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978-1-107-01260-8 - Remembering the Roman Republic: Culture, Politics, and History
under the Principate

Andrew B. Gallia

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee.

Deuteronomy 32:7

“But how can you stop people remembering things?” cried Winston, again momentarily forgetting the dial. “It is involuntary. It is outside oneself. How can you control memory? You have not controlled mine!”

Nineteen Eighty-Four

As a cognitive process whose biological foundations in the structures and chemistry of the brain neuroscientists have only recently begun to describe, memory has long called on the lens of metaphor for its analysis.¹ One of the most persistent of these metaphors is that presented by Plato in the *Theatetus*, where Socrates compares the human mind to a lump of wax:

δῶρον τοίνυν αὐτὸ φῶμεν εἶναι τῆς τῶν Μουσῶν μητρὸς Μνημοσύνης, καὶ εἰς τοῦτο ὅτι ἂν βουληθῶμεν μνημονεῦσαι ὧν ἂν ἴδωμεν ἢ ἀκούσωμεν ἢ αὐτοὶ ἐννοήσωμεν, ὑπέχοντας αὐτὸ ταῖς αἰσθήσεσι καὶ ἐννοίαις, ἀποτυποῦσθαι, ὥσπερ δακτυλίων σημεῖα ἐνημαιομένους· καὶ ὁ μὲν ἂν ἐκμαγῆ, μνημονεύειν τε καὶ ἐπίστασθαι ἕως ἂν ἐνῆ τὸ εἶδωλον αὐτοῦ· ὁ δ' ἂν ἐξαλειφθῆ ἢ μὴ οἶόν τε γένηται ἐκμαγῆναι, ἐπιλελῆσθαι τε καὶ μὴ ἐπίστασθαι.

Let us say, then, that this [wax] is the gift of Mnemosyne (Memory), the mother of the Muses, and that whenever we wish to remember anything we see or hear or think of ourselves, we hold it under our perceptions and thoughts and imprint them upon it, just as we make marks with seal rings, and whatever is imprinted we remember and know as long as its image lasts,

¹ Kandel (2006), Rose (1992: 61–99), Assmann (1999: 149–78). Watkins (1990) offers a critique of the quest for the biological “engram” as insufficient for understanding the complexity of memory.

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but whatever is rubbed out or cannot be imprinted we forget and do not know. (Pl. *Tht.* 191d-e)

Like all metaphors, Plato's framework for conceptualizing memory as a series of impressions in wax has both advantages and limitations. Most importantly, reference to an inscribed image accounts for the persistence that memory gives to fleeting thoughts and experiences. Additionally, the malleability of wax as the medium of these representations provides an explanation for the problem of forgetting and the selective nature of memory, because it allows for some items to be erased while others might not be recorded in the first place.

Plato's account is less successful, however, at explaining why certain sensory stimuli tend to prompt the recall of particular memories. Nor does it do anything to elucidate the process by which erroneous or false memories are produced. As these examples demonstrate, the critical shortcoming of any transcript model of memory (one that centers on inscriptions in wax, the arrangement of magnetized particles in a hard drive, or even the structure of neurons in the brain) lies in its failure to take into consideration the extent to which remembering depends not only on the storage of information, but on its recall as well.² As anyone who has had to relearn a once-familiar subject can attest, memories do not simply wait in an archive until they are needed. If not repeatedly reactivated by frequent recollection, they begin to fade almost as soon as they are formed.³

The importance of this distinction between memory as the storage of a series of static representations and remembering as an ongoing process of recall can be seen in Sallust's discussion of the peculiarly Roman practice of displaying wax masks of ancestors (*imagines maiorum*) in the main rooms of noble households:⁴

nam saepe ego audivi Q. Maximum, P. Scipionem, <alios>praeterea civitatis nostrae praeclaros viros solitos ita dicere, quom maiorum imagines intuerentur, vehementissime sibi animum ad virtutem adcendi. scilicet non ceram illam neque figuram tantam vim in sese habere, sed memoria rerum gestarum eam flammam egregiis viris in pectore crescere neque prius sedari quam virtus eorum famam atque gloriam adaequaverit

² Fentress and Wickham (1992: 25), Assmann (1988: 13), Assmann (1999: 185). See also Schacter (2001: 88–160), Proust (1982: 50). For discussion of Plato's theory in relation to ancient practice of artificial memory, see Small (1997).

³ Changeux and Ricoeur (2000: 138–9). This principle was first demonstrated in the pioneering study of Ebbinghaus (1913).

⁴ See Flower (1996: 32–59, 195–202).

