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THE PRESENCE OF *DAMNATIO MEMORIAE* IN ROMAN ART

Lauren Hackworth Petersen

Of the emperor Domitian (reigned 81–96 C.E.), the Roman biographer Suetonius recounts the following mixed reactions to his assassination:

The people received the news of his death with indifference, but the soldiers were greatly grieved and at once attempted to call him the Deified Domitian. . . . The senators on the contrary were so overjoyed, that they raced to fill the House, where they did not refrain from assailing the dead emperor with the most insulting and stinging kind of outcries. They even had ladders brought and his shields and images torn down before their eyes and dashed upon the ground; finally they passed a decree that *his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated*.¹

The senators' response was severe but not atypical. In fact, Domitian was one of many individuals whose memory was condemned upon death, meaning that records of the person, both visual and verbal, were ordered to be mutilated or destroyed. The term *damnatio memoriae* is often invoked to describe the institutional decree and events that took place once a Roman was declared to be an enemy of the state, but, as we know, this term is a modern one. Nonetheless, the ancient combination of the word *memoria*, along with various forms of verbs such as *condemnare*, *damnare*, *abolere*, and *eradere*, makes clear that a decree to condemn an

individual to oblivion meant eradicating his (or her) images and inscriptions as if he (or she) had never existed.² It was an attempt at conscious forgetting, analogous to wiping a slate or ancient wax tablet clean. As Plato pithily articulates in his treatise on memory, which helped to shape Roman writings on memory, "Whatever is so imprinted [in the wax block of the soul] we remember and know so long as the image remains; whatever is rubbed out . . . we have forgotten and do not know."³ But, in reality, it was not so simple.

It is well understood that memory making was central for the Romans, especially for elite and powerful individuals and their families, who had a tremendous stake in being part of Rome's recorded history. The very idea that one's memory could be ordered to be obliterated from collective memory demonstrates just how persistently Romans sought to (re)write their own recorded history, but usually with various degrees of success, as we shall see. While the study of memory and *damnatio memoriae* has received excellent scholarly attention within the last decade or so,⁴ this essay takes a slightly different tack. It takes as a point of departure the premise that the stated goal of *damnatio memoriae* was to eradicate the memories of condemned individuals. Yet this practice often had the opposite effect—that is, of reminding the viewer of those who were removed from public view. The question remains as to why the practice of

damnatio memoriae could not actually achieve its ostensible aim of eradicating an individual from collective memory.

As individuals moved throughout Rome, they were continually reminded of the city's history and the emperors' deeds through visual cues understood as crucial for perpetuating memory.⁵ Imperial monuments, such as triumphal arches, displayed text and images to remind viewers of Rome's past, much the same as funerary monuments of wealthy citizens were intended to record their achievements and promote the family's good reputation and social standing for posterity. Likewise, sculpted portraits were often accompanied by inscriptions. Text and images could thus work together to stimulate a specific memory of an individual (or individuals) and affirm Rome's history more broadly. This situation is different from that of Romans of relatively modest means; they could not always secure resources, nor did they have the political achievements, to warrant bold memory making and monument making. Most Romans, it must be remembered, are *unintentionally* rendered to oblivion, with little trace of their existence marking the material record.

As we saw with Domitian, however, a damnation of memory could mean that material traces of an individual were purposefully abolished, thereby removing the chance that a visual or verbal stimulus might evoke the memory of the proclaimed enemy of the state. A portrait could be smashed to pieces or systematically mutilated, with eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, and chin carved out, thus making the figure, for the most part, unrecognizable, thereby negating the positive visual cues to memory making.⁶ Relief sculptures and painted images could also suffer the effects of *damnationes*. For example, a

relief panel from the Porta Argentariorum in Rome (204 C.E.) now depicts an isolated image of Caracalla pouring a libation (Fig. 1). The left and central portions of the composition are rendered imageless. Caracalla's young wife, Plautilla, and her father have been chiseled from the relief field as a result of Caracalla's attempt to eradicate their memories. Likewise, another panel from the same monument depicts the emperor Septimius Severus and his wife, Julia Domna (Fig. 2). A fragment of a caduceus appears to float in the void to the right of the empress, and a substantially lower relief carving on the empress's left side exposes faint vestiges of the erasure of her son Geta, who had once been carved into the panel and subsequently carved out after his murder by his ruthless brother, Caracalla. In both panels, the empty (or clumsily reworked) space creates an unbalanced, awkward composition. The erasure calls attention to itself. In a sense, therefore, the empty space has become as much a presence as the figures themselves.⁷

