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0521544807 - Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture

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Excerpt

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## CHAPTER

## I

*Historia/memoria*

## “optanda erat oblivio”

The emperor Tiberius was once approached by a man who addressed to him a question beginning with the word *meministi* – “do you remember ...?” (Sen. *Ben.* 5.25.2). Scarcely had he uttered that one word when the emperor brusquely interrupted, *non memini ... quid fuerim*, “I do not remember what I was.” Tiberius was merely feigning a memory lapse; he doubtless remembered perfectly well what the man was inquiring about – evidently, a previous encounter between the two – but chose to consign it to oblivion. As Seneca puts it, *optanda erat oblivio* (ibid.). Loosely rendered, “it was the emperor’s wish to forget.”<sup>1</sup>

If, to borrow Millar’s succinct definition, the emperor was what the emperor did, he was equally what he remembered.<sup>2</sup> As this small episode

<sup>1</sup> *Ti. Caesar inter initia dicenti cuidam: “meministi” – antequam plures notas familiaritatis veteris proferret: “non memini,” inquit, “quid fuerim.” ad hoc quidni non esset repetendum beneficium? optanda erat oblivio; aversabatur omnium amicorum et aequalium notitiam et illam solam praesentem fortunam suam adspici, illam solam cogitari ac narrari volebat. inquisitorem habebat veterem amicum!* “When someone started to say, ‘Do you remember ...?’, Tiberius interrupted before he could present more evidence of old acquaintance: ‘I do not remember what I was.’ Why should this man not have sought a reciprocal benefit? It was the emperor’s wish to forget; he was renouncing his relationship with all his friends and companions, wishing only that his current good fortune be considered, that only this should be pondered and talked about. He looked upon an old acquaintance as an investigator!” On the passage, Roller (2001a), 208–9.

<sup>2</sup> Millar (1977), xi. For the latter notion (generally construed), Roth (1994).

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illustrates, however, his memory could be entirely selective, with decisions large and small hinging on what the emperor chose to remember ... and forget. Indeed, memory lay at the very heart of power under the Principate;<sup>3</sup> the phenomenon of *damnatio memoriae* – the (usually) posthumous ‘erasing’ of someone’s memory by having all references to their names removed from inscriptions, portraits defaced, and the like – provides one familiar illustration of how such control might be exerted and, as importantly, why it needed to be exerted.<sup>4</sup> Memories, Romans knew, can be dangerous. For that reason the ability to control and even suppress memory became a crucial component of political authority. Jacques Le Goff’s observation applies especially to the Roman aristocracy: “[t]o make themselves the master of memory and forgetfulness is one of the great preoccupations of the classes, groups, and individuals who have dominated ... historical societies.”<sup>5</sup> Such an attitude capitalizes on the fact that for members of most societies remembering the past is both a social and political imperative.<sup>6</sup> Romans attached a heightened importance to memory, which manifests itself in almost every aspect of their existence, from celebrations of the dead to oratory to law, suffusing and animating their art, their buildings, and their literature. For Romans the past wholly defined the present, and to forget – to disconnect with – the past, at either the level of the individual or of the state, risked the loss of identity and even extinction.<sup>7</sup> Hence the danger – and sometimes the appeal – of oblivion.

<sup>3</sup> Le Goff (1992), 68, 98–100 (citing Veyne). For the link between power and memory see further Terdiman (1993), 19–20.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the term and the practice, Flower (1998), Hedrick (2000), 89–94; Varner (2001) provides a very useful case study. The classic study, since much questioned, remains Vittinghoff (1936). See also Le Goff (1992), 67–8.

<sup>5</sup> Le Goff (1992), 54; cf. Connerton (1989), 1; Hampl (1985), 208–9; Sturken (1997); 7–8; Alcock (1994a), 249.

<sup>6</sup> In our era this has become a global concern, as evidenced by UNESCO’s “Memory of the World” project ([http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/en/index\\_mdm.html](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/mdm/en/index_mdm.html)). Cf. the American Memory project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html>).

