INTERDISCIPLINARY EGYPTOLOGY

Project Report

Memory in Antiquity

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Abstract

This article provides a thematic summary of two workshops funded through the project *Memory in Antiquity*, hosted by Leiden University and the University of Birmingham. This project capitalises on the broad interest in memory in the humanities and social sciences and provides a forum for researchers to reflect on the processes of remembering and forgetting, how these are identifiable in the ancient sources, and what role they play in the construction of ideas about the past, with a particular focus on ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East.

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الذاكرة في العصور القديمة

الملخص

يقدّم هذا المقال ملخّصًا موضوعيًا لورشتين نظّمهما ومَوَّلهما مشروع "الذاكرة في العصور القديمة"، وقد عُقدتا في كلٍّ من جامعة لايدن وجامعة برمنجهام.حيث يسلّط المشروع الضوء على الأهمية البالغة لمفهوم الذاكرة في ميادين العلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية، إذ يسعى إلى توفير فضاء بحثي يمكّن ويساعد الباحثين من التأمّل في آليات التذكّر والنسيان، وفهم الطرق والأساليب التي تم استخدامها لذكر هذه العمليات في المصادر القديمة، فضلًا عن إبراز الدور الذي تؤدّيه تلك الآليات في بناء التصوّرات والمفاهيم حول الماضي، بالإضافة إلى كل ما سبق، يعمل المشروع على إبداء اهتمام خاص بالثقافات القديمة المتواجدة في حوض البحر المتوسّط والشرق الأدنى.

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1 Introduction

Statues, as well as other monuments, are symbols of power. They can materialise the memory of specific historical episodes, the legacy of past and present leaders, or the constructed sense of belonging to a nation, among other things. As visual reminders of systems of power, they can convey a variety of responses, ranging from respect to contestation. In this manner, the toppling of statues in various countries and as a result of conflicts has become a symbol for the willingness to forget. Yet the empty space those statues leave serves as a constant reminder of what was and no longer is: their absence makes them paradoxically present.

This is just an example of the complex workings of memory and its capacity to inform social practice. Memory can act as a powerful tool to construct, manipulate, resist, silence, unite, and ultimately provide hope. As such, memory can be used as a framework not only to explore ancient societies but also to understand ourselves. It is for these reasons that memory has become one of the major themes in humanities and the social sciences in the last few decades. The role of Aleida and Jan Assmann in the theorisation of cultural memory was fundamental in the inception of memory studies, placing Egyptology at the foreground of these theoretical developments (A. ASSMANN, 2011; J. ASSMANN, 2011). Their work's legacy has inspired countless approaches to how societies remembered in the past, but also to how the past is remembered. J. Assmann also demonstrated the value and necessity of looking beyond the borders of individual academic fields, and especially his own discipline, Egyptology. In that spirit, we believe that memory studies provide an opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary research. Memory can be an insightful framework to understand both ancient societies and their modern perceptions.

Memory studies were identified as a unique opportunity to explore the research synergies between the two lead authors, who had both worked on non-elite communities and aspects of social experience in the past. Miriam Müller has recently been investigating ancestor cults and memory within domestic contexts from an archaeological perspective. Her book on a neighbourhood of the ancient city of Avaris explores multicultural dynamics in a town on the periphery of the Egyptian state (MÜLLER, 2023). Meanwhile, Leire Olabarria published a monograph where she explored relatedness in Middle Kingdom Egypt focusing on how social groups are displayed on commemorative stelae from the site of Abydos (OLABARRIA, 2020). She has expanded her research on the materiality of memory and the performative dimension of remembrance in a recently published work (OLABARRIA, 2025). Both authors take an interest in how identity, relationships, and also memory can be expressed without written sources, hence exploring new ways to interpret the archaeological record. These overlapping interests were a catalyst to start a project to think about memory from within and beyond Egyptology through the piloting of a research group on approaches to memory in Antiquity.

The topic of memory was not only chosen because of the expertise of the two main authors, but also because it aligns with the research interests and priorities of our respective departments, namely the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of Birmingham, and the Leiden Institute for Area Studies at the Faculty of Humanities at Leiden University. Involving colleagues from diverse disciplinary backgrounds—including Assyriologists, Egyptologists, archaeologists, Byzantinists, Biblical scholars, and Roman historians among others—who presented on themes ranging from iconoclasm to ancestor cult, from monuments as resistance to climate anxiety, this project gave us an opportunity to escape the siloing of individual disciplines providing a space to facilitate academic exchange and blue-sky thinking. As part of this project, we organised two interrelated workshops with participants from both Leiden and Birmingham, as well as two external keynote speakers. The workshop in Leiden, held in March 2025, focused on the theme of remembering, while the workshop in Birmingham, in April 2025, explored material and linguistic aspects of the process of forgetting. These two encounters allowed us to showcase our current research with varied case studies ranging from Egypt, the Levant, the wider Near East, Iceland, Sri Lanka, and Rome. The disparity of these case studies, both in terms of geographic and chronological span, provided an opportunity for the-

