

## FUNCTIONS OF ‘FORGETTING’ IN ANTIQUITY

BERNSTEIN (F.) *Vergessen als politische Option. Zur Einhegung interner Konflikte in der Antike*. Pp. 106. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2023. Cased, €38. ISBN: 978-3-515-13502-3.

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*Optima civilis belli defensio oblivio est*. Thus pronounced the elder Seneca (*Contr.* 10.3.5), who lived through two brutal civil conflicts, the death of the Roman Republic and the establishment of the Julio-Claudian Principate. Superficially, it is tempting to interpret *oblivio* as a complete eradication of the past, but B. argues that institutionally prescribed acts of forgetting in antiquity did not remove memory wholesale but tailored recollection selectively to prevent renewed conflagration. The purpose was to contain, rather than resolve or cure, civil and political conflict. B. draws on a tradition of scholarship, best exemplified most recently by H. Börm (*Mordende Mitbürger* [2018]), which views internal conflict as structurally recurrent in the ancient city and its remedies as essentially ameliorative. A similar agonistic perspective is evident in the works of H.-J. Gehrke (*Stasis* [1985]) and C. Mann (*Die Demagogen und das Volk* [2007]), which showed a greater interest in political dialogue than in institutions. In that vein, B. views amnesty less as a legal-institutional, more as an emotional, remedy to conflict.

The first chapter, ‘Einleitung: Die Irritation eines Zeitgenossen’, introduces the paradox of ‘collective forgetting’ (*das kollektive Vergessen*) in cultures that memorialise the past. The second, ‘Eingrenzung der Frage und Abgrenzung des Gegenstandes’, argues that *damnatio memoriae* was a controlled legal measure to consign designated individuals to infamy, rather than to remove them from history, and that it functioned less as oblivion *in toto* (*Erinnerungsverbote*) than as regulated suppression (*Vergessensgebote*). B.’s definition of amnesty as a steer on collective amnesia (*Steuerungsinstrument kollektiver Amnesie*) underpins Chapter 3, ‘Die Amnestie: Bekannte und unbekanntere Beispiele’, which examines, in reverse chronological order, four test cases: the *praescriptio taciturnitatis* of 395 CE; the *oblivio in perpetuum* of 25 January 41 CE; Cicero’s plea for *oblivio sempiterna* on 17 March 44 BCE; and the Athenian amnesty of 403 BCE. B. refers to all four test cases to suggest that the ancient concept of amnesty framed itself as a preventative measure against recollection of listed topics but did not remove memory of all that had happened previously. The fourth chapter, ‘Die Notwendigkeit politischer Vergessensgebote’, argues that selective deletion of forbidden subjects was a remedy in times of internal discord and, on the strength of attestations in Homer (*Od.* 24.482–6), Hesiod (*Theog.* 226–32) and Alcaeus (*ap.* Strab. 13.2.3), contends that even in pre-legal societies, the resolution to civil strife necessitated memorial selectiveness. Following the characterisation by J. Burckhardt (*Griechische Kulturgeschichte* 1902 [1957]) of ancient society as a ‘culture of competition’ (*Wettbewerbskultur*), wherein elite social groups stood in perpetual rivalry that periodically broke out into open warfare and gave impulse to peaceful settlement by controlled legislation, B., in Chapter 5, ‘Eine Zwischenbilanz, oder: das politische Vergessengebot – ein Kompromiß?’, maintains that amnesty agreements were about political consensus, not compromise. Pointing to Athens, he challenges the idea that negotiations were contracted on an equal principle and *a fortiori* holds that *homonoiia* (literally, ‘like-mindedness’ or, in Latin, *concordia*) was not a pluralistic idea comparable to the modern doctrine of harmonious coexistence in a free and democratic society in which citizens agree to disagree, but a settlement guaranteed by force and mandated upon the weaker by the stronger. Likewise, B. views Augustus’ First Settlement of 27 BCE as not a compromise between the Princes

