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Sites of Conflict as Sites of Memory in Fifth Century BC Greece

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This paper will focus on the Persian War and how it was remembered after the conflict. In particular, we will focus on the site of battle as an arena in which collective memories\(^1\) were formed. We will look at the relevance of the battlefield of Plataea (fought in 479 BC) to see whether a unified collective memory or a collection of individual memories were created. This example will also serve to illustrate the importance of physically being ‘in-the-place’ when constructing and maintaining a memory. Following this we will examine contemporary opinions concerning Salamis (a naval battle fought in 480 BC), to see whether the pan-Hellenic ‘imagined community’ of Greeks exerted any significant pressure on the memories of the Persian War held by individual Greek city-states. And lastly we will look at the later example of the Siege of Athens (87-86 BC), to see whether collective memory is temporally constrained or whether a recollection of the Persian War can exist timelessly in the ancient public consciousness.

In order to understand how past events are assimilated into the present collective framework, it is necessary to address how individuals communally recall the past. Institutionalised communal commemoration, such as commemorative anniversaries are, in their basic form, celebrations of historical events which include multiple group members. It has been noted that the subtext of such commemorative events was twofold: the ideal of freedom and the celebration of a common culture.\(^2\) In relation to the commemorative event concerning Plataea\(^3\) (named the Festival of Liberty or *Eleutheria*), it is clear that the emphasis partly lies in the survival of freedom. However, to assert that a common culture was celebrated may not be the case. The relationship between people and place is perspectival\(^4\) as different groups may see


\(^2\) Chaniotis 2005: 229.

\(^3\) We are informed by Plutarch (*Aristides* 21.3-6) that the festival was still being held in his day, some six hundred years after the Greek victory at Plataea.

space and place in different ways. It is possible, then, that due to Greek city-states being fiercely independent political units, they would attend pan-Hellenic commemorative anniversaries such as the *Eleutheria* to assert their own identity and cultural memory of past events which may conflict with other assertions being presented at the same anniversary. We learn from Herodotus\(^5\) that various city-states who did not take part in the conflict erected individual, empty graves on the battlefield up to ten years after the event. I would interpret this as an effort to make an allusion to an individual city’s contribution or participation in a past conflict. The comic poet Poseidippos (who was writing in the third century BC) describes Plataea:

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\begin{align*}
\text{νεώ δύ' εἰσὶ καί στόα καί τούνομα} \\
\text{kai to βαλανεῖον kai to Σηράμβου κλέος,} \\
\text{to πολύ μέν ἄργη, τοῖς δ' Ἐλευθερίοις πόλις.} \quad 6
\end{align*}
\]

‘It has two temples, a stoa, and its name, a bath and the fame of Serambos. Most of the time it is fallow, and only at the festival of the Eleutheria does it become a city.’

This illustrates the obscurity of Plataea where celebrations are not recalling the prominent (physical) position of the city during the final land battle of the Persian War on mainland Greece. The fragment clearly states that a multitude of people would flock to the specific place in order to take part in the (possibly multitude of) collective memory/ies of the Persian War. This example reinforces the idea that to be ‘in-the-place’ is important for the effective transmission of an identity.

In an effort by each *polis* to assert their contribution to the Persian War, memories and counter-memories of the same event were produced and perpetuated at will. As we will see below, conflictual memories can be seen of Corinth’s participation in the naval battle of Salamis. Institutions of active memory (referred to as the ‘canon’)

\(^5\) Herodotus (9.85.3) describes multiple funeral mounds which, as far as his information goes, were empty. However, he only mentions the Aeginetans specifically as constructing their tomb ten years after the battle. As Herodotus (9.28.6) lists Aegina in the Greek forces present at the battle, the ‘tomb’ may be an elaboration on an already existing funeral mound.

\(^6\) Edmunds 1961: Fragment 29.
preserve the past as present, while institutions of passive memory (referred to as the ‘archive’) preserve the past as the past.\(^7\) The canon can be seen as cultural working memory and is independent of historical and social change. The messages contained in cultural working memory are ingrained and the canon has the longevity to outlast generations who encounter these cultural memories and (re)interpret them. In contrast to the canon, the archive can be seen as cultural reference memory and can be said to exist between the canon and forgetting. These ‘stores’ of memory data can be accessed and used, for example, by political powers as tools and thus are potentially important utilities in exercising power. Without these archives there would be no data to organise the future and no control over the past. The archives, historically speaking, are stores of information that are of no immediate use but may be accessed when (wished to be made) relevant. These stored memories are given the chance of a second (possibly indefinite) life after having originally fallen out of relevance. Thus, the archive is stored but accessible cultural mnemonic material.