<sup>7</sup> As Carruthers (1990), 13 puts it: “A person without a memory ... would be a person without moral character and, in a basic sense, without humanity. *Memoria* refers not to how something is communicated, but to what happens once one has received it, to the interactive process of familiarizing – or textualizing – which occurs between oneself and others’ words in memory.” Cf. Roth (1995), 16; Gillis (1994), 3–5, on

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The threatened demise of the Republic was a constant concern for Cicero, who was acutely aware that the political system to which he had devoted his life was living on borrowed time. As he put it, *his* Republic was a faded picture of its former self (*picturam . . . evanescentem vetustate*) whose moral fiber had become buried in oblivion (*oblivione obsoletos*, *Rep.* 5.1.2). Cicero's anxiety over the loss of memory, evident here and elsewhere and a precursor to the situation under the early Empire, underscores just how grave this threat had become in the second half of the first century BC, when the very political identity of the *res publica* was at stake.<sup>8</sup>

This identity was fundamentally aristocratic in nature; although the Roman political system featured some democratic elements (the tribunate being the most important) and the *populus* was not without influence, real power lay in the Senate, membership in which was determined by both wealth and lineage, and its accompanying magistracies.<sup>9</sup> In design and function, the Republic was deliberately anti-monarchical. While it may be historically practical and neat to mark the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate with the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC or the battle of Actium in 31 BC, it took well over a century for the idea and the ideals of the Republic to be purged from the Roman imagination and memory (though they would never be purged entirely). The degree to which the early Principate may have perpetuated certain aspects of the Republic's political character has often come under discussion, and yet the Republic's demise is to be measured not merely in terms of political change, but of gradual shifts in individual and collective psychology as

memory and identity; Isid. *Orig.* 11.1.13 (people without memory are *amentes*, “mindless”). On the importance of memory in Roman culture, Farrell (1997); and Small and Tatum (1995), essentially a survey of recent work on memory and how it may be applied to the study of antiquity, containing much that is useful about the importance of memory in the classical period.

<sup>8</sup> For historical details and analysis of the crisis of the late Republic, Meier (1997<sup>3</sup>), esp. 207–300. On Cicero's growing concern for the threat to Roman memory, Gowing (2000); and with respect to the *De re publica* specifically, Zetzel (1994), 31–2. Cf., e.g., *de Orat.* 1.38.

<sup>9</sup> On the aristocratic nature of the Republic (a view complicated, to be sure, by Millar [1998]), Hölkeskamp (2000), 205, 222–3 (now more fully explored in Hölkeskamp [2004]), and the work cited therein; Syme (1939), 10–27; Rowe (2002), 42–3.

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well.<sup>10</sup> The Republic and its memory came to be used and exploited by many different groups of people: not only by those who, like the early emperors, found it expedient to perpetuate the myth of a *res publica restituta*, a “restored Republic,” but also by those who used it to discredit such people or at least underscore their hypocrisy; by those with a nostalgia for the Republic; and by those who sought to sow dissent. However the Republic and its history might be deployed, a deep-seated reverence for the past (or “Republicanism,” the term often used to describe this trend) sat awkwardly with the need, at some level and in some quarters, to forget that past or at least certain aspects of it.<sup>11</sup>

The term *res publica* warrants some discussion.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that in many contexts this phrase simply refers to “the state.” Yet it is equally clear that *res publica* denoted one thing to Cicero and something quite different to, say, Pliny the Younger. Thus when we find in the *Fasti Praenestini* for January 13, 27 BC, the assertion that the *res publica* had been “restored” (by Augustus) – *res publica restituta* – are we to understand the restoration of the traditional Republic or simply of the state, i.e. “government?” I believe it must be the former. Arguments for the latter – for understanding *res publica* here as meaning little more than “government” – rather reduce the stakes, and seem to be more the product of hindsight than a reflection of a contemporary, early Augustan perspective; such arguments also imply that Augustus was a little less disingenuous about what he had done than seems likely. At this juncture, the *res publica* could be nothing other than the Republic. Surely the truly significant word is *restituta*; the message Augustus sought to convey was that he had *restored* the Republic, not created a new and distinct state. And yet with the passage of time, over the course of the first century, the phrase *res publica* ceased to refer, as it typically must have in the Augustan and perhaps even the Tiberian periods, to what we

<sup>10</sup> On the “continuation” of the Republic, Eder (1990); Sion-Jenkis (2000), 11 (survey of earlier work), 20; Strothmann (2000), 13–14. Sion-Jenkis’ discussion (2000), 19–53, of the relationship between *res publica* and *principatus* as political terms is especially enlightening; cf. Eder (1990), 83–4.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Citroni (2003), x–xi. MacMullen (1966), esp. 13–45, remains the best general exploration of the “Republicanism” of the imperial period.

<sup>12</sup> For full discussion of this and related terms (e.g., *libertas*, *princeps*), see Lind (1986); see also Flower (2004a), 2–3.

