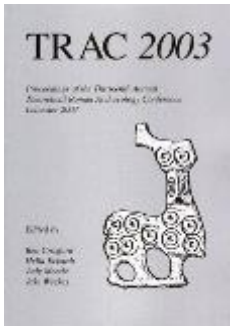

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Ephemeral monuments and social memory in early Roman Britain

Howard Williams

Introduction

Recent theories of material culture and social memory have discussed both the role of monumentality and artefact deposition and destruction in mortuary commemoration (Jones 2003; Rowlands 1993; Williams 2001). Yet discussions of social memory in Roman funerary archaeology have tended to focus on the construction of enduring tombs and their landscape settings. To redress this bias, the paper discusses the significance of ephemeral and transient monumentality in mortuary commemoration. Involving both monument building and destruction, ephemeral and transient monuments are argued to have been important mechanisms for social remembering and forgetting in late Iron Age and Roman cremation practices. This argument is developed in relation to the archaeological evidence for cremation and ephemeral monumentality uncovered by Rosalind Niblett's excavations at Folly Lane, St Albans.

Archaeologists have spent a great deal of effort cataloguing and interpreting the inscriptions, sculptures and architecture of funerary monuments in the Roman world (e.g. Toynbee 1971; Hope 1997a and b). Yet the relationship between monuments and memory in the Roman world is as complex as the tombs are varied. Monuments can commemorate individuals, families and households, but also other social, political and religious groups (Hope 2003; Patterson 1992). Furthermore, some monuments to the dead – such as those commemorating political and religious leaders – can form part of the social memories of groups unrelated to, or distant in time from, those commemorated. In addition, it has been recognised that the building of permanent monuments to the Roman dead may have involved strategies of both remembering and forgetting. They selectively promoted particular aspects of the deceased's identity in relation to survivors at the expense of others, sometimes portraying the dead in a very different way to their identities in life. Equally, it has been noted that monuments and remembrance can be related through different media. Valerie Hope (1997a, 1997b and 2003) has recently argued that three different forms of remembrance intersected in Roman funerary monuments. Textual, visual and ritual forms of remembrance were incorporated into the choices of materials, art, images and text in monumental design. Each form of remembrance interacted with the others, affecting the way the dead were remembered by the living. Commemoration was not only influenced by the form and materiality of monuments, but also by their location (Esmonde Cleary 2000; Kerr 2002; Pearce 1999). Consequently, the rich variety in the frequency and form of Roman-period funerary monuments illustrates complex variations in strategies of remembrance.

Hope's triple definition of funerary remembrance as textual, visual and ritual provides a valuable starting point for the archaeological study of death and memory in the Roman world. Yet this approach to memory continues to prioritise what Paul Connerton calls 'inscribing practices' of remembrance. From this perspective, remembrance tends to be regarded as a means of storing and communicating information (Connerton 1989; e.g. Barrett 1993; Hope 2003). While Hope considers the role of ritual in remembrance, the importance of Connerton's

'incorporating' strategies of remembrance for Roman mortuary practices have yet to be fully theorised and applied to Roman-period mortuary evidence. Rather than focusing on inscribing memories onto objects, these incorporating strategies concern the roles of commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices in remembering and forgetting (Connerton 1989). In addition, any given monument can be the focus of both inscribing and incorporating practices of remembrance (see Williams 2001). For example, a Roman tombstone not only 'stores' memories through its permanence and the information contained in its inscription; the tombstone also acts as a focus for incorporating practices such as commemorative feasts and processions that influence interaction between the living and the dead (Hope 2003; Williams forthcoming). Moreover, as Hope recognises, permanent memorials are but one means of remembering. For instance, both during the funeral itself and in post-funerary rituals, remembrance can be manifest through the transformation, fragmentation, destruction and disposal of artefacts and the orientation and movement of the human body. Therefore, this paper argues that within and alongside Hope's definitions of textual, visual and ritual remembrance, archaeologists should begin to isolate and theorise the possible presence and social significance of other strategies for commemorating the dead. By giving priority to texts and enduring monuments in funerary commemoration, archaeologists may be focusing on a rich source of evidence for Roman mortuary beliefs and practices, but they may be inadvertently misinterpreting and over-simplifying the complex mnemonic roles of material culture in mortuary practices. This argument is particularly apposite when applied to Roman provinces such as Britain where numerous studies have shown that the adoption and use of Roman-style ritual, visual and textual commemorative strategies were more sporadic than elsewhere in the Roman world (Hope 1997b). It is also important in allowing us to interpret a range of burial data specifically in terms of social memory that to date has simply been studied in terms of religious belief, social structures or ideology (see Williams 2003).

