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Pagkalos, Manolis E.

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Greek Memories: theories and practices

Luca Castagnoli, Paolo Ceccarelli, *Greek Memories: theories and practices*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 433. ISBN 9781108471725 £90.00.

Review by

Manolis E. Pagkalos, University of Groningen. m.pagkalos@rug.nl

Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

This collection of articles is the result of a series of Research/Work-In-Progress Seminars and a conference on Ancient Greek memory organised by the Department of Classics and Ancient History of Durham University a decade ago. The publication of the volume is in line with the surge of studies focused on the workings of memory and the construction of collective identities in Classical Antiquity. The book consists of sixteen chapters that approach different practices of memory in a range of literary genres (from epic and lyric poetry and theatre to oratory, historiography and philosophy) and with a broad chronological span (from Homer to Claudius Aelianus and Plotinus). The chapters are organised chronologically in four parts that cover the Archaic to the Imperial periods (c. 3rd century CE). Unfortunately, the focus is unevenly distributed with half of the book dedicated to the Classical period; in contrast, the Archaic, Hellenistic, and Imperial periods are less discussed. An introduction by the editors and a concluding chapter complete the book. The volume is further enhanced by a list of references and two Indices (Locorum and Rerum).

Castagnoli and Ceccarelli introduce the book with a thorough and well-structured Introduction that will benefit everyone interested in memory theories. Most importantly, it offers a brief, yet concise, overview of several key themes and ideas behind the theories and practices of memory in the ancient Greek world. The introduction is full of references to ancient sources, discussing many concepts ('memory', 'cognition', 'time' and 'history') and their social diffusion while addressing the impact of writing on practices of memory. The discussion touches on the divinity of 'memory' (Mnemosyne) in antiquity as well as the role of monuments and other 'sites of memory'. The editors conclude with an outline of the sixteen chapters of the volume and underline its aims: to trace the links between concepts and practices of memory in Greek thought as part of the broader cultural and literary framework in which they originated (47-48).

Part I of the volume is dedicated to the Archaic and early Classical periods. In Chapter 1, Lilah Grace Canevaro discusses how and to what extent women act as conservators of memory in the *Iliad*. She uses as a comparative parallel the *Kosovo Cycle* of South Slavic epic, which demonstrates similar patterns outside the Greek tradition, to argue that women occupy a central role – and through it, power – in the Homeric poems. However, this power is limited, mirroring the limitations of their agency. Women can preserve memories only during their lifetime, and for the longevity of the object they create. The importance of their role becomes clear through their immortalisation in the epic itself. Peter Agócs (Chapter 2) discusses how poetry helped define attitudes to the written texts by discussing the oral culture of the early fifth century, the Homeric epics, the Attic tragedians, and epic poetry (Pindar). He focuses on how memory was constructed and disseminated in a mainly oral performance culture (epic and song) and how such practices were negotiated during the transmission to an ‘inscribed *logos*’ culture. He describes first the complicated relationship between performative song and memory, and second, the role of the written text as a memory – both as an imprint of something orally created and as a site of memory *per se* – that is unavoidably linked with its reperformance as voice.

Part II forms the largest group of articles in the volume and is dedicated to the classical period. The first three chapters explore memory in Classical Athens. Paola Ceccarelli (Chapter 3) focuses on memory (and oblivion) in Greek tragedy and its central role within the civic community, and questions how far the potential to (re)shape collective memories was realised. Through the analysis of Sophocles’ *Ajax* and Euripides’ *Suppliant Women* she explores how the tragedians interacted with memory and reciprocity both in their plays and as part of a process of synthesis. Ceccarelli’s analysis highlights similar trends and contemporary developments in the Athenian socio-political sphere such as the increase in inscriptions (from written laws to proxeny decrees and treaties). Silvia Milanezi (Chapter 4) addresses the role of memory in comic poetry (Aristophanes) arguing for the importance of Mnemosyne and the Comic Muses in dramatic competitions. Memory is dramatised, as part of the play, but also extends beyond the play itself, as *poetic* memory of previous dramatised experiences (119), to train the collective (musical) memory of the audience. Milanezi explores how comic poetry sharpened the audience’s memory as an intentional form of recollection that added to the reception of dramatic contests and became an institutionalised tool to inform Athenian civic memory.

In Chapter 5, Mirko Canevaro argues for the power that memory holds in oratory in fourth-century BCE Athens and its potential for moulding collective and individual memories in public discourse. Orators often turn to the past as a strategy of invoking authority in their arguments and demonstrating participation in shared cultural memory. Equally, these strategies have made it possible to manipulate memory through appeals to a presumably remembered past, which is presented as common knowledge, even if it is constructed. Canevaro intelligently demonstrates that the power of the (ab)use of the past is clearly realised by orators, creating further possibilities in the field of social memory. Catherine Darbo-Peschanski (Chapter 6) examines the role of memory

in historiography to identify different forms of memory, results of different temporal frameworks, which are in turn checked against broader patterns of cultural memory. She approaches historiography under the lens of creating *historia*, and argues for changes in motifs that influence the narratives of the past (162): ‘the time of justice’ (Herodotos); the ‘time of human nature’ (Thucydides and Xenophon); and ‘the time of fate/fortune’ (Polybios). For Darbo-Peschanski memory is an educational factor but is not always a direct agent in historiography.