Herodotus states\(^8\) (relying heavily on Athenian informants) that the Corinthians apparently fled at Salamis when confronted by the enemy navy. This example may have been such a dormant narrative that was deliberately revived. This narrative is unlikely to have been any more than Athenian slander as by 430 BC Athens and Corinth had become the bitterest of enemies.\(^9\) The Corinthians were permitted by Athens, who controlled Salamis during this period, to both bury their dead in the communal grave here and erect a memorial to their dead on the island. In addition, Corinth’s name is included in the joint commemorative monuments at Delphi and Olympia and they apparently acquitted themselves well in the battle with a Corinthian captain capturing enemy arms.\(^10\) This Corinthian example would therefore suggest that the pan-Hellenic ‘imagined community’ exerted little or no significant pressure on

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\(^7\) Assmann, A. 2010: 100-103 discusses cultural working memory, the canon; and cultural reference memory, the archive.

\(^8\) Herodotus 8.94.1. However, other Greek city-states apparently refuted this Athenian claim, see Herodotus 8.94.4.

\(^9\) The first Peloponnesian War, especially the battles of: Halieis 459 BC (Diodorus 11.78.1-2; Thucydides. 1.105.1), Megara 458 BC (Diodorus 11.79.1-4; Thucydides 1.105.2-106) and Sicyon 453 BC (Diodorus 11.88.1-2; Thucydides 1.108.5 & 111.2). The Corcyraean War, particularly the naval battle by Sybota Island 433 BC (Diodorus 12.33; Thucydides 1.45-55) and the Revolt of Potidaea 432 BC (Diodorus 12.34; Thucydides 1.56-63).

\(^10\) See Plutarch’s *On the Malice of Herodotus* 39 for numerous examples of Corinth being present at Salamis.
the memories of the Persian War. Conflictual memories could be archived and re-emerge to suit the needs of the present.

In relation to time only the individual lives and dies. The group, through which the survival of a collective memory is made possible, has the potential to live on indefinitely. By constructing a past togetherness in the present, a collective identity is formed\(^{11}\) and it is necessary for an individual to share in the group’s collective memory in order to belong.\(^{12}\) Plutarch describes to us how, when Sulla had besieged Athens in 87 BC, the Athenian envoys attempted reconciliation by emphasising the greatness of their city that was in danger of being destroyed. The envoys failed to convince the besieging force as they referenced, among other Athenian successes, the repulsion of the Persians four centuries before, thus alienating the Roman force. This was a failure of communication based on the cultural memory of one party that the other could not understand or engage with.\(^{13}\) Plutarch reports Sulla as saying:

\[\textit{\'Ω μακάριοι, τοὺς λόγους τούτους ἀναλαβόντες: ἐγὼ γάρ ὦ φιλομαθήσων εἰς Ἄθηνας ὑπὸ Ῥωμαίων ἐπέμφθην, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἀφισταμένους καταστρεψόμενος.}\(^{14}\)

‘Dearest gentlemen, take these speeches away with you; for I was not sent to Athens by the Romans to learn its history, but to put down its rebels.’

Sulla refers to the evidence put forward by the envoys as Athens’ ‘history’ whereas the Athenians had, presumably, carefully selected these examples of their cultural memory to present in order to save their city. Unfortunately, it is precisely because these cultural memories are exclusively Athenian that the envoys’ efforts fell on deaf ears. Thus, collective memory can, in fact, enter public consciousness and become

\(^{11}\) Assmann, J. 2006: 94.
\(^{13}\) Chaniotis 2005: 215.
\(^{14}\) Plutarch \textit{Sulla} 13.4.
timeless. However, it can also become an alienating factor when interacting with a group outside one’s cultural framework.

Neither the context nor meaning of a place is ever static. Landscapes contain the traces of past activities and thus, to access these traces, groups must utilise interpretative narratives.\(^{15}\) Interpretations are both subjective and changeable and so I therefore believe Plataea and other sites of conflict to be sites of competitive commemoration. The present will always be contentiously connected to the past, however remotely, as we are handing ourselves down to ourselves constantly.\(^{16}\) Efforts of recollection, such as the pros and cons of the Corinthian conduct at Salamis can be seen as ‘potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past’.\(^{17}\) A group’s collective memory is particular to that group. Meaning is attributed through the conventions of the community in which the individual and group reside and it is within this group that memory, intelligence and identity are learned and constructed. Collective memory is a process of exchange, depending on socialisation to survive while enabling humans to live within social groupings.\(^{18}\) A collective memory when formed has the potential to outlive the individual.

\(^{15}\) Bender 2001: 4.
\(^{16}\) Thomas 1996: 61.
\(^{17}\) Boyarin 1994: 22.
Bibliography