In order to develop this argument, I wish to suggest that the construction of temporary and ephemeral monuments during the cremation rituals of late Iron Age and early Roman Britain constitute an important mnemonic strategy. Cremation sometimes leads to the building of enduring monuments such as barrows and mausolea, but during the funeral a sequence of temporary structures was made and then quickly destroyed. In this way, these 'ephemeral' monuments formed an important part of incorporating practices of remembering and forgetting that focused on the construction and rapid destruction of monuments, objects and the bodies of the dead. In this light, cremation rites can be considered as a 'technology of remembrance' (see Jones 2003) that may have held greater significance in remembering and forgetting than the raising of permanent memorials for many sections of late Iron Age and early Romano-British society. While this process of ritual transformation had social and religious aspects, it is suggested that the primary concern was the construction of social memories through theatrical acts of conflagration, dissolution and fragmentation.

Ephemeral and Transient Monuments

Studies of mortuary practices from around the world have always tended to focus upon impressive expressions of monumentality from the pyramids of ancient Egypt to the Neolithic chambered tombs of Atlantic Europe (e.g. Curl 1980). Archaeologists seeking explanations for the motivations behind the raising of such impressive monuments have often looked to

ethnographic and anthropological accounts of societies that build substantial monuments. For instance, the funerals and ancestor rites prominent in Madasgascar have frequently been employed as analogies to aid interpretations of monuments in past societies (e.g. Bloch 1971). Yet, across the globe, many societies put great efforts into building monuments that are intended 'by design' to have very short life-histories.

Examples of ephemeral monuments employed in mortuary practices are numerous, particularly in societies with complex funerals involving elaborate secondary rites (see Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntingdon 1991). For example, in China, paper houses are made and then burned during mortuary ceremonies (Watson and Rawski 1988). Also, in southern and south-east Asia, cremation ceremonies frequently involve elaborate catafalques and pyres including effigies representing the dead (Metcalf and Huntingdom 1991: 136–41). So, just as the corpse in many societies is a vehicle for, and symbol of, the social, cosmological and ontological changes of the dead and mourners (see Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntingdon 1991), so 'ephemeral' monuments are sometimes employed to articulate these funerary transformations.

A related type of funerary monument might be considered to be more 'permanent' but is equally 'transient' in the sense of being only temporarily connected to the commemoration of individuals. In many societies there are monuments that gain their significance from their frequent association with repeated funerary rituals. Indeed, cremation sites in many societies including those of India and crematoria in Britain can be regarded as 'transient' monuments (e.g. Parry 1994). As monuments or places of transformation, the cremation sites and the pyre itself are significant for their liminality and temporality, rather than their role as final resting-places or in commemorating the final ancestral status of the dead.

The rich ethnography of Balinese cremation ceremonies serves to illustrate the commemorative functions of what I have here termed 'ephemeral' and 'transient' monuments in cremation rituals. After temporary burial for a number of years, the body is exhumed and the bones collected and transported to the cremation site. Effigies are made to represent and commemorate the physical and spiritual elements of the dead during the pre-cremation ceremonies. Towers are built of wood and bamboo, bound by rattan and covered with paper ornaments, cotton-wool dyed in bright colours, tinsel and mirrors. They represent the Balinese conception of the universe and are used to parade the body to the cremation site. Meanwhile, animal-shaped coffins (usually bulls and cows) are also displayed and subsequently used to contain the bones of the dead upon the cremation pyre. The pyre itself is a richly decorated structure with a sizeable canopy. The towers and coffins are both destroyed at the cremation site as integral elements of a theatrical display of dissolution and transformation. Following cremation, the remains are collected and placed in a container within a new tower. These are again structures and objects only temporarily associated with the ashes as they are transported to a river or the sea for disposal. All these might be considered to be 'ephemeral' monuments articulating the changing status of the dead at different stages of the funeral. Meanwhile, the cemetery used as a temporary repository for the body prior to cremation, as well as the cremation mound itself, are both relatively permanent parts of the social and sacred geography of Balinese communities. Yet simultaneously, both cemetery and the cremation mound are only temporarily associated with the commemoration of individuals; they are not the final resting places for the remains of the dead. These might be described as 'transient' monuments and places. Together with the careful use of space, time, orientation and directionality, the ephemeral and transient structures hold centre-stage in Balinese funerary ceremonies. They serve to mediate the ritual transformation of the dead and mourners (Covarrubias 1937: 359-88; Downes 1999; Geertz 1980; Hobart 1978).