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term the “Republic,” coming instead to refer to a different sort of *res publica* – the Principate. Thus, to anticipate a text I adduce in the final chapter, when Septimius Severus erects his triumphal arch in AD 203 *ob rem publicam restitutam*, “on behalf of the restoration of the *res publica*,” it is simply inconceivable that he imagined he had brought back the pre-Augustan Republic.<sup>13</sup>

This goes to the heart of the phenomenon surveyed in this book, the process of remembering the Republic in the early imperial period and the various transitions that memory undergoes. A crucial step in this process lay in starting to conceive of the “Republic” as an entity to be remembered, independent of the current “state,” yet using language that originally drew no such distinction. In much the same way as the traditional language of politics came to acquire new meanings and nuances as time progressed, so too does the established “language” or discourse of Roman culture, at least as manifested in *exempla* and the larger historical tradition, evolve in significant ways from Republic to Principate. Yet for quite some time that language remains the same – literally, as in the case of a word such as *libertas*, and figuratively, as in what a reference to “Cato” might denote.<sup>14</sup> Both become in early imperial culture quintessential *lieux de mémoire*, “places” or focal points where we may glimpse memory being contested and remade. But the tenacity of a term such as *libertas* or an *exemplum* such as Cato points to a striking characteristic of the phenomenon examined here: the recurrent inability of Roman writers to disengage from the pre-imperial past. They repeatedly come back

<sup>13</sup> For the *Fasti Praenestini* for Jan. 13, 27 BC, Ehrenberg and Jones (1955<sup>2</sup>), 45; cf. Suet. *Aug.* 28.1; Appian *BC* 5.132.548, describing Octavian’s intent in 36 BC: τὴν ἐντελῇ πολιτείαν . . . ἀποδώσειν; Augustus himself claims to have “returned control of the state back to the Senate and the Roman people” in 28 BC (*rem publicam ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium transtuli*, *RG* 34). Yet precisely what is meant by *res publica restituta* has been a matter for debate: see, e.g., Gurval (1995), 5 with n. 1 – citing Judge (1974), who argues that in this phrase *res publica* simply means “the state” – contra Zanker (1990), 89, and *passim*. But in these texts the “state” he would be “returning” was by definition the Republic. See Syme (1939), 323–4 and *passim*; Mackie (1986); Galinsky (1996), 42–79; Strothmann (2000) fully explores *restitutio* as one of the conceptual cornerstones of Augustan ideology and propaganda.

<sup>14</sup> As MacMullen (1966), 33, puts it (with particular reference to the shifting meanings of *libertas*), “They still proclaimed the old slogans of their heroes, but the words had changed meaning.”

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to many of the same events and characters, most associated with the late Republic (e.g., Cicero, Cato the Younger, the civil war between Caesar and Pompey), some with earlier periods (e.g., Camillus, Scipio Africanus, or Cato the Elder). The repetitiveness of *topoi* will therefore be apparent; it is in isolating the moments of change in attitude toward and deployment of those *topoi* that we observe shifts in Roman memory.

In the chapters that follow I examine some of the ways the Roman Republic – or to be more precise, several crucial events and characters from the Republican period – were memorialized in post-Augustan Rome, from the reign of Tiberius through that of Trajan (essentially AD 14–117), by which point the Republic for the most part had ceased to serve any serious ideological purpose. I use the term “Republic” chiefly as a chronological as well as cultural marker, to denote the period between the end of the Roman monarchy in 509 BC and the beginning of the Augustan principate in 31 BC; this book is not, in other words, necessarily about institutional politics. In keeping with the aim of books in the series, it does not pretend to be a comprehensive survey of imperial attitudes toward the Republic. Rather, it offers a series of case studies, focusing on certain key texts and monuments in order to formulate a general impression of how the memory of the Republic evolved over time and in particular from one regime to the next.

Thus I focus in Chapter 2 on the Tiberian period (AD 14–37), represented by Valerius Maximus and Velleius Paterculus, the two chief literary lights of a regime that insistently sought to present itself as a seamless continuation of the *res publica restituta* of the Augustan period. I locate the next significant shift in the memory of the Republic in the Neronian period (AD 51–68) and in Chapter 3 argue that this was in fact the era in which any serious hopes of restoring the Republic were laid to rest. I suggest that Lucan’s interest in the memory of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar that destroyed the Republic (an interpretation about which he is in no doubt) lies not in the conflict’s significance as a beneficial moment of transition but as a point of maximal disorder that leads only to further disorder. By contrast, Seneca’s own views of memory and Republican history, as illustrated in his *Epistulae*, supply something of an antidote to Lucan’s “Republicanism” and call into question the very relevance of the Republican past to the imperial (and particularly Neronian) present. Chapter 4 focuses on the Flavian and early Trajanic periods, positing Tacitus’ *Dialogus* as a watershed moment in