oretical and methodological discussions, resulting in the identification of four overarching themes: politics, movement, landscape, and ritual. These themes emerged from the presentations organically, pointing at common trends underlying our collective thinking. These workshops demonstrate that some key concepts can inform interdisciplinary discussions in any context, from modern Sri Lanka to ancient Babylon. We present these four themes here in further detail with selected examples from across the breadth of case studies introduced in the workshops because we believe they have the potential to shape methodological discussions about memory in the past and the present and further the theoretical appeal of memory studies.

2 Discussion of preliminary results

2.1 The politics of memory: what kind of memory is preserved?

One of the main themes weaving together several of the contributions was the idea of what kind of memory is preserved and by whom.

Memory can be instrumentalised as a framework of **CONTROL** by ruling elites and governments in order to push certain narratives and favour particular agendas. For example, in one of the keynote lectures, we were introduced to the problematic treatment of heritage sites in Sri Lanka, where the role of Tamil minorities within the country is silenced as retribution for their involvement in the civil war.[1] Grave markers are bulldozed, memorials are forbidden, and the function of memory as a conduit for grief and reparation is only starting to be explored. Control is not only exercised by a central government; there are also examples where local elites engage in competitive censoring, as shown through the example of mosaics in 8th century Palestine.[2] Some common motifs such as birds and humans were targeted, yet plants or pixelated forms were left in place as a reminder of that exertion of local control. Iconoclasm in the region has been interpreted as a response to politico-religious changes, and scholarly debate has suggested that this phenomenon may be due to either Islamic legislation or internal ideological disagreements among Christian populations. When the known cases of mosaic iconoclasm are repositioned within their architectural settings, it is evident that the petitions to be remembered are respected. The targeting of the figures, then, should be understood within a framework of rejection of idolatry imposed and practised by those local elites.

Reaction to exercising control over memory can be characterised as **RESISTANCE**. Monuments erected by governments in order to force a particular narrative can be contested and eventually removed. A powerful case study from recent events in Syria shows how statues of political leaders can be perceived as a proxy for current events, and their destruction becomes an act of counter-memory.[3] Resistance is not only achieved through destruction, but also through acts of creation that may provide a new anchoring point for communal identity. The Cruciform Monument of Maništušu is an illustrative example of how memory can be mobilised to make political statements in creative ways.[4] This monument, found in Sippar, was carved in the 6th century BCE with an inscription that claimed to be from the time of the king Maništušu of the 23rd century BCE. The cunning text imitated the style and language of original Akkadian inscriptions in order to list some of the prerogatives of the local Ebabbar temple, hence reinforcing their lineage and legitimate power in the area. Rather than dismissing this inscription as a forgery, we can unlock the ways in which it acts as a tool for resistance against the new Persian political reality. By creating and guarding this monument, the local community reimagined a wished-for past, which served as source of hope against the new leaders.

[1] Ruth Young (University of Leicester), 'Heritage and forgetting in post-war Jaffna, Sri Lanka', 24 April 2025.
[2] Dan Reynolds (University of Birmingham), 'Christian iconoclasm in eighth-century Palestine and the censoring of the late Roman past', 24 April 2025.
[3] Nour Munawar (University of Amsterdam), 'Memory makers, memory breakers: The politics of cultural memory', 27 March 2025.
[4] Caroline Waerzeggers (Leiden University), 'Forgery, memory and resistance', 28 March 2025.

Memory, hence, can be a tool to contest but also to inspire expressions of identity and belonging that may otherwise go unnoticed. Memory can be a tool for **EMPOWERMENT** of local communities, as shown in the case study of the workers of Serabit el Khadim, a mining location in Sinai that was in use during the pharaonic period.[5] The main access to the plateau is covered with inscriptions leaving a mark of the members of an expedition. In contrast to the more prominent texts left by the elites, these apparently unassuming inscriptions, often categorised as graffiti, unlock the hidden stories of those who are otherwise only listed as numbers. Online tools nowadays easily allow us to create repositories of memory that can help re-centre some of those voices that were previously silenced, either through accident of preservation, through academic preference for certain material, or through exertion of control. The website *Syrian Memory*, which collects oral testimonies of Syrian communities and individuals, was presented as a prime example of this kind of inclusive collection of personal recollections.[6] Comparable endeavours to bring previously underrepresented actors to the forefront include the Quft Project, which studies the Arabic diaries documenting the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Egyptian Expedition at fifteen Egyptian archaeological sites between 1913 and 1947.[7] The Quft Project is shining a light on the role of Egyptian workers in the creation of archaeological knowledge, hence empowering local Egyptian communities to reclaim their heritage.

