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978-0-521-18802-9 - Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing,
Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Jan Assmann

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Cultural Memory and Early Civilization

Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination

Now available to an English-speaking audience, this book presents a groundbreaking theoretical analysis of memory, identity, and culture. It investigates how cultures remember, arguing that human memory exists and is communicated in two ways, namely interhuman interaction and in external systems of notation such as writing, which can span generations. Dr. Assmann defines two theoretical concepts of cultural memory, differentiating between the long-term memory of societies, which can span up to 3,000 years, and communicative memory, which is typically restricted to 80–100 years. He applies this theoretical framework to case studies of four specific cultures – including state, international law, religion, and science – illustrating their functional contexts and specific achievements. Ultimately, his research demonstrates that memory is not simply a means of retaining information, but rather a force that can shape cultural identity and allow cultures to respond creatively to both daily challenges and catastrophic changes.

Jan Assmann is Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Heidelberg and an Honorary Professor at the University of Constance. He has published forty-five monographs including, most recently, *The Price of Monotheism* (2009), *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel and the Rise of Monotheism* (2008), *Religion and Cultural Memory* (2006), and *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*.

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JAN ASSMANN

University of Constance, Germany



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Foreword (1992)

For several years now, the subject of memory has been an increasingly important focal point for both Eastern and Western minds. I do not regard this as a matter of chance. On the contrary, it seems to me that we are passing through a transitional period in which at least three factors have combined to bring this theme to the forefront. First there are new electronic media for external storage (a kind of artificial memory), and these have brought about a cultural revolution as significant as the invention of the printing press and, in much earlier times, of writing. Second and connected to this, our entire cultural tradition is now permeated with what George Steiner has called a “post-culture,” in which something now coming to an end – which Niklas Luhmann termed “Old Europe” – nevertheless lives on as the subject of memory and of commentary. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly of all, something else is also coming to an end that affects our very lives as individuals. A generation of contemporary witnesses to some of the most terrible crimes and catastrophes in the whole of human history is now dying out. Generally, a period of forty years is regarded as the threshold beyond which the collective memory begins to fade: the recollections of the living become fewer and fewer, and the various forms of cultural memory become problematical. Even if sometimes the debate over history, memory, and mnemotechnics may appear abstract and academic, it seems to me to nevertheless lie at the very heart of current discourse. Everything points to the fact that the concept of memory constitutes the basis for a new paradigm of

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Foreword (1992)

cultural studies that will shed light on all the interconnected fields of art and literature, politics and sociology, and religion and law. In other words, everything is in flux, and this book itself is in its own way part of that fluidity. It does not claim to offer conclusions, but it sets out to provide directions and connections.

My research, carried out with Aleida Assmann at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin in 1984 and 1985, acted as the starting point for this book. To this institution I therefore offer my special thanks. Without the opportunity to attend the lectures, courses, and discussions on a wide variety of subjects, I would never have dared to venture so far beyond the frontiers of my own special subject, Egyptology. In particular, I would like to thank Christian Meier, Peter Machinist, and Michel Strickman, who were all members of a close-knit circle dedicated to discussing the whole question of comparative cultural studies.

The topic of “cultural memory” arose from a study group engaged on the “Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation,” documented in *Schrift und Gedächtnis* [Writing and Memory] (1983), *Kanon und Zensur* [Canon and Censorship] (1987) and *Weisheit* [Wisdom] (1991), and further developed at various conferences and lectures.¹ This book is the direct result of preparations for and evaluations of the conferences, in particular of the second conference held in January 1985 at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. A first version, written as an introduction – also in Berlin – with Aleida Assmann was aborted after 150 pages because it simply was not possible to cover the subject in any depth within the narrow framework of an introduction. After a few more years of intermittent collaboration, it seemed sensible to continue our research independently because despite the common ground of memory our studies were taking us in different directions. Aleida Assmann has published her own findings under the title *Erinnerungsräume. Funktionen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*² [Arts of Memory. . . .]. Her work focuses on the forms and functions of cultural memory from antiquity through to the (post)modern age,

¹ The series continued with “Text und Kommentar” [Text and Commentary] (1995), “Schleier und Schwelle” [On Secrecy, 3 vols.] (1997–1999), “Einsamkeit” [Solitude] (2000), “Aufmerksamkeiten” [Attention] (2001), “Hieroglyphen” [Hieroglyphs] (2003), “Verwandlungen” [Transformations] (2005), and “Vollkommenheit” [Perfection] (2010).

