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## Memory and Recollection in Antiquity

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### ABSTRACT

#### Memory and Recollection in Antiquity

In the ancient Greek world, memory permeates every aspect of human life. Memory plays a central role in the compositional and ecdotic phases of the ancients' literary production and has long been linked to a mode of oral–aural transmission, in which poetry survives without support from writing. The 'book of memory' metaphor appears in ancient philosophy. The transformation of figures and utterances into μνήματα (records) by iconography and writing leads the ancients to a metaphorical interpretation of cognitive processes. Memory plays a central role in theurgical medicine. Acting as the pivot around which dream therapy revolves, memory requires dream recollection and cataloging. Memory plays a central role in rational medicine as well: dreams amplify perceptual phenomena, so analyzing them may improve clinical diagnosis, as in the Hippocratic authors, establishing a functional link between the pathophysiology of the body, understood as humoral δυσκρασία (bad temperament), and the φαντάσματα (sensations) produced during sleep.

This special issue of *Medicina nei Secoli* aims at investigating the role accorded to memory in the ancient Greek world. The issue covers various topics, from the role that memory plays in explanations of cognitive processes and in the exercise of medical art, up to the emotional salience that memory assumes in literature, especially in the private dimension of writing, or in real life, including pathological manifestations.

**Keywords:** Memory - Aristotle

## Introduction

There is something infinitely poetic about the delayed light of a dead star being kept alive through our perception. Object permanence, the separation of the visible memory of an object from its existence, is perhaps the most effective example of Walter Benjamin's intuition that "to live means to leave traces".

This journal issue at MnS is dedicated to *Memory in antiquity: cross-disciplinary scenarios*, and was conceived in continuity with a future issue that will explore *Memory in contemporary biomedicine*.

In the ancient Greek world, memory permeates every aspect of human life. Memory plays a central role in the compositional and ecdotic phases of the ancients' literary production, and has long been linked to a mode of oral–aural transmission, in which poetry survives without support from writing. Moreover, this faculty becomes a soteriological resource for the Orphics, who entrust their otherworldly destiny to Μνημοσύνη (Memory). Memory preserves the perception of an image or a sound from oblivion as it fixes what has been, into the persistence of a sign. The 'book of memory' metaphor appears in ancient philosophy (cf. Pl. *Phil.* 39 a-b), and the transformation of figures and utterances into μνήματα (records) by iconography and writing leads the ancients to a metaphorical interpretation of cognitive processes. The stars survive their deaths, and thus so also - according to the ancients - does the knowledge and life of an individual thanks to Μνημοσύνη, the mother of the Muses, who shares a temple with Asclepius (σύνναος). The transformation is described in a sacred law found in the Asklepieion of Piraeus and dating back to the fourth century BCE (*IG II<sup>2</sup> 4962=LSCG 21*). As part of the healing process performed in ancient sanctuaries, memory preserves the dream received during iatromantic sleep so that, upon awakening, the patient can report it to the priests and receive diagnostic, prognostic and therapeutic indications. The memory of dreams and, more generally, of dreamlike experiences linked to healing orients the *regimens* in one of the oldest treatises of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (*CH*), V–IV century BCE. The *CH* established a functional link between the pathophysiology of the body, understood as humoral δυσκρασία (bad temperament), and the φαντάσματα (sensations) produced during sleep. Even Aristotle, while not identifying sleep with the rational soul, freed from the body, drawing on divine and divinatory forms of knowledge, associates dreamt images and sounds with physical or mental disturbance. In his *On divination during sleep*, sophisticated doctors are distinguished by their attention to dreams (463 a 5) because dreams amplify perceptual phenomena, so analyzing them may improve clinical diagnosis. Since a small noise translates into a thunder, or the flow of a phlegm droplet into the tasting of honey (463 a 12-15), it follows that correct medical exegesis of dreams allows the grasping of small alterations in the body upon the onset of disease. The link between dreaming and memory in cult contexts is well defined by the magical papyri, which name Dream as Μνήμης τελεσίφρονος υἱὸς μέγιστος

(the greatest son of Memory, who perfects a man's mental powers, *PGM V* 415). The appellation τελεσίφρων refers to Μνήμη, already translated by the *TLG* as “perficiens quod cogitat”, and connotes memory in the sense of the fullness of mental faculties. Anaxagoras believes that memory (μνήμη) finalizes the data of experience (ἐμπειρία), by collecting and comparing them (which we may see as a strong reference to the ξύνεσις, the faculty of quick comprehension, belonging to Alcmaeon of Croton). In this way, human beings achieve σοφία (practical wisdom) and τέχνη (art) that can make them distinctively superior to animals (59 B 21b D–K). The explicit linking of perception with the image stored in memory and through memory can be found, as M.M. Sassi points out (Sassi MM (ed.), *Tracce nella mente. Teorie della memoria da Platone ai moderni*. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale; 2007. pp. VII-X), before Plato's comparison in the *Theaetetus* (191 c-d), where traces imprinted in a wax block are associated with the soul. An example is the ancient, magical custom of the ritual making of a wax κολοσσός (image).

In general, the importance accorded to memory in the sapiential horizon of the ancient Greek world constitutes the matrix through which to explore two dimensions - the “omniscience of a god” (Detienne) and the human psychological processes - considering that the Presocratics ascribed the organization of sensitive experience to the latter. What unites these two dimensions is time: in one case, time is canceled in a prodigious circularity, and it becomes the measure of incorporeal existence in the other. Halfway between the sacral and the human cognitive dimensions is the art of Hippocratic medicine. By overcoming the boundaries of time through the three stages of anamnesis (past), diagnosis (present), and prognosis (future), Hippocratic physicians rely on a more or less secularized memory to preserve human health.