2.2 Memory on the move: how does memory travel?

The second main strand of approaches explored during the workshops related to movement and its impact on the transmission and transformation of memory.

Ideas of a **HOMELAND** shaped some of the discussions, both in relation to ancient and modern origin stories and migration. Archaeology grapples with establishing clear-cut links between people and material culture, which could be seen to express a mark of identity and cultural roots that could be reminiscent of a faraway land. The case study of the Eastern Nile Delta explored the enigmatic Hyksos culture, trying to read some of those potential cultural roots into uninscribed material culture.[8] The notion of homeland has implications for the people who experience migration, but also for narratives of power and control over territories, sometimes with severe consequences. This was illustrated by Munawar through the Ukrainian UNESCO heritage site of Tauric Chersonese in Crimea.[9] This ancient city, founded in the 5th century BCE, is a contested site of memory, as it is linked to ideas of homeland in both Ukrainian and Russian contexts. Tauric Chersonese is perceived as the cradle of Christian Orthodox faith, a fact that is used to support Russian claims to the annexation of Crimea. With this example, we witness how the symbolism afforded to the concept of homeland plays a key role in the creation and manipulation of nationalistic narratives of power.

Memories are used to bridge a **DISTANCE** in space and time, not only to establish links with a real or imagined homeland, but also to create a sense of belonging in a present location. For example, distant memory articulates the negotiation of identity in the case of medieval Iceland, where Irish ancestors are said to have been the origin of certain toponyms.[10] An engagement with an imagined homeland by medieval writers has modern ramifications, with Icelandic populations today claiming Celtic roots on the basis of a 10th century CE Irish past that was effectively invented by 13th century CE writers. Looking beyond the text, archaeology

[5] Sherouk Shehada (Helwan University), 'Serabit el-Khadim as a memorial of the ancient Egyptian missions', 28 March 2025.
[6] Nour Munawar (University of Amsterdam), 'Memory makers, memory breakers: The politics of cultural memory', 27 March 2025.
[7] The role of these diaries was one of the driving forces behind the conference *Bodies of Knowledge Arabic Language, Egyptian Labor, and Communities of Practice in the History of Archaeology & Egyptology*, held in November 2024 by the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC), which is one of our academic partners in the Birmingham-Leiden network.
[8] Miriam Müller (Leiden University), 'Building family histories at Tell el-Dab'a/Avaris: Migrant memories of a faraway past', 28 March 2025.
[9] Nour Munawar (University of Amsterdam), 'Memory makers, memory breakers: The politics of cultural memory', 27 March 2025.
[10] Chris Callow (University of Birmingham), 'Forgetting, remembering and creating the past in medieval Iceland', 25 April 2025.

allows us to access a different line of evidence that can complement or contest some of these other narratives. The case study of the Eastern Nile Delta showed us that foodways traditionally perceived as a marker for identity can preserve and re-actualise a memory of that distant homeland. Installations for the preparation of food found in the different houses do not have any counterpart in Egyptian material culture. In search of possible forerunners, almost identical structures were discovered in Northern Mesopotamia, potentially displaying a connection between these two areas.[11]

Foodways left a material trace, but they were also linked to intangible bodily practices. Several case studies engaged with the notion of **EMBODIMENT** as an avenue to explore memory in the material record. Inscriptions left on the wall of tombs at the necropolis of Saqqara in Egypt can give an indication of physical movement through the site, potentially displaying processional routes and interactions with monuments.[12] Graffiti were sometimes used in order to establish links with the past through monumental space and claiming a link with a social group. This practice ensures a connection with and participation in the memorialisation of a social group through embodied practice. The inscriptions and graffiti left by expedition members at Serabit el Khadim also share this aim of establishing links with the surrounding space and claiming their belonging to a group.[13] Accessing the plateau, which was a physically exerting activity, served as a bonding experience that prompted shared memories shaped by movement through this space.

2.3 Memory in the landscape: where is memory located?

A third theme that featured in multiple contributions in the workshops was the relationship between memory and landscape.

