

This paper explores the creation and manipulation of social memory in Ovidian elegy. According to A. and J. Assmann, social memory is created by a complex transformation of individual memories into a knowledge shared by a group of people. The transformation can be achieved by narratives, memorials or rituals and often involves a struggle for an authoritative version of the past. This paper argues that the productive tension between private and public voice inherent in Roman elegy (the poems are often framed as private messages, while promising to make the addressee famous) is taken to an extreme when inscriptions are incorporated into the text. Such elegies offer an exciting tool for studying the transformation of individual into social memory.

An instructive example is *Her.* 7.195–6 (the funerary inscription Dido imagines for her own tomb). The epitaph blames Aeneas for her death, omitting any reference to a divine intervention that forced him to leave Carthage. By planning to have her accusation carved in marble, the queen is trying to perpetuate her own version in Carthaginian public opinion, thereby manipulating the social memory of her people in favor of her view of the events. Thus, the inscription is presented as laying the foundation for the future hatred between Carthage and Rome. While the epitaph is, in the *Heroides*, a fantasy of Dido, *Fasti* 3.549–50 presents it as a real inscription, whose message has a profound impact on Dido's exiled sister Anna (cp. her encounter with Aeneas in *Fasti* 3), apparently suggesting that a memorial is a successful strategy of manipulation.

In fact, however, Dido is immortalized not by her inscription, but by a piece of literature and of Latin literature at that. Contrary to what *Heroides* 7 suggests, the Latin verse inscription quoted in the elegy cannot be a transcript of a Carthaginian original. Furthermore, Dido's letter is in itself not fully comprehensible were the reader not familiar with the *Aeneid*. From this perspective, it is not Dido who manipulates her people's social memory, but the Romans who imagine her doing so. They create their own “memory” of the events in Carthage, which is spread successfully not so much through inscriptions, but through literature. Similar questions arise with other inscriptions found in the Ovidian corpus, which are often inspired by features of inscribed epigrams. In pitting private and public, literary and inscribed texts against each other, Ovid explores the possibilities and pitfalls inherent in the shaping of social memory. Recently, Ramsby, Spentzou and Fulkerson have drawn attention to related questions. Fulkerson considers the *Heroides* a ‘literary community’ in which the memory of Dido leads to the premature death of Phyllis, while Ramsby discusses the sophisticated means by which Dido’s epitaph highlights Aeneas’ “blame and her effectiveness”. This paper hopes to add new aspects to the discussion by focusing on the rivalry of literature and inscriptions in forming a social memory in which the meaning of events is open to discussion.

Bibliography

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