

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: ERASURES AND REWRITINGS IN SPACE AND TIME

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In Late Antiquity, as in other periods, particular ways of seeing had a profound impact on how contemporaries interpreted the world around them,¹ which, in turn, helps to explain why acts of erasure should be particularly potent. Moreover, late ancient viewers were demonstrably never simply passive “witnesses” to the world around them; rather, the descriptions they offered inscribed meaning onto what they saw, and in such acts of inscription simultaneous acts of erasure or omission could render the inscribed meaning more emphatic. A celebrated instance appears in Ammianus Marcellinus’s famous ekphrasis of Rome in his account of the emperor Constantius II’s *adventus* to the city in April 357 CE. The report is permeated by language that stresses the visual impact of monuments that are exemplary of Rome’s imperial grandeur, particularly in terms of the emperor’s response to them through his stupefied gaze.² Yet the description is selective, omitting any reference

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¹ The classic study for antiquity remains Jás Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 278-287. See also Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 102-133. For theoretical considerations, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), retains its power.

² Ammianus Marcellinus 16.10.6 (*unde cum se vertisset ad plebem, stupebat*), 13 (*obstipuit, perque omne latus quo se oculi contulissent, miraculorum denstitate praestricus*), 14 (*quidquid viderat primum*), 17 (*multis igitur cum stupore visis*), emphasis added.

to the increasingly prominent Christian topography of the city, an exclusion that seems all the more pointed when we consider that elsewhere Ammianus *does* refer to the buildings and personnel of the Roman church.³ For the account of 357, it is as if the pagan Ammianus is consciously erasing it from his conception of what constituted the *Urbs Aeterna*.⁴

The pointed subjectivity of Ammianus's account is underscored by other descriptions of Rome written about a century later by the Christian Gallic aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris, notably in his report of his journey from Gaul to Rome in 467 CE. Once more, visual cues punctuate the account, as the city is described as bursting upon his sight. Unlike the vista offered by Ammianus, however, Sidonius's description refers both to ancient structures (particularly those associated with the conveyance and deployment of the city's water supplies: Sidonius gives the impression that the journey there left him parched), as well as to Christian ones, in the shape of the great apostolic basilicas of Peter and Paul.⁵ Such vaunting of Christian sites was not incompatible with celebrating Rome's imperial past: in a letter written about a decade earlier, Sidonius showed that just as much as Ammianus he could regard Rome as the embodiment of imperial greatness, explaining to his friend Eutropius the dazzling impact that such a city would have on a young man's eyes.⁶

Similar observations could be made about other forms of description, in a range of both pagan and Christian literature. We see it, for instance, in accounts of the physical appearance of individuals, where physiognomic tropes could be manipulated to describe, inscribe, and dispute physical attributes that embodied moral qualities.⁷ As with

³ Ammianus Marcellinus 15.7.7-10 (deposition of Pope Liberius); 27.3.12-15 (buildings and personalities at the time of the disputed papal election of 366).

⁴ For discussion and references to earlier studies, Mark Humphries, "Narrative and Subversion: Exemplary Rome and Imperial Misrule in Ammianus Marcellinus," in *Some Organic Readings in Narrative*, ed. Fritz-Gregor Herrmann and Ian Repath (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2019), 233-254, esp. 241-244.

⁵ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 1.5.9.