Some sites may have been perceived as powerful centres of memory, made more potent due to **PRESENCE** and human interaction over thousands of years. The necropolis of Saqqara is a prime example of such a place. Its location near the important centre of Memphis ensured its continuous use as a burial ground throughout Egyptian history. The presence of tombs belonging to the royal elites determined the location of other monuments that would benefit from the proximity to these prominent burials as well as the processional routes along this funerary landscape.[14] The chapel of Sekwesekhet exemplifies the construction of monumental genealogies of place through the addition of components expressing the memory of a group and their connections to that landscape over centuries. Presence can be achieved by proximity, but also by monumentality and visibility in the landscape. The necropolis of Palmyra features different types of tombs varying from imposing tower tombs to free-standing stelae on pit graves, yet funerary phraseology was shared between all of them.[15] Commonalities in epigraphic practices indicate a comparable desire to be present and remembered in this potent landscape.

The idea of human and monumental presence in a landscape is one of the prime tools to express memory through **PLACEMAKING** by social groups. The necropolis of Qubbet el-Hawa in Southern Egypt showcases how a place becomes a powerful site by means of continuous interaction.[16] Local communities reactivated this funerary space and hence the memory of important past leaders by adding and reconfiguring tomb spaces.

[11] Miriam Müller (Leiden University), 'Building family histories at Tell el-Dab'aAvaris: Migrant memories of a faraway past', 28 March 2025.

[12] Nico Staring (Leiden University), 'Ancient Egyptian tomb-graffiti', 28 March 2025.

[13] Sherouk Shehada (Helwan University), 'Serabit el-Khadim as a memorial of the ancient Egyptian missions', 28 March 2025.

[14] Leire Olabarria (University of Birmingham), 'Memory, embodiment, and genealogies of place: Constructing spaces of memory at Saqqara', 27 March 2025.

[15] Nolke Tasma, Leiden University, 'Too close to the sun? Remembering the dead in non-monumental Palmyrene epigraphy', 28 March 2025.

[16] Reuben Hutchinson-Wong (University of Birmingham), 'An ongoing investment: Collective remembrance and added burials at Tomb QH2526 at Qubbet al-Hawā', 27 March 2025.

This site is a good example of how memory is reconceptualised to align with the new needs of the local community to claim a place of their own memory. Placemaking is not only relevant in our study of funerary spaces, but it equally plays a role in the domestic sphere. Migrants marrying into local families of the Eastern Nile Delta affirmed their presence in this territory by constructing their own new family histories.[17] Memorial spaces within the household were built for the deceased members of the family. These 'houses of the dead' would be visible to the community and integrated into daily practices to memorialise their dead and create a sense of belonging to a place.

INVENTED memories can also be rooted in the landscape and become crystallised into toponyms. The case study of medieval Iceland grants an opportunity to study the effect that placenames can have on perceptions of ancestry.[18] The etymology of some toponyms was not well understood by the 13th century, leading authors of that time to seek an Irish linguistic root to justify the origin of those placenames. An alternative interpretation is that they could derive from Old Norse instead, which would suggest that those Irish connections were an invented legacy. The politics of Turkic languages in Iran provides another interesting case study of linguistic invented traditions.[19] Languages are instrumental in the enterprise of nation building and placemaking, as demonstrated by the claims to Classical works in Turkic vernaculars through modern Persian translations. The Turkic roots of these works are overlooked in the published translations, hence obliterating a linguistic ancestry while forging the identity of the titular nation through a fabricated cultural heritage.

2.4 Memory and ritual: how is memory performed?

The final theme of potential approaches to memory that emerged during the workshops pertains to the effect of ritual practice on the perpetuation and reinterpretation of memory.

Ritual interactions could lead to the **REFORMULATION** of memory into new religious traditions that would reactivate past experiences. A possible case is the ancient Roman agricultural festival of Robigalia, which was intended to protect fields from crop disease.[20] Reformulated memories of past agricultural catastrophes shaped ancient narratives about habitat loss and climate anxiety, leading to the use of ritual to foster communal identity and belonging. Memories could also be reshaped at an individual level. The funerary landscape of Qubbet el-Hawa provides an opportunity to study how the reiteration of ritual practices and tomb reuse could result in a reformulation of the beneficiary of the funerary cult.[21] While individual people could have been remembered shortly after their death, they may have been subsumed into collective groups of ancestors after two or three generations. This process should not be regarded as loss, but rather as a reconfiguration of memory.

MATERIALITY also influences the perception and effect of memory as a performative practice. The enigmatic group of the šarrina, attested in Late Bronze Age texts from Nuzi and Ḫattuša, were reinterpreted as royal ancestor effigies during the workshop.[22] The texts from Ḫattuša mentioning the šarrina refer to the making of wool dolls, with a clear focus on their materiality. These texts provide a good reminder of ritual practice as a sensory experience, where different kinds of materials, with their colours and textures, could

[17] Miriam Müller (Leiden University), 'Building family histories at Tell el-Dab'aAvaris: Migrant memories of a faraway past', 28 March 2025.

