

Invisible architecture: inside the Roman memory palace

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As Frantz Fanon (1965, 179) wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, when discussing the cultural dilemmas and choices facing the native intellectual making an original artistic statement in opposition to a colonial power, "old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies." This whole process, of course, would rely on the reuse or rediscovery of native cultural traditions whose value had not been eradicated or compromised through contact with the colonial power. Cultural, folk, or social memory was the key to rediscovery. This paper will consider the way in which conceptual frameworks may have operated in the ancient world and the role of memory in the creation of the Roman world view, and will argue that the construction of a consensus social memory was an element of great importance in the maintenance of the day-to-day recreation of that world, a process upon which the system itself depended.

If the culture of the Roman empire is viewed as a text, then an examination or reading of that text can and should be multifarious. Text is

always interpreted, and not simply experienced, both by those "living" it and by observers "reading" it (Boon 1986, 240). We need, therefore, to consider how the self-interpretation of Roman culture depended on a system involving the ordering and control of both mental and physical space, and how each provided the experience and security of "returning to the whole".

Formal mnemonic systems, devised for the transformation, mental storage, and subsequent recall of information, were used in the Roman world to order knowledge and to train and school the memory. While such systems were also in use in the medieval and early post-medieval periods in Europe, their value was by then being challenged, until they came to be viewed as little more than tricks and deceits. They, nevertheless, retained their value in some spheres as a tool or technique in teaching and learning.

Transformation and recall were based upon an intermediary and personalised imaging and visualisation of data in mentally constructed "memory palaces". The origins and principles of classical mnemonic systems were described and set out by, amongst others, Pliny, in his *Natural History*, and Quintilian, in his *Oratoria*, and these authors explained the rationale, workings, and use of such systems in some detail. Quintilian, though slightly sceptical about the value of such methods, noted how chosen images and symbols could be mentally stored in "buildings":

These symbols they then dispose in the following manner: they place, as it were, their first thought under its symbol, in the vestibule, and the second in the hall, and then proceed round the courts, locating thoughts in due order, not only in chambers and porticoes, but on statues and other like objects. This being done, when the memory is to be tried, they begin to pass in review all these places from the commencement, demanding from each what they have confided in it, according as they are reminded by the symbol.... What I have specified as being done with regard to a dwelling house may be done also with regard to public buildings, or a long road, or the walls of a city, or pictures, or we may even conceive imaginary places for ourselves.

These mnemonic systems were intended for training in rhetoric and oratory, whereby complex arguments and cases, dependent on the correctly ordered marshalling of facts, could be stored and retrieved, not simply by rote learning of a text but by the mental ordering of appropri-

ate images. Other applications are obviously possible.

One of the best examples of such a memory system in use, though in a very different context and at a much later date, is found in the writings of Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit missionary working in China between 1583 and 1610. By this date the value and focus of mnemonic techniques had changed, and there now existed a strong "Christian mnemonic tradition that focused on memory arts as the means to marshal spiritual intentions" (Spence 1984, 13). The life of Ricci is considered by Jonathan Spence in his book *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* where he states that (1984, 3):

by Ricci's time it had become a way for ordering all one's knowledge of secular and religious subjects, and since he himself was a Catholic missionary Ricci hoped that once the Chinese learned to value his mnemonic powers they would be drawn to ask him about the religion that made such wonders possible.

Here then the system is seen to be almost representative of a wider social network and the way in which it orders knowledge enables it to order the world. As Ricci himself wrote (Spence 1984, 9-10):

Once your places are all fixed in order, then you can walk through the door and make your start. Turn to the right and proceed from there. As with the practice of calligraphy, in which you move from the beginning to the end, as with fish who swim along in ordered schools, so is everything arranged in your brain, and all the images are ready for whatever you seek to remember. If you are going to use a great many [images], then let the buildings be hundred or thousands of units in extent; if you only want a few, then take a single reception hall and just divide it up by its corners.

At whatever period, these mentally constructed memory palaces would be filled with images and artefacts appropriate to both the time and the place and to the cultural milieu in which they were constructed; while the images would be individualised they would nevertheless derive their very substance, and ultimately their truth, from the complicity of some social or cultural group which would, if it could be said to have some form of meaningful access to these memory images, recognise its own mores, values, and story in them, for otherwise the images would be so much dead wood and dry straw.

To return to the Roman world, it would be true, if simplistic, to say that

Roman power was based on, amongst other things, the ability to order the world through a process of interpretation of often ambiguous and contradictory phenomena, and to translate that interpretation into a new vision of reality. While most obviously this interpretation took place in a military or political sphere it was also achieved through control of the dissemination of ideas and information, through the mediation of art and religion, and through the potentially unifying power of certain elements of material culture.