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I have often heard that Quintus [Fabius] Maximus, Publius Scipio, and other illustrious men of our state used to say that when they looked upon their ancestors' portrait masks, these violently inflamed their spirits with a love for virtue. Certainly it was not that *the wax figure itself* had such power over them, but that the *memory of their deeds* fans a flame in the hearts of prominent men that does not subside until their own virtue has attained equal reputation and glory. (Sall. *Iug.* 4.5)

A fixed representation is insufficient on its own to produce the powerful response that these famous Romans experienced when they looked at the *imagines* of their ancestors. In Sallust's formulation, the memory that achieves this outcome is distinct from the visual signs that set it in motion.

In contrast to Plato, Sallust does not offer an explanation of the inner psychological mechanisms that produce particular memories. Notably, the physical traces to which he refers are real objects that exist in space, where anyone can see them and be prompted to remember. Moving from the internal record of Plato's wax seals to the wax *imagines* in the *atria* of noble households forces us to consider the broader framework within which memory functions. The memories that Sallust describes are not confined to the discrete and idiosyncratic mental processes of the individual; they are situated instead within their broader social and cultural context. Memory operates as it does for a Fabius or a Scipio because of a specific commemorative practice (the display of *imagines*) that helped to determine their position, and that of their families, within Roman society at large.⁵

Sallust's shift of emphasis from the psychological to the social points to the importance of what the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs termed "collective memory."⁶ Like Sallust, Halbwachs recognized that the ways in which memory functions for the individual are shaped by external social realities. Halbwachs' formulation is useful, but this approach to memory also comes with caveats. First, although it is evident that social realities play an important role in determining how information about the past is organized and transmitted within cultures, it can be misleading to speak of a cognitive process such as memory as if it belongs to a group rather than to individuals.⁷ When we refer to "collective" – or better, "social" – "memory," it is important to bear in mind that we are speaking figuratively, redeploying the metaphors used to understand the memory of the individual to frame a discussion around a particular set of discursive

⁵ Cf. Plb. 6.54.2–3. Flower (1996), Walter (2004: 84–130), Wallace-Hadrill (2008: 218–25).

⁶ Halbwachs (1925, esp. 273–96), (1950: 51–87).

⁷ Connerton (1989: 38), Margalit (2002: 48–69), also Gedi and Elam (1996). Other critiques: Confino (1997), Klein (2000).

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practices common to the members of a group, which can only influence, but not establish, the distinct recollections of that membership.⁸

Halbwachs' concept of "collective memory" has also been criticized because of his tendency to position memory as a way of understanding the past that is fundamentally incompatible with the critical epistemology of history.⁹ Postmodern critiques of historical positivism have done much to erode the theoretical coherence of this distinction, but that is not really what concerns us here. Insofar as it can be distinguished from later "scientific" traditions, ancient historiography clearly had a part to play in the operation of social memory – certainly Sallust did not regard his role as a historian as disconnected from the processes of memory he attributes to the Fabii and Scipiones.¹⁰ From this perspective, the real problem with Halbwachs' formulation is not how he defines historiography, but rather how the distinction he draws between history and memory is embedded within a broader discourse about modernity, wherein scientific rationalism is felt to produce a break with earlier, more "authentic" traditions, here identified with "memory."¹¹ Pierre Nora draws on this line of thinking when he laments the corrosive impact that historical consciousness has had on traditional forms of social memory and suggests that modern societies have created artificial "sites of memory" to counteract the sense of alienation from the past that history creates.¹² Although the ideas of rupture and loss will be important to the discussion that follows, this nostalgia for a more cohesive sense of memory in an era defined by revolutionary change is, by definition, historically specific and not easily transferable to other cultures or time periods. To be sure, the Romans also worried about the implications of a breakdown in the social institutions of memory, but they did so on their own terms. Imposing a modernist distinction between "authentic" and "inauthentic" forms of memory can only hinder our investigation.

To account for the fact that socially conditioned memories often extend beyond the immediate personal experience of the individual to include ideas derived from a more distant, historical past, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has introduced the concept of "cultural memory," which he

⁸ On the preferability of the term "social memory," Fentress and Wickham (1992: 7).

⁹ Assmann (1988: 11), Hutton (1988: 316–17), cf. Halbwachs (1950: 35–79).

¹⁰ Castelli (2004: 26–8). See also White (1978), Wiseman (1979: 41–53).

¹¹ Le Goff (1992: 21–50), Kemp (1991: 149–78), cf. Koselleck (2004: 26–42), (2002: 154–69), also Connerton (1989: 13–14), Fentress and Wickham (1992: 144). Frow (1997: 218–24) provides an important critique.