The Balinese example illustrates the importance of ephemeral and transient monuments in cremation rituals, but how might such structures serve in social remembrance? In order to answer this question, let us now turn to anthropological research conducted in New Ireland in the Bismark Archipelago. Here the anthropologist Susanne Küchler has specifically focused upon interpreting the mnemonic use of ephemeral and transient monuments in mortuary ceremonies (Küchler 1999; 2002). Her argument is complex, specific to the societies she is dealing with, and can only be summarised briefly here. While this anthropological case study does not give us a direct formal or historical analogy for archaeological studies of memory, archaeologists have begun to regard Küchler's research as an invaluable analogy for understanding mortuary practices, ephemeral monumentality and social memory (e.g. Bradley 2002; Fowler 2003; Rowlands 1993).

Küchler focuses upon the funerary monuments known as *malanggan*. These are complex monuments carved from wood, woven from vines or constructed from clay. They consist of many complex and inter-weaving images of animals and objects drawn from the daily environment of New Ireland life (Küchler 2002: 111–50). These images are made to represent the body of the deceased following burial. They do this not through their visual likeness to the body or by symbolising it directly, but instead by providing a new skin for the body through the 'wrapping' of images. These images are seen to metaphorically contain the odours of the corpse's decomposition (Küchler 2002: 114–6). Each image is invested with ancestor power and they are central to the transformation and remembrance of the deceased during the complex sequence of ceremonies involving gift exchange and feasting that take place in the months and years after the burial. The aim is to produce a new 'body' for the deceased that is materialised in the *malanggan* sculptures (Küchler 2002: 81–110). Their efficacy in the selective process of remembering and forgetting the dead is achieved through the manner of their carving but also through the brevity of their final display at the end of the mortuary ceremonies. Despite the length of time taken to make them, and the many rituals leading up to their display, *malanggan* are unveiled on the grave of the deceased for a very brief period. After this, they are 'sacrificed' through their ritual 'killing'. This is achieved by either leaving them to rot in damp places or by burning them (although they are also sold to tourists and collectors: Küchler 1999; 2002: 102–8). These acts complete the mourning process and the transformation of the deceased's physical and social disintegration, a process of remembering through forgetting. Consequently, they are considered essential for 'finishing' the memory work of the mortuary rites. This is mirrored in the abandonment of both the deceased's house and burial place that soon become submerged into the forest.

Küchler argues that *malanggan* do not store memories, but through their production and rapid destruction, *malanggan* sculptures evoke '*mnemic*' memories. Mneme is here defined as the ability to recall something that had previously existed, not through its physical survival, but through previous experience of it. In other words, mnemic objects transmit memories for those who experienced the images at the funeral and their mnemonic significance paradoxically derives from their physical absence. So, using the terminology discussed above, *malanggan* are 'ephemeral' monuments, and the houses and burial sites of the deceased are 'transient' places. In this sense, the very acts of making and destroying *malanggan* in mortuary rituals serves in 'finishing' the dead and producing memories that consequently are central to the transmission of social information and identities (Küchler 1999; 2002). In so doing, *malanggan* transform the dead, but also through negotiating the right to produce *malanggan* and through the process of remembering and forgetting *malanggan*, relations between the living, the dead, land and resources are reproduced.