All these elements coalesced to create a structure for daily life which, if interpreted through experience and memory as a whole and not as a number of random and disparate elements, would allow the individual to grasp, as Bourdieu (1972, 88) has suggested, "the rationale of what are clearly series" and to make it his or her own "in the form of a principle generating conduct organized in accordance with the same rationale."

Art could sometimes encapsulate detailed and sophisticated information in an image, whose decoding in a way, perhaps, could be seen as a parallel process to the recall and interpretation of the value-laden images and objects inside the memory palaces. Indeed, the ability to decode certain images, whether in the mind or in reality, was a mark of "belonging", the stages of the process of decoding marking the construction of a map by which the decoder could find his or her way. This brings to mind Balzac's aphorism that "the world belongs to me because I understand it". Cultural alienation could result from the opposite process, for without a cultural map travelling becomes difficult if not necessarily impossible.

As an example of the operation of the interpretive process, I intend to cite the research of Valerie Hutchinson (1986a and b) on the cult of Bacchus/Dionysus in Roman Britain. Hutchinson, not satisfied with the accepted view that the appeal and role of the cult were restricted, even in the Mediterranean world, and therefore that it most certainly must have been purely marginal in a peripheral and less sophisticated province such as Britain, went back to basic principles with the intention of identifying individual objects and works of art relating to the cult in Roman Britain.

She identified over 400 such objects, ranging from mosaics and large-scale statuary to "small scale statuary, engraved or embossed metal plate, figured glassware, ceramics, furniture appliques, knife and key handles and other gadgets, ritual items and grave goods, jewellery, amulets and charms" (Hutchinson 1986b, 5), all displaying iconographic links to the cult. These portrayed not only the god himself in his various guises, his mythical colleagues and attendants, including Maenads and Satyrs, his

tutor Silenus, his companion Pan/Faunus, and his enemy Lycurgus, but also animals such as the panther, the lion, the dolphin, the hippocamp, the parrot, and the elephant with a recognised place in the iconography of the cult, as well as ritual paraphernalia such as the *thyrsus* and *pedum*, and attributes and symbols, such as *canthari* and other wine vessels. Indeed, in Britain there is represented almost every Bacchic image known in the classical repertoire. The portrayal and context of discovery of a few of the pieces represent instances of an *interpretatio celtica* of the cult.

The complexity of the Bacchic story, and consequently the large number of ways in which this could be portrayed or alluded to in religious art, in contexts that must document actual religious activity of some kind, whether public worship, private devotion, or mere superstitious practice on an individual or group level, make it a useful indicator of the processes of dissemination of "classical" religious ideas in Roman Britain. The ability to decode and understand the significance of some of these objects would be part of the overall experience of being a member or sympathiser of the cult, an experience perhaps indistinguishable from the overall ecstatic and celebratory drama of the cult rituals, while to others outside the cult or outside the milieu in which it operated, their meaning may have been purely visual and lacking any context of interpretation or explanation. It had previously been argued that many such objects would have been produced for purely decorative purposes, but in the majority of instances this cannot any longer be seen as a valid argument.

During decoding, each representation could be seen in the mind as a static image to be transformed by memory into part of a larger pictorial sequence and narrative. Indeed, it could be said that Hutchinson's research, while obviously dependent on the systematic location, description, analysis, and interpretation of all relevant material in museums or in the period literature, primarily relied on her ability to decode the hidden texts through her own knowledge of classical mythology and to use her knowledge of Roman religion to place these objects in some overall cultural context. Previous authorities had perhaps not only simply lacked her dedication but also the academic apparatus necessary for understanding. Thus we may see here, mirrored in a modern academic setting, the same process of inclusion through knowledge, mediated by memory, and exclusion through the lack of the mental apparatus to provide a contextualising cultural, social, or religious framework.

Hutchinson mapped her information both geographically and chronologically and was able to make some tentative observations about the operation of the cult, previously thought to be the more or less exclusive

preserve of the well-to-do in the major towns and the country villas, and about the mechanisms of its adoption and spread.

In another paper (Ferris 1995), I have considered the existence of what may best be called an "information system" in Roman Britain, as reflected in the distribution of inscriptions (Biro 1965), knowledge of the literary classics (Barrett 1978), and the distribution of graffiti (Evans 1987) and have suggested that this system may also be further reconstructed through an analysis of the processes of introduction of "new gods", that is certain classes and types of artefacts that are representative and redolent of quite specific cultural positions and assumptions. Such goods, most particularly items with religious uses or associations, sometimes could carry, and thus potentially disseminate, complex and sophisticated ideas, concepts, and information.

Of course, the role of oral transmission in the creation and operation of this information system cannot be quantified, nor must it be assumed that the material carriers of this information, such as inscriptions, were interpreted solely within the concept of a linear progression of time. As John Barrett has recently suggested in his paper "Chronologies of remembrance", certain inscriptions can be read according to a number of different chronologies, according to "the expectations of the reader ... memory ... orientates the biographical experiences of the reader towards the inscription and allows the reader not only to understand what they read but also to recognise something of their own experiences, and those of others, being addressed through that reading" (Barrett 1993, 237). Indeed, the power of memory, whether individual or collective, lies in its ability to defy linear or sequential time and to allow a version of the past sometimes to exist parallel to the present.