⁶ Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 1.6.2: *si semel et in inventa viderit domicilium legum, gymnasium litterarum, curiam dignitatum, verticem mundi, patriam libertatis, qua unica totius orbis civitate soli barbari et servi peregrinantur.*

⁷ Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, 134-170; Guy Sabbah, *La méthode d'Ammien Marcellin. Recherches sur la construction du discours historique dans les Res Gestae* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1978), 421-428; Anthony Corbeil, *Nature Embodied: Gesture in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton

descriptions of places, much depended on the eye of the beholder. Thus, for an admiring Ammianus, the lively eyes of the emperor Julian blazed with signs of his innate intelligence; but for the hostile Gregory of Nazianzus, Julian's darting eyes (along with his wobbly neck, shrugging shoulders, and unsteady gait) portended instead the emperor's unreliable caprice.⁸

The essays assembled in this volume do much to reinforce how subjective and dynamic such representation could be, and that an essential component was not just description, but also omission and erasure. Such activities were intimately connected with assertions of authority, particularly when enacted by members of political and religious elites, where both description and erasure could be seen as imposing a *communis opinio* in a top-down model. For example, in the ecclesiastical sphere, the thirty-ninth *Festal Letter* (for the year 367) of Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria famously defines what literature should be read by Christians in terms both of what should be included, either as canonical scriptures or writings by approved apostolic fathers, and what excluded, as heretical and apocryphal. Exclusion effectively meant erasure, for while the books of the Old and New Testament and by the apostolic fathers are listed by title, apocryphal works are not, instead being delineated in terms of their unorthodox content. It has been speculated that the cache of heterodox scriptures preserved in mid-fourth century papyrus codices and discovered in the mid-1940s at Nag Hammadi in middle Egypt bears witness to how this particular act of erasure occurred, with the scriptures carefully removed from a collection (there is a Pachomian monastery nearby) and then buried.⁹

The essays in this volume demonstrate very clearly how presence and absence, description and omission, inscription and erasure need to be seen not in absolute terms, but instead as part of a complex set of negotiations through which particular individuals and groups sought to articulate their position in the world vis-à-vis any number of configurations of authority. Kelly Holob draws our attention to the

University Press, 2004), 140-167; David Rohrbacher, "Physiognomics in Imperial Latin Biography," *Classical Antiquity* 29 (2010): 92-116.

⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus 25.4.22; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 5.23.

⁹ Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39.17-18 (canonical Scripture), 20 (apostolic fathers), 21-23 (apocrypha). For a recent comprehensive analysis, see David Brakke and David Gwynn, *The Festal Letters of Athanasius of Alexandria, with the Festal Index and the Historia Acepala* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 231-245.

erasure of the human form in texts relating to martyrdom, focusing on two examples preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea: the letter concerning the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne in Gaul (177 CE) quoted in the *Ecclesiastical History*, and the account of the Palestinian martyr Apphianus (or Epiphanius) during the so-called Great Persecution. Both accounts examine the challenge that bodily destruction presented to Christian ideas about the resurrection (as attested, not long after the purge at Lyon and Vienne, by Athenagoras). The emphasis in both accounts on bodily obliteration is entirely consonant with the top-down ambitions of the legal system under which these Christians were condemned. In both cases, however, the fates of the martyrs' bodies are reinterpreted in specifically Christian ways. The mutilation of Blandina and her fellow martyrs in Gaul is no impediment to resurrection wrought by God. Later, the miraculous reappearance of the disfigured body of Apphianus/Epiphanius outside his city of Caesarea acts as a warning, but not in the same way as a gibbeted corpse would have displayed to other malefactors the consequences of ancient penal codes; on the contrary, his body served as a signal to the unfaithful that they should convert.

Miriam Hay's discussion of the representations on early Christian sarcophagi of the Three Hebrews in the furnace from the Book of Daniel and the Three Magi from the Epiphany narrative offers another way of thinking about erasure. The iconography of the two groups, Hebrews and Magi, was often indistinguishable (a trio of male figures in Phrygian caps and tunics), with the result that they are elided in such a way as to emphasize the Three Hebrews as proto-Christians. This evokes parallel late antique polemical efforts to stress that Christianity was the only logical fulfillment of the narrative found in Hebrew scripture. But concomitant with this elision was an act of erasure, as debates on the identity of the *Verus Israel* required by Christians a repudiation of Jewish claims in this regard.¹⁰