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imperial memory of the Republic. Cicero receives special attention here; as one of the last great political and literary figures of the late Republic, he inspires Tacitus' own reflections on the current state of the *res publica*. I examine the apparent tension between this text and Pliny's *Panegyricus* (a specimen of the oratorical expertise the *Dialogus* claims to be dead): delivered in AD 100, perhaps a year or so before the publication of the *Dialogus*, this speech celebrating the accession of Trajan proclaims the return of *libertas* (see p. 25). Yet as Pliny's own words make clear, this is a far cry from the *libertas* so often associated with the Republic.

Roman memory, however, particularly of the Republic, hardly resides in texts alone. By way of epilogue, and in order to exploit the powerful associations of place and memory in Roman thought, Chapter 5 considers aspects of the physical transformation of the city of Rome from Augustus through Trajan, during which period the memory of the Republic, once imprinted on the urban landscape, begins to be gradually erased or simply abandoned. The contrast between the Forum of Augustus (dedicated in 2 BC) and the Forum of Trajan (AD 112) exemplifies the transition from a time when the memory of Republic was highly valued and celebrated to one when, a century later, it was becoming little more than a dim memory. In this initial chapter I lay out the premises on which the subsequent discussions are based, none more important than the connection Romans made between *historia* and *memoria*.

***Historia and memoria***

I approach this exercise in mnemohistory fully aware of the limitations imposed by the evidence. By "mnemohistory" I mean an historical or rather historicizing account of the memory of the Republic in the early imperial period.<sup>15</sup> The memory that interests me is itself historical (rather than strictly social) in nature, the evidence for it primarily literary texts and, to some degree, physical remains. It is, therefore, evidence of a highly selective and particularized kind; and the literary evidence naturally presents its own set of interpretive challenges. Nonetheless, it *does* allow us to document the ways some imperial Romans remembered the Republic over time. From their perspective, given the connection

<sup>15</sup> For the term and its methodology, Assmann (1997), 6–22; Oexle (1995), 30–2.

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between *historia* and *memoria* I discuss below, the texts I will examine certainly may be said to transmit memory.<sup>16</sup>

This evidence is of course bound up in personal and individual memories. Writing under Tiberius (AD 14–37), Velleius Paterculus takes pride in declaring that his great-great-great-grandfather had fought in the Social War of 91 BC (2.16.2, *multum ... atavi mei ... tribuendum memoriae*). Another Tiberian author, Seneca the Elder, insists that his own memory is the source for all the information (much of it historical) and extensive quotations in his *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* (*Con.* 1. *praef.* 2–5). In Tacitus' *Dialogus*, written several decades after Velleius' *History*, Aper comments that the span of time from Cicero's death in 43 BC to his own time (the dramatic date of the dialogue being ca. AD 75) is really only the length of a single lifetime (*Dial.* 17)<sup>17</sup> – a crucial point, for it suggests that oral memory of the transition from Republic to Principate was still operative for several decades after Actium.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we often find references to the Republic entirely personalized: Seneca's veneration of Scipio during a visit to the famous general's villa over two centuries after his death (*Ep.* 86), discussed in Chapter 3, is but one example of the reverence accorded to the houses of Republican icons. These attempts to keep alive a connection to the Republican past in some personal way pepper most of the texts I examine in this book, and serve as a useful reminder that elite imperial Romans rarely talked about the Republic in dispassionate, coldly objective terms. At some level that history is inevitably a personal history.<sup>19</sup> What they have *in common* as memory is what matters. Any attempt to categorize the particular *kind* of memory I seek to uncover therefore seems ultimately unsatisfactory and unhelpful (modern scholars of the subject being generally insistent on distinguishing between various modes of memory).<sup>20</sup> It is at once cultural, historical, collective, individual memory, all driven

<sup>16</sup> For the capacity of texts (literary and otherwise) to transmit memory, Fentress and Wickham (1992), 5–6, 8–11, and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> See Chap. 4 with n. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Le Goff (1992), 98, observes the importance of this: "It is societies whose social memory is primarily oral or which are in the process of establishing a written collective memory that offer us the best chance of understanding this struggle for domination over remembrance and tradition, this manipulation of memory."