Paul Connerton, in *How Societies Remember*, distinguishes between the structure of memories of dominant and subordinate groups, the dominant placing themselves within a linear trajectory of time, in relation to the past legitimating origins, and in relation to the future creating a sense of the continuity of power, wealth, and influence. The subordinate will construct a different history, defined by a different narrative of life with "a different rhythm ... [a] rhythm not patterned by the individual's intervention in the working of the dominant institutions" (Connerton 1986, 19).

Jacques le Goff's *History and Memory* briefly discusses the distinction between past and present in psychology and the way in which this can be reflected in linguistics and in "primitive" thought, but his account of the historical background to the evolution of the relationship between past

and present is patchy. Indeed, Barrett's world of overlapping time sequences defining a contemporary reality, as opposed to a world where linearity exists alone, is but a step away from the surreal or metaphysical.

In their writings and paintings Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carra, two artists greatly influenced by psychoanalysis, argued that modern man was driven by the same instincts as his ancestors and that beneath the conscious mind there lay a rich subconscious world of dream and fantasy in which the past and the present were one. Carra, writing in the journal *Valori Plastici* in the 1920s, described one such temporal juxtaposition as "the drama of the apparitions". Writing in the same magazine, Giorgio de Chirico described an image, startlingly effective and out of time, and yet as familiar, seductive, and unobtainable as an image in a Roman memory palace:

a statue is not destined always to stand in a place enclosed by well defined lines. We have long been accustomed to seeing statues in museums. To discover newer and more mysterious aspects we must have access to new combinations. For example, a statue in a room, whether it be alone or in the company of living people, could give us a new emotion if it were made in such a way that its feet rested on the floor and not on a base. The same impression could be produced by a statue sitting in an armchair or leaning against a real window.

De Chirico reacted against the concept of reality being defined by physical and visible phenomena alone, a reality from which elements could be selected and reorganised to form a new visible representation. He strove, rather, to widen the definition through the incorporation of psychological facts deposited in the individual or collective unconscious and unearthed in reaction to external symbols.

Memory, then, must be seen as part of a wider cultural system that relies on a collective vision of the world/reality, or more properly a series of overlapping realities that differ slightly in detail but which correspond in a sufficiently broad way as to present the appearance of a unified whole. In the Roman world there can also be seen to have been two interrelated systems for ordering conquered territories, one through the physical incorporation of landscape, taking place in sequential time, and the other through a mental incorporation of both landscapes and peoples into a shifting and adaptable collective vision of empire, mediated and transmitted by social memory, to which individuals, families or social and cultural groups could adhere or subscribe, consciously or uncon-

sciously, in whole or in part, or against which people could react, if little or nothing of this constructed memory related to their own situation, vision, or reality.

The developed, or mature, Roman perception of geography involved, as has been discussed by Nicholas Purcell in his article "The creation of provincial landscape: the Roman impact on Cisalpine Gaul", the taming of landscape by the building of roads and the subsequent creation of an infrastructure, including bridges, fords, causeways, planned and gridded towns, frontier works, and so on. "The geometric layout of the lands is measured, expressed and controlled by the celebration of itineraries across them. The formation of such axes became a familiar aspect of Roman attitudes to the empire, almost to the point of being a doctrine. It is these routes which give shape and definition to the world" (Purcell 1990, 13). Added to this was the development of exact topographical recording of landscape. As Purcell (1990, 21) again states, "very simply, the Roman perception of the place to be conquered and the process of conquest are so clearly related as to be aspects of the same mentalité, and there is no need to disjoin them or to seek more elaborate explanation."

Creative building upon memory marked a positive step towards the making of new mental maps. Proust (1921–22, 1029) noted that "distances are only the relation of space to time and vary with it", a variation mediated by memory alone until technological innovation became perhaps a more important factor.

It was crucial to the integration of territories into the empire that the native élites subscribed to the maintenance of the physical infrastructure, even if their perception of the rationale behind its creation differed or was relatively unsophisticated. Administrative policy and military and economic expediency were always underpinned by a mentally retained and imperceptibly shifting and mutating vision of the world that depended on adherence to a collective or social memory in which the élite of the empire could see their own story, whether expressed through cultural solidarity, social or economic concordance of interests, or religious practice; this was the motor for acculturation and is one factor in creating what Greg Woolf (1994) has called "the unity and diversity of romanisation".

Diverse tongues, objects, actions, and thoughts gave to collective life a collective form. In this situation memory created the only truly human landscape, as solid and structured, as yet as inaccessible, inconsistent, and secret as the human personality. To paraphrase the words of W. H. Auden, landscape was but the background to a torso.

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