The assumption that Late Antiquity is associated with top-down erasures has been particularly influential in discussions of the role played by Christians in the end of pagan religious practices. In a famous assertion that has shaped both scholarly debate and popular perception of the issue ever since, Edward Gibbon cast this as "the only example of the total extirpation of any ancient and popular superstition," and

¹⁰ The classic study remains Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A study of the relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman empire, 135-425* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1986).

therefore “a singular event in the history of the human mind.”¹¹ Much scholarship has sought to challenge this assertion, noting what Carlos Machado calls, with reference to Rome, “the inescapable presence of the pagan past” in various forms long after the Theodosian period that was the focus of Gibbon’s analysis.¹² The essays by Benjamin Kybett and Anna Sitz address this issue in different ways, approaching the question through different forms of evidence. Kybett helpfully juxtaposes invocations of the ancient gods in the poetry of Claudian with the explicitly Christian motifs found in works such as those by Juvencus and most pointedly, because he is Claudian’s direct contemporary, Prudentius. By distancing himself from a tendency to see such pagan motifs as merely literary, and therefore as “unremarkable, even bland, [and] entirely traditional,” Kybett is able to present Claudian’s entreaties to the Muses and other deities in an altogether more contentious landscape from which Christian poets, by invoking Christ, had endeavored to erase the ancient gods. Sitz’s chapter neatly complements this discussion by examining the evidence of erasures of “religious” content in inscriptions, including theophoric elements in city and personal names, juxtaposing what she neatly describes as “grammatoclasm” with better known instances of attacks on images usually designated as iconoclasm.¹³ The examples marshaled by Sitz underscore her central argument that while the impulse towards such erasures was wide, its manifestations need to be regarded as culturally specific.¹⁴

Mali Skotheim’s chapter, on the incorporation of erased inscriptions, particularly epitaphs, in the pavement of the fifth-century church of St Mary at Ephesus, picks up on themes delineated in the preceding discussions. Like other contributors, she emphasizes the cultural

¹¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3 (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1781), 69.

¹² Carlos Machado, “Religion as Antiquarianism: Pagan Dedications in Late Antique Rome,” in *Religious Dedications in the Greco-Roman World: Distribution, Typology, Use*, ed. John Bodel and Mika Kajava, *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae* 35 (2009): 331-354, at 333.

¹³ Sitz explores these phenomena more broadly across a range of eastern Mediterranean sites in her monograph, *Pagan Inscriptions, Christian Viewers: The Afterlives of Temples and Their Texts in the Late Antique Eastern Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹⁴ For a comparable example, consider the erasure of feet in Egyptian temple reliefs: Troels Myrup Kristensen, “Embodied Images: Christian Response and Destruction in Late Antique Egypt,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2.2 (2009): 224-250.

specificity of the actions she is analyzing, highlighting that the erasures of names from centuries-old epitaphs does not fit with efforts at contemporary political memory sanctions often unhelpfully described as *damnatio memoriae*.¹⁵ Instead, she regards the manipulation of such *spolia* as reflecting Christian efforts to redefine commemoration in the context of belonging to the communal body of the Church.

Ryan Denson's careful elucidation of "ghost stories" in Late Antiquity shows that their fate cannot simply be reduced to a simple form of erasure, in which ghosts were recast as *daimones*. On the contrary, ghost stories persisted, not least because they were embedded in folkloric elements in the Christians' own scriptures. To Denson's examples we might add the curious instance of the ghost (*umbra sordida*) that Sulpicius Severus described as being summoned through the prayers of Martin of Tours.¹⁶ The shade materialized beside a tomb that had become the subject of martyr cult, but its appearance and words to Martin made clear that the tomb in question belonged to a brigand, not a saint, and that veneration should cease. In this case, while the words of the ghost were audible to all those assembled before the altar, the shade itself was visible *only* to Martin, thereby endorsing his particular sanctity and capacity for divinely inspired insight.¹⁷