The erasure has become a mark, much like the presence of a written sign, to put it in the terms of Jacques Derrida.⁸ Indeed, the erasures of the relief panels described above, among many others, have the quality of physical marks. The empty spaces have been made present through the process of erasure, and the subsequent physical absence of the preceding mark (that is, the image of an individual) is present as, or signified by, a void. The empty spaces, as indexical representations of erasing, become subjects of the panels; they represent a past event—the damnation of the memory of an individual. Ironically, the empty spaces could function as prompts to recall the memory of the condemned individual.⁹ While this concept has been ad-

dressed generally in the literature, I would like to push it a bit further. *Damnatio memoriae* was an institution that permitted Romans to (re)cast a past with which they could live¹⁰—that is, a past that was not immediate, but took some working to reconstruct.

In a fascinating essay on memory making, Sigmund Freud invokes a well-beloved children's toy, the Mystic Writing-Pad, as a way to explain the perceptual apparatus of the mind, which, he believes, is open to new experiences while never quite losing the impressions of the past (i.e., memories).¹¹ Before relating this Pad to memory making, Freud discusses the role of writing on paper as a means of securing a "permanent memory-trace" of something that someone wishes to remember. A sheet of paper thus contains a mark, the "memory-trace." The memory-trace, according to Freud, only ceases to be permanent when one discards the sheet of paper. Writing with chalk upon a slate board provides an alternative means for supplementing a memory. Although the slate does not offer a "permanent memory-trace," as paper does, Freud notes that a chalkboard is "a receptive surface which retains its receptive capacity for an unlimited time and the notes upon which can be destroyed as soon as they cease to interest [him], without any need for throwing away the writing-surface itself."¹²

Ancients had a similar device—the wax tablet—which, too, was reusable. However, unlike chalk, which adds to the surface, the writing implement for a wax tablet is a stylus, which engraves marks into the wax surface. Nonetheless, the wax tablet could be smoothed down, thereby erasing the text, making it comparable to a chalkboard. In fact, the wax tablet was used as an apt metaphor for the ancient memory process,

as we saw in Plato's remark that memories were imprinted on the wax block of the soul. With the decree of *damnatio memoriae*, stone portraits, reliefs, and inscriptions, although of permanent materials, could also receive erasure like the slate and wax tablet. Put another way, the entire stone surface would not need to be thrown away if the memory of an individual was no longer to be retained. Rather, like the slate board or wax tablet, an image could be, as it were, rubbed out by chiseling it away.

This analogy between the slate board and Roman stone is inadequate, however. An erased slate does not retain a mark, but, as indicated, the traces of erasure from *damnationes* are marks in and of themselves. Freud's remarks on the Mystic Writing-Pad offer an alternative approach that can be applied to analyzing the effects of *damnatio memoriae*, even as he discusses this device in relation to memory making. He writes:

[It is] a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. It claims to be nothing more than a writing-tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of notes that have been made on it.¹³

The Pad, which has both an unlimited receptive capacity and the quality of retaining permanent traces, is comprised of a slab of dark resin or wax and thin, transparent sheets. These sheets lie over the slab and consist of two layers; the upper layer is a