¹² Nora (1989: 12): "These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it." Cf. Yerushalmi (1982: 81–103), Le Goff (1992: 93–9).

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distinguishes from the more informal kinds of “communicative memory” that provided the principal focus of Halbwachs’ analysis.¹³ Insofar as memory can be said to be situated in culture, its traces are there to be found in a wide variety of media. These include ritual, oral traditions, literature, the plastic arts, and the physical organization of space, to name the most prominent aspects of culture through which a person’s recollections of the past may be formed.¹⁴ The nature of cultural memory in a given context will depend on how these various channels of communication operate within a particular society. Like the neurobiologist who maps the cognitive processes associated with different kinds of memory onto the regions of the brain in which they occur, the historian of social memory pursues a project that is fundamentally descriptive. By examining the cultural frameworks within which memories are produced as well as the concepts, narratives, and semantic structures that give memory its shape, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how a given society understood its past.¹⁵

It is impossible to describe how memory operates without also considering its purpose, however. Of the many functions and consequences of remembering, one that stands out as critical for memory’s social implications is its role in establishing a basis for the continuity of personal identity.¹⁶ Without memory, it is impossible to claim credit (or bear responsibility) for one’s past behavior, much less that of one’s ancestors. Who we are, in an epistemological sense, depends on our memory. Applied to the cultural plane, this rule produces a reciprocal relationship, wherein memory is not only conditioned by the individual’s participation in social life, but is also fundamental to the constitution of the very social groups in which he or she takes part. The Roman aristocrats in Sallust’s example were expected to inherit their identities as members of noble families (and to display the characteristics that went with these identities) because they embraced the memory that attached to the wax *imagines* of their ancestors. In practice, of course, the contents of these social identities are rarely fixed in stone – but, then, neither is memory. The cultural channels of remembering thus offer an opportunity for a kind of communal autobiography,

¹³ Assmann (1988: 10–14), (1992: 48–56), Assmann (1999: 13). Cf. Fentress and Wickham (1992: 44–84).

¹⁴ Burke (1989: 100–2), Assmann (1999: 20–2).

¹⁵ See esp. Olick and Robbins (1998). The “historical sociology of mnemonic practices” they propose differs in important regards from the broadly diachronic “mnemohistory” of Assmann (1997a: 6–22). For the importance of semantic structures to the operation of memory, see Fentress and Wickham (1992: 28–44), Bartlett (1932, esp. 247–80). On narrative, Fentress and Wickham (1992: 47–76), Schudson (1995: 355–8).

¹⁶ Changeux and Ricoeur (2000: 138–9), Assmann (2006: 87–93).

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through which individuals can assert their connection to a particular group or class, while the members of those groups work together to define some sense of what it means to belong to that collective.¹⁷ As the sense of identity that attaches to a social group begins to change over time, we can be confident that the character of the social memory at work within that group will change as well.

Once we begin to speak of memory as operating in the social realm, we must inevitably consider its political dynamics.¹⁸ This aspect of remembering is given special prominence in the history of the Roman Principate, which provides the context for the memories that are the focus of the present study. It should come as no surprise that the Roman emperors actively promoted memories that served their own interests and repressed forms of commemoration that they regarded as a threat to their power. The latter imperative can be seen in the restrictions that were occasionally imposed on the commemoration of individuals, especially the display of the wax *imagines* that Sallust regarded as an essential element in the social operation of elite Roman memory. Early in the reign of Tiberius, the senate imposed sanctions on the display of the *imago* of Cn. Calpurnius Piso as partial punishment for his crimes against the Imperial house. This limitation of a family's ability to commemorate its own members represented a powerful, and potentially ominous, method of social control.¹⁹ Over time, a paradigm emerged whereby emperors who were seen as vicious were also represented as disruptive of the workings of social memory. The biographer Suetonius presents Caligula's wanton destruction of the statues of illustrious men in the Campus Martius as evidence of that emperor's cruelty, and Nero was said to have banished a descendent of Cassius Longinus, the assassin of Julius Caesar, for displaying the *imago* of his ancestor with the *titulus* "leader of the party."²⁰

On the basis of this evidence, it is tempting to see the operation of memory during the Principate as rigidly controlled by omnipotent emperors who cynically manipulated all discourse about the past to serve their interests. Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to describe the situation in such terms. Reformulations of public memory often occur for reasons other than the political self-interest of those in power, and we should

¹⁷ Smith (1999: 208), cf. Bell (2003).

¹⁸ Assmann (1992: 55), (2006: 7), cf. Trouillot (1995: 22–9), Fentress and Wickham (1992: 114–37), Connerton (1989: 7–13).