In the final chapter, Becca Grose examines a curious development in Merovingian Gaul: the preservation by later generations of epigraphic texts in which particular details had *never* been incorporated. An analogous practice is identified also in a letter of Avitus of Vienne to the Burgundian king Gundobad concerning the death of his daughter – an individual who is left conspicuously unnamed throughout the text. As with Skotheim, Grose relates these developments to evolving ideas about the relationship between the temporal and the eternal life, in which the commemoration of details about the status of individuals while they were alive were less important than meditations on life after death. As such, these texts deploy lacunae not as a way of excising the very existence of something now deemed worthy of condemnation; rather, they use absence as a generative process, a way of reflecting ideas about the

¹⁵ For the term and its problems, see the introduction to this volume.

¹⁶ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini* 11.4-5.

¹⁷ Clare Stancliffe, *St Martin and His Hagiographer. History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 154-155, 254.

relationship (or disjunction) between the life lived in the world and the afterlife.

The chapters in this volume address a wide range of instances and types of erasure and challenge us to move beyond simplistic notions such as that encapsulated by a term like *damnatio memoriae*. As the essays assembled here demonstrate, acts of erasure, omission, or redaction reflect how the boundary between past and present in Late Antiquity was permeable. This reminds us not just of past realities, but of the urgent relevance of the essays assembled in this volume. The recent past has seen questions of erasure raised to a prominent position in public debate. A pivotal moment came on 7 June 2020 in the British city of Bristol, when a late-Victorian statue honoring Edward Colston (1636-1721), a historic benefactor of the city who had grown rich through the Atlantic Slave Trade, was pulled down from its plinth during a Black Lives Matter protest; it was then hauled through the streets and dumped into Narrow Quay in the city's harbor. The event spurred much fulmination in the press, particularly in publications on the Right of the political spectrum, that history was being unceremoniously erased.¹⁸ This visceral reaction to the toppling of Colston's statue completely ignored a much longer history of debate about his public commemoration in an increasingly multicultural society.¹⁹

The events in Bristol during June 2020 were linked at the time to other contemporary, and contentious, cases of statue removal, notably in certain parts of the United States, where monuments to "heroes" of the Confederacy that had been erected in the American South during the Jim

¹⁸ For opposing views, see Will Heaven, "Why Edward Colston's statue should have stayed up," *The Spectator*, 7 June 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/edward-colston-was-a-slaver-not-a-saint-but-his-statue-should-have-stayed-up> (accessed 18 July 2023); David Olusoga, "The toppling of Edward Colston's statue is not an attack on history. It is history," *The Guardian* 8 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest> (accessed 18 July 2023).

¹⁹ Samuel J. Richards, "Historical Revision in Church: Reexamining the 'Saint' Edward Colston," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 89 (2020): 225-254. For the wider context, see the useful contributions of Analays Alvarez Hernandez, "The Life and Death of the Monument in the Era of Social Networks: New Communities of Memory," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 46.2 (2021): 75-84; and Marcus Milwright, "The Destruction of Art," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 47.1 (2022): 86-89.

Crow era were taken down.²⁰ But the blunt arguments in media debates on the issue were often reductive, reflecting politically-charged and polarized debates at the time, and paying only scant attention to the sorts of specific cultural contexts that the essays in this volume have argued are essential for understanding the significance of acts of erasure. Brief consideration of three more modern examples of erasure and their interpretation will hopefully bring into focus the contingency of such acts, and how they can be interpreted differently by different participants and at different and sometimes overlapping times.