These anthropological case studies illustrate a different conception of the relationship between material culture and memory to that familiar in contemporary Western society. While the Balinese cremation rites do not provide a direct analogy for the mortuary practices of late Iron Age and Roman Britain, they illustrate the potential roles of ephemeral and transient monuments at each stage of the cremation process in staging remembering and forgetting. Moreover, Küchler's research forms part of a growing anthropological and sociological literature investigating social memory and material culture focusing upon what Connerton calls 'incorporating practices' and 'forgetting' (Argenti 1999; Battaglia 1990; Hallam and Hockey 2001; King 1999; Verdery 1999). For our purposes, this research provides a theoretical basis for identifying the importance of building and then destroying structures in the funerary sequences as a means of constructing the past in the past. Through the process of forgetting through destruction, links with the past and ancestors can be achieved and maintained. Sequential acts of destruction recall earlier mortuary events and form parts of the exchange of knowledge and social connections through which communities and persons define their identities.

Ephemeral Monuments and Social Memory in First Century AD Britain

Studies of the use and re-use of monuments and monumentality in terms of social memory have come to the fore in prehistoric and early historic archaeology (e.g. Alcock 2002; Bradley 1998; 2002; Holtorf 1997; Williams 2001; 2003). Yet given the arguments presented above, can we explore the increasingly rich archaeological evidence for the ritual process and the use of ephemeral monuments in late Iron Age and early Roman mortuary practices in terms of social remembrance? (see McKinley 2000; Pearce 1998; Polfer 2000).

As a case study to illustrate the application of this theoretical perspective, I wish to address the funerary rites reconstructed from Rosalind Niblett's excavations at Folly Lane, St Albans (Niblett 1999: 29–64, 394–419; 2000). On this hilltop overlooking the early Roman town, a complex sequence of ritual activity was unearthed. Niblett describes and interprets the evidence for a funerary chamber and pyre site dating to the middle first century AD recovered from the centre of a rectangular ritual enclosure. Similar finds have been uncovered elsewhere in south-eastern Britain and appear to be aristocratic burial sites of the Iron Age elite immediately prior to and following the Roman conquest. Equally significant is the fact that the site seems to be remembered and referenced as a place of ritual significance in subsequent centuries, illustrated by the construction of a Romano-Celtic temple over the site of the funerary rituals. Colin Forcey (1998) has argued that this relates to a wider pattern found in Britain in which 'Romano-Celtic temples' were in fact the focus of mortuary cults of remembrance. I would like to build on these observations by emphasising how the funeral at Folly Lane deliberately employed ephemeral and transient monuments in the funerary sequence. This in turn seems to have set in motion a tradition of ritual remembrance through incorporating practices that continued through the Roman period. In a manner comparable (but not identical) to the New Ireland *malanggan*, it appears that remembrance initially took place through the transmission of images and monuments created to be rapidly destroyed, rather than the erection of enduring and permanent monuments to the dead.

The funeral at Folly Lane was a complex and multiple-staged affair. Some of the events can be reconstructed from Rosalind Niblett's careful and detailed interpretation of the

archaeological evidence. A tentative reconstruction of the funerary sequence can be summarised as follows:

Building the Monuments:

- A rectangular shaft was excavated and supported by wooden beams sometime in the second quarter of the first century AD.
- The shaft contained a wooden chamber. The chamber may have served as a place for the containment and display of the dead, perhaps built for the display of the corpse of one individual in particular. Around this chamber but within the shaft there was a walkway allowing a small group of observers and participants access to rituals focusing upon the corpse.
- The soil from the shaft was used to build a large mound to the north-west. The remaining soil may have been used in the construction of a rectangular funerary enclosure demarcating a sacred arena around the chamber.
- In the shaft, the body may have been displayed, perhaps mummified, or encoffined together with a rich range of artefacts. Artefacts that are thought to have been present in the grave include furniture, a fire-dog, a chariot or cart, and at least forty-one vessels including amphorae and cups. The fact that many of the artefacts were associated with drinking and eating suggests that feasting ceremonies took place in the chamber. This chamber created an enclosed, concealed, subterranean temporary dwelling place for the deceased. The chamber would have allowed access to the corpse, but access that was restricted.