¹⁹ Eck, Caballos, and Fernández (1996: ll. 75–82). Bodel (1999: 45–51), cf. Flower (1998: 155–87). See also Flower (2006: 115–48), Hedrick (2000: 89–130).

²⁰ Suet. *Calig.* 34.1. Tac. *Ann.* 16.7.2: *duci partium*, Suet. *Ner.* 37.1.

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not overlook these alternative explanations when examining how memories change (or remain unaltered) over time. Because cultural memory, as defined by Assmann, is inscribed in monuments and texts, it often presents the rememberer with certain fixed points that are difficult to tamper with or redefine, however inconvenient they may be.²¹ If anything, Cassius' continued reverence for his ancestor's portrait mask (and the public's ability to understand what this devotion may have signified) demonstrates how difficult it was for emperors to establish a monopoly over the institutions of memory in Roman culture. Unlike the rulers in modern totalitarian societies, who benefit from the power of centralized mass media, Roman emperors were not able to organize opinion through the coordinated workings of a state propaganda apparatus.²² The more violent an emperor's attempts to repress memory, the more passionate the efforts to commemorate his victims became, as the record of repression by Caligula and Nero demonstrates. As a result, the nature of memory under the Principate was more complex and often more contentious than what the balance of power might suggest. In the end, as we shall see in the case of Domitian, emperors themselves could be subject to the kind of commemorative penalties that were imposed on Gnaeus Piso.²³

In its broadest terms, this book is about the interaction of social memory and cultural identity in the face of profound historical change. It examines some of the ways in which the period we know as the Republic, during which Rome was ruled by magistrates operating under the authority of the senate and people, was remembered by Romans living in the era that followed the battle of Actium, when that whole system came under the absolute control of one man. Although the topic of the Republic's continuing impact on the Principate merits investigation in its own right, I hope to show that this problem provides a particularly useful heuristic for exploring the operation of memory within Roman culture.²⁴ The importance of this theme lies in the way it bridges two very different aspects of collective or social memory. On the one hand, the store of Roman cultural memory presented a record of events that made it easy to mark off the Republic as an era that was historically distinguishable from the present.

²¹ Assmann (1988: 11). See also Kammen (1995: 329–30), Schudson (1995: 353–4).

²² Levick (1982a), *pace* Syme (1939: 459–75). On the control of memory in the Soviet Union, cf. Hosking (1989), but note also the revealing anecdote about a visit to Bulgaria recounted by Burke (1989: 108).

²³ See Chapter 3. See also Flower (2006: 148–59, 197–233).

²⁴ Gowing (2005) pursues a similar approach, but touches only briefly on the period covered here. Other important studies include Castritius (1982), Sion-Jenkins (2000), and Eder (1990).

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On the other hand, many Romans also clung to a notion of their identity that was predicated on the continuation of memories that stretched back into that distant era. The tension between these distinct but overlapping projects of remembering stands at the heart of the present study.

In the chapters that follow, I present a series of case studies, each of which centers on a particular set of circumstances in which the memory of the Republic was reactivated in some meaningful way. Because remembering as a social process (as opposed to “memory” as a concatenation of static representations) is historically contingent, each case will require a certain amount of thick description to account for the particularity of its context. Although my primary interest remains the frameworks of memory at work in each instance, I also of necessity depart at times from this central thread to go into more detail about various issues of Roman history and culture as they become relevant to the interpretation of how the Republic’s memory was produced. Mindful not only of Nero’s repression of Cassius but of the act of commemoration that gave rise to it as well, I have tried to organize the discussion in a way that calls attention to the complex and decentralized nature of memory within Roman culture. Competing memories of the Republican past, operating in a wide range of contexts and media, helped to shape – and were in turn shaped by – an ongoing process of negotiation and debate, through which the emperors and their subjects struggled to define Roman identity under the Principate.

The chronological limits of this discussion are relatively compressed, stretching from the last year of Nero’s reign through the Principate of Trajan (AD 68–117). The decision to focus on this fifty-year span does not stem from any conviction about the unique importance of this period in the history of the memory of the Republic or for Roman cultural memory generally. Rather, I have chosen to restrict the time frame to investigate more fully and deeply the broad range of cultural contexts within which Imperial Romans remembered their Republican past. The era extending from the Flavian emperors through Trajan offers a wealth of material with which to examine the diversity of these processes. Although this half-century, which saw the successful establishment of two different dynasties, is generally viewed as occupying a central place in the story of the institutionalization of the power of the emperors, I do not wish to suggest that the issues discussed here were confined to the period in question. Just as there were important developments in the ways that the Republic was remembered before the fall of Nero, the story continued after the point at which this book leaves off.