² Munich 1999, 4th ed. 2009. Engl., *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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and to a certain degree it can be considered a continuation of my present book, which concentrates mainly on the early written cultures of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

A sabbatical in 1987 and 1988 enabled me to work on the case studies discussed in Part II of the book. The first, more theoretical part developed in Part I grew from my preparations, together with Tonio Hölscher, for the lecture series on “Kultur und Gedächtnis” (1986 and 1988), “Kultur und Konflikt” (1988 and 1990), and “Revolution und Mythos” (1990), in collaboration with Dietrich Harth, and the conferences on “Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument” (1987 and 1991), and “Mnemosyne” (1989 and 1991), in collaboration with Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth. I am indebted to all of these colleagues for their endlessly inspiring supply of ideas. A further, most welcome opportunity to discuss the central themes was provided by lectures at the SFB Freiburg on “Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit” [The Oral and the Written], at the Stuttgart Zentrum für Kulturtheorie, at the Freiburg Graduiertenkolleg on “Vergangenheitsbezug antiker Gegenwart” [Past Reference in Classical Presents], and at the Essen Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut – most of these delivered jointly by myself and Aleida Assmann. Finally, my thanks go to E. P. Wieckenberg, without whose indefatigable encouragement my tentative probings would never have grown into a book.

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Foreword (2010)

Twenty-five years ago when Aleida Assmann and I discovered “Cultural Memory” as a topic for a common book project, we embarked on what was then a small river of discourse. Today, the river has grown into a sea. Cultural memory has become a central concern, not only for archaeology and comparative literature, the two disciplines in the context of which we started, but also within all branches of cultural studies as well as history, arts, and even politics. However, the very fact that we began our research at such an early stage when the foundations of this field had still to be set down may have saved our books from becoming soon outdated by being just part of a passing fashion. There is very little that I found necessary to change for the English edition except for updating the bibliography. The field has since evolved in many directions, but the theoretical foundations proved stable as did the ancient world with which the case studies are concerned.

For an Egyptologist, cultural memory is a likely concept to study, especially for two reasons. First, Egypt was reputed, in antiquity, to be the civilization with the longest memory whose monuments and annals stretched back into time immemorial. The past stood visibly and constantly before Egypt as a model to follow, and the Egyptians made great efforts not to let the monuments of their past fall into ruin and oblivion. Is this a special case? Or, is it a typical form of a culture or society to deal with its past? Second, do we think of Ancient Egypt as part of our own past or rather as a foreign, exotic world? Is it a matter of memory or of (re)discovery? And what is the difference? What is

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the nature of this mysterious shadow-line that separates remembered from discovered past, for example, the Homeric epics or the biblical psalms from the Pyramid Texts?

Completely different were the questions about the past that started to occupy the public debates in Germany during the years from 1985 to 1990, when we started to work on our common project. They concerned the recent past and its importance for the political (re)invention both of Germany after the union with the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and of Europe aspiring to ever closer forms of political union. The “past” and “identity” were the two focal points around which we tried to build our concept of cultural memory. My task was to deal with the ancient world whereas Aleida’s was to pursue the topic up to modernity and postmodernism. However, due to external reasons, the work that was planned as a common enterprise was published separately at seven years distance. It is only now, in its English version and at its new home with Cambridge University Press, that our original concept is realized and the two parts reunite, not between two covers but as a pair belonging together and complementing each other.

We are very grateful that this has become possible, first of all to Werner Kelber (Rice University) who insisted on English editions of the works and did not give up until he found a publisher; then, to Beatrice Rehl who charged herself so efficiently with getting this project into the program of Cambridge University Press, and to Emily Spangler, Brigitte Coulton, and Ginger Boyce who with great care saw the manuscript through its various stages of production. David Henry Wilson did an admirable job in translating my at times rather heavy German text into his fluent and elegant English prose. Linda Shortt attended with indefatigable care to finding and verifying existing English translations for the many quotes and checking the exact terminological correspondents. The Constance Cluster of Excellence “Cultural Foundations of Integration” and the Athenaeum Stiftung Dietrich Goetze supported the publication with their generous funding.

Constance, August 2010, Jan Assmann