Destroying the Monuments:

- Months, years or even decades after these initial funerary ceremonies, the shaft was re-entered and the remains of the dead and associated artefacts were extracted from the chamber. The body was carried to the adjacent mound where a funerary pyre of oak, ash and hazel was constructed.
- Before cremation, the contents of the shaft were deliberately broken up and token amounts left in the shaft. Animals were sacrificed including horse, cattle, sheep/goat and hare.
- The body was cremated with the sacrificed animals (or parts of animals) in a prominent position at the centre of the enclosure. The amount of artefacts and animals involved and the size of the funerary enclosure suggest that a large gathering was intended to witness the spectacular ritual.
- As the pyre died down, the shaft was deliberately and rapidly destroyed by throwing stones onto the wooden chamber and undermining the revetments making the walls collapse inwards. Subsequently, the rest of the shaft was filled with tips of sand, gravel, soil and turf. The material was (perhaps deliberately) brought from many different locations in the surrounding landscape for this purpose.
- A token deposit of pyre material was buried in a pit on the mound. This pit was also used as a post-hole for a possible memorial situated at the centre of the cremation mound.
- Simultaneously, a pit adjacent and abutting the shaft was excavated and filled with pyre debris.
- A turf stack was built over the shaft marking its position for future generations. Perhaps a post-marker was also erected although no evidence survives.
- Later a Romano-Celtic temple was built over the mound in the late first century AD. Offerings continue to be made on the site in ritual shafts until the third century AD.

Cremation in late Iron Age and early Roman Britain involved a complex sequence of ritual actions aimed at transforming the identity of the deceased and her/his relations with the mourners. The rite has been argued to have been important in constructing an idealised representation of society and also as related to cosmological principles. Time, space and material culture were employed in articulating these ideological and cosmological ideas and conferring an identity upon the dead and mourners (see Fitzpatrick 1997; 2000; McKinley 2000; Pearce 1998). At Folly Lane, cremation was a 'secondary rite' (Hertz 1960) following temporary interment in the ritual shaft. Yet the emphasis upon the transformation and dissolution of the body, objects and ephemeral monuments appears to be central to the ritual technology of the funerary process. Niblett explains the emphasis on the destruction of objects and the dissolution of the dead at Folly Lane in religious terms, remarking that: 'A striking feature of the Folly Lane ceremonies was the almost obsessive care with which everything connected with the funeral was systematically destroyed' (Niblett 1999: 63). The interpretation is that the destruction allowed the release of the dead person's spirit from its mortal coil: '...once this had been achieved the remains themselves were less significant, although the site of the final ceremonies remained important' (Niblett 1999: 63). While interpretations in terms of eschatology, cosmology and ideology are valuable, they take a cognitive approach that fails to address the mnemonic role of ritual practices and performances involving the rapid destruction of the body and its material representations. While the journey to an afterlife may have been an important concern of the funeral, it is argued here that the process can be equally understood through the application of Küchler's theory concerning the importance of ephemeral monuments in social remembrance.

Two ephemeral monuments were created within the enclosure at Folly Lane. First the shaft containing a chamber, and then the cremation mound. Both acted as transient monuments in the sense that they were only briefly associated with the dead and neither was the final resting place of the deceased's remains. Fragmentary remains of the dead were incorporated into both monuments, but if there was a final place for depositing the majority of the human remains, it was not found on the site. These sites also acted as ephemeral monuments. The chamber was constructed and then deliberately destroyed. On top of the mound, a pyre, possibly of some size, was constructed and speedily consumed by fire.

Permanent monuments also played a role in the commemoration. After the transformation of the dead and the destruction of the ephemeral monuments, two monuments remained. The mound had been transformed by fire and a turf stack built over the shaft. The site of the mound and the pyre were subsequently commemorated by the choice to build a Romano-Celtic temple over it. Simultaneously, the temple referenced the still-visible turf stack marking the burial chamber through its close proximity and orientation. Yet through the sequence we see the deliberate destruction and transformation of artefacts, the body and the monuments as relations between mourners and the deceased changed. While permanent monuments marked the spot of the chamber and the pyre, it was through the theatrical spectacle of dissolution and destruction during the initial phases of the site's history that the course for the long sequence of subsequent ritual activity on the site was set: the significance of the permanent remains held significance through what did *not* remain. Furthermore, the temple and the enclosure may not have been commemorative of the funeral on their own, but as settings for repeated 'incorporating' acts of ritual deposition and commemorative ceremonies.