and the Senate but a dictated peace that brooked no dissent from a now disempowered senatorial aristocracy. These ideas are developed in the sixth chapter, ‘Konsens und Vergessen’, which examines the contextual uses of *homonoia* and its Latin synonym, *concordia*, and with reference to specific cases, such as the *cause célèbre* of the playwright Phrynichus, fined in 494 BCE for reminding his Athenian audience of the Persian capture of Miletus five years earlier, argues that unity and stability (*Konsens*) could only be achieved if certain subjects that gave particular offence were treated with the same *Lethetechnik* as amnesty settlements. This involved a special kind of memory doctoring, so that sore and potentially destabilising topics became unmentionable. In a concluding chapter, ‘Schluß: Kommunikation – Vergessen – Pazifikation’, B. re-affirms his main thesis: in all its forms, forgetting the past entailed suppression of specific memories rather than universal denial and became an instrument of legislators and wider imperial structures to maintain a poised, and potentially fragile, social order that, in the aftermath of civil and internal conflict, required special political and legislative measures to control.

B.’s monograph is born out of an effort to bridge the cultural divide between an ancient world in which prescribed suppression was the moral and political norm, especially in times of crisis, and a modern one that prioritises memorialisation and frank historical discourse. B. astutely points out in the preface that this perceived cultural dichotomy is nothing like as clear or obvious as we often believe. Since the Second World War it has been taken for granted in the West that truthful discussion of the past, even of the ugliest and most unwelcome topics, is a desirable antidote to the recurrence of war, genocide and other tragic human events that have scarred Europe since the start of the twentieth century. B. suggests (p. 16) that, as our precarious world order tilts towards collapse, the relationship between openness and conflict resolution (*Aussöhnung*) is not self-evident. Though quite a statement, B. may not be far from the truth when he points to some aspects of our most recent experience, such as the random destruction of historical monuments and other manifestations of ‘cancel culture’, which betray a willingness less to deal with history than to mask angst in the face of history (p. 7). Where the parallel breaks down, however, is in the circumstances under which such acts of deletion happen. In the ancient world, deletion was politically prescribed, usually but not always by governments that by their nature were tyrannical. The case of Phrynichus is thus not a useful example, because what the playwright transgressed was not social order but good taste. Similarly, whilst B. is right to point out that the Athenian amnesty was mandated by the winning to the losing side, despite some recent assertions to the contrary – see the exchanges between E. Carawan (*JHS* 2002; *CQ* 2012) and Joyce (*CQ* 2008; *Antichthon* 2014 and 2015; *Amnesty and Reconciliation* [2022/4]), not listed in the bibliography –, importantly, the winning side put a stay on vindictive instincts, which should nuance the points B. makes about amnesty not being about compromise. B. might have considered further the contextual polysemy of phrases such as *me mnesikakein* and *oblivio*, which applied institutionally to legal measures prohibiting vexatious litigation over issues deemed unactionable, non-institutionally to social and collective memory. Further, B.’s definition of forgetting (*Vergessen*) as a limitation upon destabilising recollections presupposes a world in which memory can be institutionally regulated. The old ontological problem about conceptual entities existing in a world of ideas is not considered: the statement ‘*x* never existed’ raises *x* to a level of existence by the very act of mentioning *x*. Thus, with *abolitio nominis* under the Caesars, those targeted were (in modern terminology) ‘cancelled’ but, in an Orwellian sense, that did not mean that they could not be recalled as living, breathing members of the political community.

In brief, this is a worthy and stimulating but, in the end, unconvincing treatment of a vast topic that requires more pages than B. devotes to it. A less chronologically

compendious survey would have suited this book's aims better. Further, though the semantic application of *Vergessen* ('forgetting') is examined in some depth, B. does not emphasise sufficiently the main institutional point: 'Forget about it' does not literally enjoin memory obliteration, but rules out vindictive retaliation. In its most precise legal configuration, amnesty was about the latter, not the former.

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