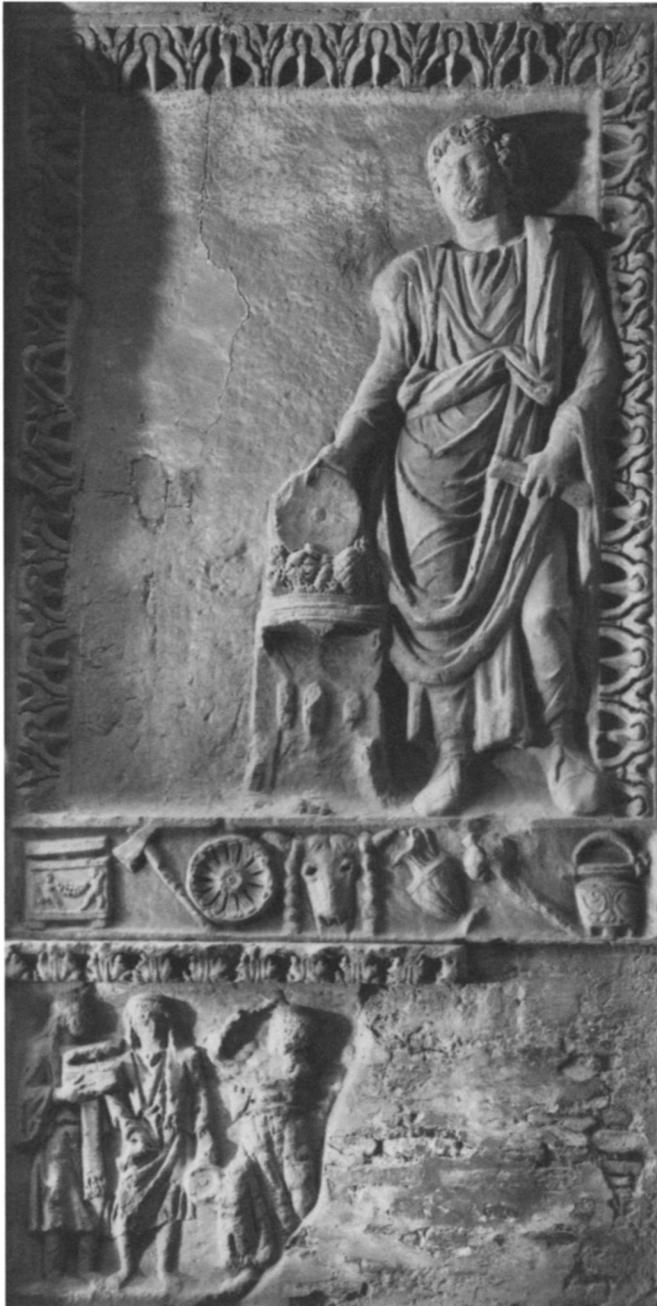


Fig. 1 Porta Argentariorum, panel B: *Caracalla Sacrificing*. 204 C.E. Rome. (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY; ART402438)



Fig. 2 Porta Argentariorum, panel A: *Septimius Severus and Julia Domna Sacrificing*. 204 C.E. Rome. (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY: ART300443)

piece of celluloid, and the bottom layer is a piece of waxed paper that gently adheres to the slab surface. One makes a mark by applying a stylus to the celluloid, thereby indirectly scratching the slab surface. If one wishes to erase the mark, one simply lifts the sheets from the slab. The writing disappears from the celluloid surface, but the grooves from the marks remain visible on the slab as permanent traces. The Pad has the benefits of both paper and slate (and as such offers Freud a metaphor for the human mind).

It seems that a loose connection can be drawn between the writing/erasing exercise on a Mystic Writing-Pad and the processes of memory making and *damnatio memoriae* in stone (among other media).¹⁴ Both stone surfaces and the Pad are places for making marks and memory. The process of *damnationes*, of the abolishing or recarving of images, compares to the lifting of the sheets of the Pad. In both instances, the intent is surely to erase or remove images, consigning them to oblivion, whether in individual or collective memory. Yet the stone, as with the reliefs of the Porta Argentariorum, and resin slab both present a trace of what was. Of course, the resin slab's permanent traces are the grooves of the writing/design; and with time and various rewritings, the slab becomes overinscribed and largely illegible. In contrast, a relief's permanent traces are the marks of erasure—the empty spaces that were intentionally made and left behind—that could function as prompts to remember. But the capacity of Freud's metaphor to explain the impossibility of achieving a clean slate—as far as memory goes—more closely approximates the situation with *damnatio memoriae* than does Plato's notion that an image is either simply present or absent in memory.

This analogy could also apply to portraits in the round. When Pliny the Younger recounts his version of the destruction of Domitian's images, he makes it clear that the destruction approximates attacks on the emperor himself,¹⁵ as well as creating opportunities for the physical transformation of the sculpted material itself. He writes:

It was our delight to dash those proud faces to the ground, to smite them with the sword and savage them with the axe, as if blood and agony could follow from every blow. Our transports of joy—so long deferred—were unrestrained; all sought a form of vengeance in beholding those bodies mutilated, limbs hacked in pieces, and finally that baleful, fearsome visage cast into fire, to be melted down, so that from such menacing terror something for man's use and enjoyment should rise out of the flames.¹⁶

Despite both Pliny's and Suetonius's accounts of the attacks on Domitian's images, his sculpted portraits do survive, many of which contain no indication that they were deliberately mutilated in antiquity. In all likelihood, these portraits were warehoused so that they might be recarved (or recycled) into the likeness of another individual at a future time, a practice that was not uncommon, as Eric Varner's work clearly demonstrates.¹⁷ Indeed, a number of Domitian's portraits can be identified as having been reworked into images of Nerva, most famously in frieze A of the Cancelleria reliefs, with the telltale sign of the relatively small, recarved head of Domitian/Nerva (Fig. 3). The fact that we can identify both Domitian and Nerva in this image, as the ancients probably did,¹⁸ suggests that Roman sculpture could be a palimpsest of memories, good and bad.