In Chapter 7, Andrea Capra focuses on forgetting. He delves into Plato’s texts and in particular *Phaedrus*, where the philosopher uses Sappho’s *Ode to Helen* to discuss the juxtaposition between memory (*μνήμη*) and oblivion (*λήθη*) in the debate about ‘love’. The concept of ‘oblivion’ is then explored both in Plato’s work and its cultural context, highlighting not only roots to poetic memory but also merits – what Capra terms ‘lyric oblivion’ (179, 194). Memory and oblivion are not just the two sides of the same coin but are inextricably linked through a feedback loop. Ynon Wygoda’s contribution (Chapter 8) follows the same trajectory and explores the concept of ‘forgetfulness’ as a case of Socratic irony. The chapter has great synergy with the arguments and discussion of Capra just before. Now, the discussion revolves around key passages of *Meno* and *Protagoras* and underlines the pedagogical power of forgetting. Just as in Capra’s argument, where through oblivion one remembers more (and better), through forgetting one can understand and reach higher philosophical levels such as dialectical inquiry.

Richard King (Chapter 9) continues the analysis of memory in the work of Plato. He discusses *Philebus* approaching memory (*μνήμη*) and recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*), without either of which the other cannot exist, and he evaluates their role as part of the dialectic leading toward the ‘successful conduct of human life’ (217). He closely examines each concept and their relationships in Plato’s expanded philosophical framework, to approach them as part of an evolving dialectic on human ‘soul’, where memory, senses and images are interlinked. Following the development of the concept of memory in philosophy, Luca Castagnoli (Chapter 10) proceeds on to the works of Aristotle, the first of the philosophers to dedicate a treatise to memory (*On Memory and Recollection*). In Aristotle’s theory, (mental) images are central to approaching and understanding memory; through them, we can remember. Thus, the past – what one senses and perceives – is the only subject of memory. Aristotle approached memory in human terms and moved away from its divine provenance as personified in Mnemosyne or Mneme who were omniscient and the sources of human inspiration. Thus, Castagnoli argues that Aristotelian thought should be viewed as a conceptual break in Greek cultural tradition.

Part III deals with the Hellenistic period. Claude Calame (Chapter 11) critically approaches Theocritus’ *Idyll* 18 to argue about the legitimisation of contemporary circumstances in Ptolemaic Egypt through the use of a heroic (and poetic) past – the *arkhaîa* – that is part of Greek cultural memory. The *Idyll* celebrates the wedding of Helen and Menelaus, but Theocritus, through the epic theme (of the past) and language and the choral parts (ritual), creates an allusion to another idealised yet real couple:

King Ptolemy and Berenice. Textual manifestations and ritual performance make this an *epithalamios choros* rather than *logos* that brings the past to the present and repurposes the myth. In Chapter 12, Emidio Spinelli explores the centrality of memory in Epicurean philosophy. Memory and memory practices are central to communicating Epicureanism. Everyone can benefit from Epicurus' doctrines through the memorisation (and the process of memorising) of the epitome of his writings. In this context, however, memory acquires a physical status as it alters one's physical disposition (in many ways a development of earlier philosophical thought) through which the highest conduct of life is attainable.

Part IV examines the Imperial period. Steven D. Smith (Chapter 13) approaches the work of Aelian, whose aim was to memorialise Greek culture and was a deliberate, intentional act. He considers *De natura animalium* as an example of contemporary debates on memory and mnemonics. More importantly, he proposes that Aelian's treatise can be understood as a subtle critique of contemporary politics and, therefore, is a manifestation of the understanding of the manipulation of public memory during Caracalla's reign. Riccardo Chiaradonna's (Chapter 14) and Stephen R. L. Clark's (Chapter 15) contributions complement each other and deal with the philosophy of Plotinus. On the one hand, Chiaradonna focuses on the *Enneads* and analyses memory as part of Plotinus' metaphysical and epistemological approach. The philosopher works in the context of previous philosophical work but in contrast to Aristotle believes that memory and recollection can reveal the hierarchical metaphysical and cognitive levels of one's soul. On the other hand, Clark explores the concepts of remembering and forgetting in Plotinus' philosophy, which are approached as art and can be actively pursued rather than passively experienced. All elements, memory, recollection and forgetting can help one ascend from the intelligible world to actual reality and reach the divine origin.

Part V concludes the book with Maria Michela Sassi's paper (Chapter 16). She offers an overview of Greek philosophical approaches on practices of memory and the natural process of memorising in the *longue durée* from Pre-Socratic to Hellenistic philosophy. She also highlights the development of philosophical thought on memory and so interacts with many other chapters of the volume.

The volume is well edited, and typographical errors are almost nonexistent. Chapters mostly follow a clear structure with pronounced sub-chapters, except for Chapters 5, 13 and 14, which might have benefitted from such an approach, providing consistency to the volume's contents.

Papers are of high quality and offer thought-provoking argumentative angles. The volume also enjoys some coherence and thematic overlap and allows for tracing developments in understanding and theorising about memory in classical antiquity. Some chapters (Agócs, Canevaro, Castagnoli, Calame, Sassi) can be picked out as exempla of the potential of exploring memory to approach the ancient world. However, the reviewer felt that the volume had two main weaknesses that hinder the overall aims: (1) although the authors reflect on the role of memory, often they do not come to

conclusions but only provide thoughts; and (2) the focus of many contributions is restricted to literary or philosophical examples, creating a rift between ‘theories’ and ‘practices’ (even if these are implied). Thus, the volume remains largely unconnected to similar discussions in the field of memory in antiquity, contrary to the wishes of its editors.

Overall, the book is a valuable source of information and contemporary research trends in the field of memory studies in Classics directed towards how Greeks conceptualised memory and how this informed memory practices, but it feels like a missed opportunity. The synergy between the contributions is restricted to the structure of the volume, which is otherwise in limited dialogue with similar studies on memory, intentional history, and reception/use of the past.

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