The six essays that this volume hosts explore the topic of memory in the ancient Greek and Greco–Roman worlds from different angles. They cover different issues, from the role that memory plays in explanations of cognitive processes and in the exercise of medical art, up to the emotional salience that memory assumes in literature, especially in the private dimension of writing, or in real life, including pathological manifestations.

In her essay, Daniela Fausti dedicates an introductory section to the long history and vast phenomenology of the memory field in the classical Greek world up to the Hellenistic age; then, she addresses memory specifically in the medical context. The *CH*, particularly in the *Prognostic*, identifies the crucial role of the doctor's interview, especially in the use of memory reconstruction during the anamnestic process, and the value of the inferential reasoning (λογισμός), which organizes signs and symptoms in view of the prognosis, as we read in *Epidemics* 6, 8, 17. Accordingly, in the *Precepts*, the λογισμός is configured as a sort of operative μνήμη. In a second section, Fausti analyzes the relationship between a doctor's memory and pharmacological remedies, focusing particularly on Dioscorides, who (presumably) was the first author in anti-

quity to classify species according to their properties (δυνάμεις) with the aim of helping physicians in memorizing and associating more easily the substances with their therapeutic use. Fausti traces the modification of Dioscorides' criterion, due to the restoration of alphabetical order in the manuscript tradition. As it is argued, Galen's authoritativeness probably consecrated the custom of alphabetical classification, at least until Linnaeus, who introduced the binominal nomenclature centuries later. In its final section, the essay offers an interesting excursus on pharmacological recipes in verse, where the metric form works as an aide-mémoire.

Three contributions are dedicated to Aristotle's interpretation of the relationship between memory and cognitive processes, specifically in his treatise on *Memory and Recollection* within the *Parva naturalia*. Andrea Falcon and Klaus Corcilius investigate the relationship of this treatise with *On the Soul*, to identify the specific role that this work plays in Aristotle's overall reflection on the psychology of living beings. The authors support the well-known hypothesis that memory depends on perception and φαντασία (mental image), where phantasia is defined as the first principle in *De anima*, while intended in terms of an explanation of perceptual phenomena in *De sensu*. Following the historiographic tradition on Aristotle, Falcon and Corcilius appropriately frame the definition of memory into Aristotle's system of the four causes (viz., material, efficient, formal, and final) and then distinguish two steps for the definition of memory in *Mem.* 1. The authors close their article by analyzing the relationships between perception, image of perception, and memory. Thus, they show that, for Aristotle, memory is essentially linked to the perceptual awareness of temporal distance, a capacity that would exclude non-rational beings from possessing memory as they cannot quantify time in numerical terms. However, the counter-example of Argos, Odysseus' dog, testifies that some kind of perception of temporal distance is possible for non-rational souls.

Luciana Repici analyzes this link between memory and perception in Aristotle starting from *Metaphysics* I 1, identifying the influences that the memory-hearing-learning nexus may have had on Aristotle's zoology, physiology and psychology. By preserving the imprint of the perceptual act, memory engages in a symbolic translation of both the seen and the heard. The result is a learning path which distinguishes man from animal to the extent that "man is able to carry out the call to memory" as an act of reasoning (συλλογισμός). The accidents of matter act on such cognitive process, and this is due both to the fact that, for Aristotle, man is a *synolus* of soul and body and that the body is exposed to context conditioning. Repici, therefore, emphasizes the greater consideration that Aristotle gave to hearing, among the different senses, in the human learning process. Through memory, human beings may recover heard words from the soul, as, therein, memory records are consolidated over time as symbols of spoken sounds.

Claudia Zatta explores the link between memory, "mental speech" and φαντασία in their interaction with sensations to establish a stimulating comparison between the

Aristotelian approach and the elaboration of individual memory in some of Euripides' tragedies. Euripides' characters express their present pain through the activation of memories of past joy. The tragic perspective anticipates the scientific formalization of mental speech that Aristotle will elaborate in his treatise *On memory*, and is used by Euripides to engage his public emotionally.

Looking at medical treatises in antiquity, we should also consider that Galen's thoughts on memory and its related cognitive processes appear not in a systematic study, but fragmented reflections scattered across multiple works. Ricardo Julião, in his overview of these fragments, distinguishes Galen's approach from that of Plato and Aristotle. For Galen, there is no distinction between memory and reminiscence, but Galen strongly believes that these two processes are salient for the construction of reasoning and knowledge, and that they play a central role in medical practice. In general, Galen focuses on the dysfunctions of memory that he examines from anatomical and physiological points of view by placing them in the broader context of mental disorders. Remarkably, Julião examines a series of passages that define the main perspectives from which emperor Marcus Aurelius' physician analyzes the functioning of memory as a faculty localized in the brain (i.e., by ventricular theory, which dominated through to the Renaissance).

To complete our overview on memory, Nicola Reggiani explores the emotional aspects of memory as described in private letters from Greco-Roman Egypt. Thanks to a large textual choice, organized by thematic areas, Reggiani insists on the use of the lexicon of memory in the papyri. The late Egyptian view of memory that emerges from this analysis is of a socially vast and affectively deep connection among individuals, aimed at reducing their spatial and temporal distances. Through the memory of deceased loved ones, for instance, one may blur the line between life and death.

Time remains, therefore, the infinite land that humans try to ride over again on the indomitable horse of memory.