The socio-political implications of these acts of remembrance may have been far-reaching. They were clearly reserved for a unique individual, although the possibility that more than one person was temporarily interred in the chamber and cremated on the mound cannot be ruled

out. This was a time of considerable internal tensions and external threats to the Iron Age communities of south-eastern Britain. These funerals were more than displays of conspicuous consumption, idealised expressions of elite identity or materialised ideologies and cosmologies. Instead, we need to consider the roles of these complex mortuary practices as technologies of remembrance that promoted a particular view of the past. The impressive scale and complex character of these high-status funerals were novel inventions and may have been intended to be unique events to be remembered. The distinctive nature of the funerary spectacle they constructed through destruction by fire may have enhanced the authority over past and present of both the dead and their successors. While we cannot reconstruct the identity of the dead person whose funeral became a focus for religious and ancestral veneration at Folly Lane, we can suggest that the use of ephemeral and transient monumentality could have enhanced (rather than diminished) the significance of the site as a focus for the negotiation and interpretation of history and myth for the people living in and around the early Roman municipium of Verulamium.

Discussion

Ephemeral and transient monuments are far from restricted to the exceptional funeral that took place at Folly Lane; they are widespread in late Iron Age and early Roman Britain in a variety of different ways and alongside more permanent forms of commemoration. Indeed, the Folly Lane funeral may only be exceptional in the scale of the rituals that it represents and the fact that it is a rare case where archaeologists have been able to read something of the complex sequence of activities taking place. Niblett notes similar cases of late Iron Age burial rites in Britain and the Continent with comparable evidence of cremation as a secondary burial rite, including the Stanway site at Colchester (Crummy 1993). For instance, there is also evidence for the deliberate destruction of artefacts in the Lexden tumulus (Foster 1986). Equally 'bustum' graves (in situ cremation over pits) are usually interpreted as high status rites, but the use of the pyre site as a place of commemoration suggests that the pyre may have been regarded as an ephemeral monument concerned with the promotion of memory through destruction and transformation (cf. Struck 2000). This might reflect a distinctive type of funerary remembrance using the pyre, particularly among military sites like Petty Knowes, High Rochester where cremation *in situ* appears to have been frequently practised (e.g. Charlton and Mitcheson 1984). Also, a number of Roman barrows appear to have been placed close to, or over the pyre sites as at Riseholme (Thompson 1954) and Holborough (Jessup 1956; see also Dunning and Jessup 1936). In these cases the destruction of artefacts and monuments were an integral part of the rite. Furthermore, at the Holborough barrow, excavations produced evidence of a temporary square timber structure (perhaps a place where the body was displayed) built and deliberately destroyed by the building of the burial mound (Jessup 1956). Walled cemeteries and funerary mausolea have also produced evidence of ephemeral or transitory structures. Excavators noted that the multiple-phased temple or funerary mausoleum at Wood Lane End, Hemel Hempstead, seems to have had a relatively short period of use. Perhaps again we are looking at monuments that were built to be destroyed, or at least abandoned, after only a brief time (Black 1986; Neal 1984). In each case, we are left wondering whether we might have underestimated the mnemonic significance of

early Roman cremation rituals and focused too much attention on their permanent material outcomes.

The implications of this argument are wide ranging. An appreciation of the importance of ritual transformations and destruction in terms of social memory challenges the simplistic link between monuments and remembrance. It illustrates that the use of writing, images, the building of monuments and the re-use of monuments and objects are only some of the strategies of remembrance employed in early Roman Britain. The use of ephemeral and transient monuments might represent another, alternative, strategy of remembrance, one that gained efficacy through the brevity and spectacular destruction of monuments and material culture. By creating powerful multi-sensory 'images', they articulated the changing identity of the dead and those of the mourners, and aided in the construction of relations between past and the present. At Folly Lane we may have an example of a theatrical funerary tradition in which acts of rapid destruction were central to the creation of social memory during a period of instability for the Iron Age aristocracies of south-eastern Britain. Their links with the past and desire to invent mortuary traditions may have come to the fore at the very time when their future was far from certain.

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