In 1792, French Revolutionaries removed a grand equestrian statue of King Louis XV by the sculptor Edme Bouchardon from its plinth at the center of the square in Paris named after the king and which was now renamed the Place de la Revolution (it is now the Place de la Concorde). The plinth itself was left in place, a silent witness to the doom of the Bourbon monarchy. The location soon acquired potent political resonance, when the guillotine was moved there in January 1793 specifically for the execution of Louis XVI.²¹ A famous illustration of the event by Charles Monnet (engraved by Isidore-Stanislas Helman) underscored this potent reinterpretation of the initial erasure by showing the executioner brandishing the king's severed head in the direction of the mutilated plinth.²² Later still, and in time for Marie Antoinette's execution in October of the same year, the plinth was occupied by a plaster statue of *Liberté*.²³ By the time of the queen's death, therefore, the significance of the plinth had undergone a series of reinterpretations in rapid succession, from royal monument, to vacant space emphasizing the removal of the king, to a shrine to Revolutionary ideals.

A similar set of changing circumstances can be observed in the fate that befell a statue of Queen Victoria that was unveiled outside Leinster

²⁰ For an international perspective, see Peter Hill, "When the statues went up," *History Workshop: Histories of the Present* 12 June 2020, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/when-the-statues-went-up/> (accessed 18 July 2023).

²¹ Andrew McClellan, "The Life and Death of a Royal Monument: Bouchardon's *Louis XV*," *Oxford Art Journal*, 23.2 (2000): 1-27, esp. 25-27.

²² For the engraving, see Charles Monnet, "Tableau n° 8 des Principales Journées de la Révolution", L'exécution de Louis XVI, place de la Révolution, actuelle place de la Concorde, actuel 8ème arrondissement, le 21 janvier 1793," online at <https://www.paris.museescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/tableau-no-8-des-principales-journees-de-la-revolution-l-execution-de-louis#infos-principales> (accessed 18 July 2023).

²³ McClellan, "The Life and Death of a Royal Monument," 27.

House in central Dublin in 1908. By itself, the statue testified to the place of Dublin and Ireland in the United Kingdom and Britain's Empire. But the afterlife of the statue is no less intriguing. It remained in place even when the building became the seat of independent Ireland's parliament (the Dáil), and there were periodic expressions in Irish nationalist quarters of frustration at its continued presence. But what eventually led to the monument's removal in 1948 was the need for more car-parking spaces in the building's forecourt. At a later stage, the statue, having long languished in storage, was gifted to Sydney, New South Wales, in the somewhat unexpected guise of a symbol of friendship between the peoples of Ireland and Australia.²⁴ In this case, the pattern of presence, erasure, and absence is by turns quite surprising, and certainly does not conform to any straightforward narrative of Irish nationalist reaction against British imperialism.

Finally, just as the meaning of erasures can change over time, so too contradictory attitudes can coexist concurrently in the same space. In such cases, optics can be important and even misleading. On 9 April 2003, not long after Baghdad had fallen to the forces of an American-led coalition, a statue of Saddam Hussein in the city's Paradise Square was pulled down. The episode was presented in media reports, not least on television, as an action condoned by throngs of jubilant Iraqis. Closer inspection of these reports reveals, however, that careful efforts were made to stage-manage the event by the United States military, and that the presence of Iraqi civilians was restricted and their numbers obscured by the cropping of images released to the media. Even then, the event did not unfold precisely as planned: an initial effort to cover the statue's face with the American flag was abandoned in favor of using the Iraqi one, suggesting that the use of the Stars and Stripes risked provoking opposition.²⁵

This series of modern examples underscores one of the collective findings of this volume. The deployment or erasure of images and words can be contingent on circumstances that are specific in various ways – culturally, spatially, and temporally. Meanings can change over time or be interpreted differently by diverse groups at the same time. Only

²⁴ Míchéal Ó Riain, 'Queen Victoria and Her Reign at Leinster House,' *Dublin Historical Record* 52.1 (1999): 75-86.

²⁵ Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 120-121.

through paying careful attention to the contexts in which erasures took place, and the actors involved, can we begin to grope towards an understanding of the forces involved. As the authors of the preceding chapters argue compellingly, those forces defy easy and simplistic categorization.

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