<sup>19</sup> Fentress and Wickham (1992), 7.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Holtorf's (2001) chapter on "Cultural Memory."



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by a deep conviction that the Republican past, or certain aspects of it, bears remembering.

What we lack, of course, is the sort of extensive evidence available to someone investigating, say, the memory of the holocaust, one modern event that has generated a multitude of mnemohistories, or the American Civil War.<sup>21</sup> We do not have, that is, eyewitness accounts or interviews, film footage, newspapers, recordings, government documents, etc. – in short, the wide-ranging, detailed evidence that allows the historian to document the development and evolution of memory from a variety of perspectives. What confronts us in examining the evidence from early imperial Rome can only be a slice of Roman cultural and collective memory, and we should not make the mistake of making the part stand for the whole.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, such as it is, the evidence embodies and communicates memory.

The situation in Rome comes into sharper focus when we recognize the explicit connection Romans themselves made between *memoria* and *historia*. It is not without reason that the Oxford Latin Dictionary offers “history” as one definition of *memoria* (OLD s.v. 7). *Romans* would have regarded the historian Velleius Paterculus, the epic poet Lucan, and the epistolographer Pliny as all engaged at some level in preserving and handing down memory when they narrate the past, which they obviously do to greater and lesser degrees. And certainly, as we shall see, the authors themselves saw remembrance as an important if not the central aim of their respective projects. This is a phenomenon that therefore cuts across traditional distinctions of genre in a way that will make some modern students of history and memory uneasy.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the Romans, for example, we would not typically class together as equally

<sup>21</sup> Holocaust memory has been extensively explored in a number of media, e.g., film (most notably Lanzmann’s 1985 *Shoah*), numerous exhibitions and museums (the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for example), and scholarly studies (I would single out, only because of its relevance to my subsequent discussions of the role of monuments, Young [1993]; for other, representative studies, Kenan [2003], LaCapra [1998]). Civil War memory is increasingly the subject of study, e.g., Blight (2001).

<sup>22</sup> Terdiman (1993), 18.

<sup>23</sup> As Sion-Jenkis (2000), 13, observes, no account of the idea of the Republic in the imperial imagination can restrict itself exclusively to the evidence from historiography, even an account as “historical” as hers. Freudenburg (2001), for instance,

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reliable documentations of the Vietnam era Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now* or Boulblil's and Schönberg's 1989 *Miss Saigon* with Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars 1945–1990* (New York 1991), a standard, well-respected historical study of the era. We have devised separate categories to distinguish between such things: "fiction" (or, euphemistically, "historical fiction") and "non-fiction."

Their "historicity" aside, however, I doubt that anyone would dispute the idea that all three have the capacity to create in the mind of the viewer or reader a "surrogate" memory that will have something in common with that of an individual who lived through the Vietnam era or participated in the war; nor do I deny that the opposite may happen, that the memory they create may have little in common with an actual participant's memory.<sup>24</sup> But that is to question whether the memory is "true" or "false", "transmitted" or "lived," not whether it is in fact a memory at all.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of their origins, such memories become part of the individual's experience and understanding of the past, and, to the extent that such memories are shared, part of the culture's "collective memory."

It is this capacity of texts to *create* or establish memory<sup>26</sup> – or, if you prefer, to fictionalize – that renders them somewhat problematic as sources of historical information. But the Roman view of *historia* and *memoria* inevitably leads to a refashioning of the meaning of the past, requiring authors to give it meaning in the present and decide not only *what* to remember but *how* it should be remembered. This is why from one regime to the next the use of Republican history varies significantly.

is a fine example of a genre-specific (Roman satire) study that ably explores "an inherited, 'free-speaking,' old-Republican enterprise that gets remade radically over time precisely because these authors feel and respond to the increasing pressures of totalitarian oversight" ([2001], 4).

<sup>24</sup> For such "created" memories, Burke (1989), 98. Texts are especially capable of this: we might think of the common remark "I remember reading . . .," an idiom that really equates the "reading" of the text with the knowledge acquired from reading, linking both with memory.

<sup>25</sup> It is useful in this respect to recall that in his well-known exposition of memory in Book 10 of the *Confessions*, Augustine posits two types of memories, those that are *experta* ("experienced") and those that are *credita* ("believed" or "received") (*Conf.* 10.14).

<sup>26</sup> Miles (1995), 73–4; Farrell (1997), 375. Thus Toni Morrison (1984), 213, defines memory as "willed creation."