With this caveat out of the way, the discussion begins roughly 100 years after Actium, by which time the reality of the break between the

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Principate and the Republic that preceded it should have been well established. Conceptually, however, the nature of this change remained difficult to comprehend. Words, images, and even institutions that had been central to Roman self-definition during the Republic were taken over and reused by the emperors to justify their position within the new system of the Principate. Moreover, Republican commemorative practices (such as the display of family *imagines*) continued to play an important role in the formulation of elite identity. The Republic was thus both a discrete epoch of Roman history and a continuing part of the present: It had an end point, but it was not over. The opening chapter explores the nature of this ambiguity by examining how the concept of freedom (*libertas*) was deployed in the rebellion that brought an end to the Julio-Claudian dynasty in AD 68. Although *libertas* was tied to a particular conception of the Republic, the rebels of 68 were able to exploit the ambiguity of this concept to manipulate the memories that were associated with it, thus laying claim to the moral authority of the Republican past without doing anything to restore its political substance.

The second chapter moves from the ambiguity of political concepts as sites of memory to discuss the importance of public monuments and their multiplex associations with memory. Turning to the foundation of the Flavian dynasty by Vespasian, this chapter examines one of the first acts of that emperor's reign, the rebuilding of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which had been destroyed by fire only a few days before the entry of Flavian armies into the city. The Capitoline temple was a quintessentially Roman *lieu de mémoire*, a place inscribed with a rich and well-known history. The importance of this temple for my discussion centers on its foundation narratives, which were closely linked with a particular, anti-monarchical conception of freedom. The destruction of this temple in a context of civil war brought renewed attention to these narratives and to the overdetermined meaning that they gave to the term *libertas*. As a consequence, Vespasian had to be careful in how he proceeded with the project of rebuilding. I argue that the emperor negotiated this situation by involving the senate and people as much as possible in his work and by focusing public attention on a different set of memories, which connected the temple (and thus its rebuilding) with the stability of Roman imperial power. These mnemonic associations better suited the benefits that an emperor could provide.

Chapter 3 considers the plight of Vespasian's son Domitian, who was less successful at negotiating the ambiguities of Republican memory. Taking my starting point from the vivid description of the punishment of the chief Vestal virgin Cornelia in a letter composed by Pliny the Younger,

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I examine this episode as a case in which the emperor's attempt to exploit Republican tradition failed to achieve the desired effect. For Domitian, the decision to bury Cornelia alive was part of a program of moral renewal intended to evoke the old-fashioned principles of ancient religious custom. In emphasizing strict discipline over rewards for virtue, however, Domitian failed to recognize the complexity of the tradition surrounding these priestesses. That complexity made it possible to challenge the emperor's manipulation of memory, and Cornelia proved herself to be adept at exploiting tradition to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the emperor's moral policies. I argue that her protests in the final moments before she was buried alive were intended to evoke the *exempla* of earlier Vestals who had proved their innocence with similar prayers. By presenting this alternate memory of the historical context for her fate, Cornelia exposed the arbitrariness of Domitian's attempts to exploit Republican tradition for contemporary political gain.

The problem of using the Republic to justify punishments meted out by the emperor is also the topic of Chapter 4. In a discussion that weaves together episodes from the reign of Nerva with Tacitus' accounts of Vespasian's reign, I focus on the role of senators in the administration of justice, and their use of models drawn from the Republic to justify their participation in (or retreat from) public life under the Principate. The bulk of this chapter focuses on the historical discussion presented in Tacitus' *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, a work that investigates another important turning point, the one that marked the end of the age of great orators. Tacitus offers many explanations of decline, but I suggest that he saw the most important break with the traditions of the Republic in the moral disillusionment of men such as the dialogue's host, Curiatius Maternus, who would rather write poetry than take part in the world of legal advocacy. The retirement of Maternus and others like him from public life left the way open for the *delatores* who saw to the unsavory business of prosecuting senators for treason and other offences. The issue, from Tacitus' perspective, was not so much that the scope for rhetorical accomplishments had diminished under the Principate, but rather that the moral status of a career in advocacy had been redefined.

Chapter 5 examines the works of two Flavian authors, Silius Italicus and Frontinus. Both wrote under Domitian, and both took Republican history as their subject matter. Their sensibilities stood at opposite extremes, however, as did their understanding of the relationship between the present and the past. Like the figure of Maternus in Tacitus' *Dialogus*, Silius withdrew from public life to write poetry. His epic poem on the Second Punic war, although not lacking in contemporary resonance, presents the Republic