Fig. 3 Cancelleria reliefs, frieze A: *Profectio of Domitian/Nerva* (fourth figure from the left). 93–95 C.E. Vatican Museums, Vatican State. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY; ART80416)

By abolishing images (by means of melting, erasing, or recarving) or removing them from public view, the Romans—or, more specifically, the members of the Senate—were attempting to write over their recorded history. To put it in Freudian terms, through the process of repression, in which something is kept at a distance from the conscious,¹⁹ Romans sought to purge condemned individuals from collective memory, whether displacing the condemned individual by the substitution of another (that is, through recarving) or through wholesale destruction. Indeed, not all cases of *damnatio memoriae* retained conspicuous traces of what was to be forgotten; melted bronze portraits and truly shattered stone portraits are effectively eradicated from the material record, while recarved or chiseled-out portraits could leave memory traces. With the latter, like the marks left behind on an

“erased” Mystic Writing-Pad, the wholesale wiping out of condemned individuals is not quite complete. In the words of Derrida, “We must conceive . . . what Freud doubtless believed to be the indelibility of certain traces in the unconscious where ‘. . . nothing is forgotten.’”²⁰ One could argue that the senators’ proclaimed attempts to erase parts of history markedly failed in their goal. Many individuals condemned to oblivion and their subsequent erasures remain etched in stone, and thus in Roman history, since sculptural voids and mutilations could correspond, in the mind of the viewer, with memory traces that resist eradication. Despite all the rhetoric of erasing memory, *damnatio memoriae*, in practice, often commemorated the very act of forgetting, thereby paradoxically spurring one to remember individuals supposedly abolished from collective memory.

NOTES

1. Suetonius, *Domitian* 23, in his *Works*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), II, pp. 384–385 (emphasis mine).
2. Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 1–9. See also Friedrich Vittinghoff, *Der Staatsfeind in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Untersuchungen zur "damnatio memoriae"* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1936).
3. Plato, *Theaetetus* 191D–E, in Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 21.
4. Most notably Harriet I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Varner (see n. 2, above); *id.*, ed., *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* (Atlanta: Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2000); and Charles W. Hedrick, Jr., *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).
5. See especially essays in Elke Stein-Hölkeskamp and Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, eds., *Erinnerungsorte der Antike: Die römische Welt* (Munich: Beck, 2006); Penelope Davies, "The Politics of Perpetuation: Trajan's Column and the Art of Commemoration," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101, no. 1 (Jan. 1997):41–65; and Michael Koortbojian, "In Commemorationem Mortuorum: Text and Image along the 'Streets of Tombs,'" in *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, ed. Jás Elsner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 210–233.
6. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation*, esp. pp. 3–4.
7. As Varner (*ibid.*, p. 198) notes, "The resulting blank passages in relief speak volumes . . . [the] obliterated individuals are tellingly present through their conspicuous absences."
8. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 311–317.
9. See also Hedrick, especially the chapter "Remembering to Forget: The *Damnatio Memoriae*," pp. 89–130, although his focus is on the effect of *damnatio memoriae* on ancient writers' accounts of history.
10. This concept is taken from Michael Roth's study of modern trauma and its effects on memory and history. See Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 13.
11. Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (1925), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 23 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957–1974), XIX (1961), pp. 227–232. Derrida famously provides a subtle analysis of this essay in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 196–231.
12. Freud, p. 227.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
14. While the comparison drawn here between personal/spontaneous and collective/institutionalized memory making and forgetting may seem strained, a case can be made for strong, intimate interconnections between the two, particularly in response to distressing circumstances at any given time by (re)forming personal and collective identities. See Roth, esp. pp. 8–17 and 201–213.
15. See Peter Stewart's chapter "Touching Statues," in *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 261–299.
16. Pliny the Younger, *Panegyric* 52.4–5, in his *Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), II, pp. 440–441.
17. Varner *Mutilation and Transformation*, pp. 111–135, for Domitian's portraits.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
19. Sigmund Freud, "Repression" (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 23 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957–1974), XIV, pp. 146–158.
20. Derrida, "Freud," p. 230.