single deity to embody both feminine and masculine traits simultaneously. Further research is therefore needed, particularly studies that engage with a larger and more representative sample, ideally in more extensive formats. Another important direction would be to incorporate contexts beyond mythology to more thoroughly examine

gender inequality in ancient civilizations. This article is intended as an initial step, opening space for future research to approach the past from perspectives that remain relatively underexplored.

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