[18] Chris Callow (University of Birmingham), 'Forgetting, remembering and creating the past in medieval Iceland', 25 April 2025.

[19] Ferenc Csirkés (University of Birmingham), 'Forgetting Iran's Turkic literary past', 25 April 2025.

[20] Diana Spencer (University of Birmingham), 'Belonging to the land: Cultivation, curation, and memory', 28 March 2025.

[21] Reuben Hutchinson-Wong (University of Birmingham), 'Forgetting to remember: added burials and the slow transformation of memory at QH2526 in Qubbet al-Hawā', 25 April 2025.

[22] Albert Planelles (Leiden University), 'Royal cult in the Late Bronze Age Mesopotamian periphery: From the Lower Zab to the Upper Sea', 28 March 2025.

evoke certain memories. Acts of destruction intended to obliterate memory can also be identified by a close study of material remains. A group of execration figures was deposited in a corner of the 21st century BCE chapel of Sekwesekhet in the Egyptian site of Saqqara.[23] This cluster of 104 figures, dating approximately to the 19th century BCE, includes some execration texts listing leaders of foreign countries as well as Egyptian names in order to target this destructive magical practice against them. The chapel of Sekwesekhet, where the execration assemblage was found, was built on a key processional route leading to the pyramid of the Old Kingdom king Teti of the 24th century BCE. This location was probably perceived as a potent place that would contribute to the efficiency of these clay figures, some of which were intentionally broken to realise the full potential of this ritual.

Interaction with monuments in the past and present also has an impact on what is perceived as **CANON** and who controls those narratives and traditions. In the case of ancient Rome, there are examples of how the *curia*, the place of assembly of the senate in the Roman Forum, was reconfigured over time to reinforce messages about leadership and power.[24] These architectural alterations reflect dynamics of remembering and forgetting that were utilised by certain leaders in order to canonise their memory. A similar practice can be witnessed in modern interpretations of ritual space, which tend to highlight specific politico-cultural concerns. An interesting case is that of the Iron Age temple of Arad in Judah, which has a long archaeological history ending in its ritual burial.[25] This temple had been entirely forgotten in history as no written sources where it was featured were known until its remains were uncovered in the 1960s. When it came to providing an archaeological reconstruction of the site for visitors, the excavators chose to feature that earlier phase with the temple rather than a later version of the site that could be interpreted in line with the text of the Hebrew Bible. Placing the focus on a particular period highlights how the concerns of the group of excavators has an effect on what is remembered and what is not. The ideas of canon and tradition often determine decisions that are made in such archaeological reconstructions, but Arad can be understood as a counterexample to that trend.

3 Future plans

The four themes emerging from these workshops are innovative approaches to memory studies that have the potential to inform interdisciplinary research as shown by the case studies introduced above. The notion of politics of memory addresses the instrumentalisation of the past in the construction and interpretation of cultural heritage. Movement of people and ideas also leaves a mark on how and why memories are perceived and reformulated in a specific landscape. Placemaking emerges as a key tool to anchor memories and forge forms of belonging that produce new interactions with past and present. Performative practices make memory visible, highlighting the multifaceted nature of social experience. Living together means remembering together.

This project, with its wide geographic and chronological scope, demonstrates the value of transcending disciplinary boundaries in the study of complex human responses to everyday challenges. An encompassing approach to memory studies shows that some of the same mechanisms and processes can be identified in past and present and across cultures. In this context, interdisciplinarity is not only meaningful but also necessary to raise questions and provide new insights into human experience.

[23] Leire Olabarria (University of Birmingham), 'Memory, embodiment, and genealogies of place: Constructing spaces of memory at Saqqara', 27 March 2025.

[24] Hannah Cornwell (University of Birmingham), ' "Recollections may vary": constructing the res publica and altered/alternative memories', 25 April 2025.

[25] Jonathan Stökl (Leiden University), 'Forgetting sacred sites: the tension in Biblical accounts between licensed and unlicensed sanctuaries', 24 April 2025.

Humanities are undeniably under threat in this day and age, with their societal relevance being questioned and funding being withdrawn. An approach like the one outlined in this paper can be a fruitful and positive avenue to demonstrate the power of collaboration beyond disciplinary silos and the potential of overarching research themes for the survival of our disciplines. Their value in the understanding of modern-day challenges proves that our past case studies are more relevant than ever.

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