

REVIEW

COGNITION, THE FUTURE, AND THE ROMANS

Maggie L. Popkin and Diana Y. Ng, edd., *Future Thinking in Roman Culture. New Approaches to History, Memory, and Cognition*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. Pp. xii + 193, 29 figs, 1 table. Hardback, £135.00/\$180.00. ISBN 978-0-367-68780-9.

The ‘future thinking’ of the title of Maggie L. Popkin and Diana Y. Ng’s edited volume is not, as I had originally assumed, a slightly awkward way of expressing socio-specific ways of thinking about the future in the Roman world. Instead, it stands in more narrowly for prospection, the distinctively human ability to ‘pre-experience’ both things that we have already experienced, and things that we have not, and to act on the basis of this ability (1). Species-level approaches to prospection developed by scholars of psychology, philosophy, and psychiatry are highlighted as the volume’s theoretical framework, but the editors emphasise at the same time the specificity of physical, social, and cultural environments of cognition within particular historical societies. In their breakdown of the different aspects and implications of prospection, they accordingly emphasise the ways in which ‘texts, objects, and rituals’ (4) were employed in attempts to shape and control that future. This attempt to bring already complex and highly interdisciplinary approaches to brain science into conversation with (for example) memory studies, much more familiar to the scholars and students of the ancient world who are the prime audience of the volume, is ambitious and demands a great deal of effort from contributors and readers alike. In what follows, I will outline and briefly evaluate the individual contributions, before offering some overall reflections.

Popkin and Ng’s Introduction (1–22) is a fitting preview of the volume’s impressive, but somewhat bewildering breadth, with its deep dives into discrete areas of scholarship and material discussions, some less familiar than others. After a brief treatment of Roman examples of simulating the future, and strategies for remembering to do things (1–3), they plunge into approaches to cognition across multiple fields, highlighting the awareness of thought processes that encourages behaviours that help people to remember to do things, the phenomenon of ‘mental time travel’ that prompts actions aimed at securing the intended future state, the roles played by parts of the body, senses,

and external objects when remembering to remember, and the attribution of agency to external objects in this process (3–13). While there is already a great deal of social specificity in the objects and systems involved in prospection, the editors also emphasise the role played by specific built environments, and expectations linked to particular cultural forms or rituals, such as the layout of the Elizabethan theatre or Reformation church, or the conventions of Greek drama (14). This general theoretical discussion concludes with a short discussion of existing work on Roman memory and concepts of the future (15–16). This is already a lot, and it is noteworthy that the editors take nearly another five small-type pages to try to begin to relate the chapters in the volume to the numerous aspects of cognition and memory studies highlighted in the theoretical discussion earlier in the Introduction (17–21). As we will see, it is typical of the editors to try so conscientiously to make connections between aspects of theories and aspects of case-studies. The downside is that the Introduction, with all of its dense and discrete, acronym-heavy individual sections that do not readily cohere into an overarching interpretative framework, may begin to raise questions for the reader about how far all of this theoretical front-loading will truly illuminate the Roman case-studies.

Although the editors encourage readers to make their own adventure in navigating the chapters that form the case-studies of the volume (18), the first three chapters (Jacob A. Latham on Fabius Pictor/Dionysios of Halikarnassos, Aaron Seider on the death of Germanicus in Tacitus' *Annals*, and Eric Orlin on the memorialisation of Augustus' Secular Games) form a cluster through their common focus on literary/state-produced texts. While each of these contributions is strong and interesting, that strength and interest does not in my view depend on the aspects of cognition theory that each author dutifully pulls out. Latham's 'The Future of the Past: Fabius Pictor (and Dionysios of Halikarnassos) on the *pompa circensis* and Prospective Cultural Memory' (23–36), is a sound discussion of the influence of Fabius Pictor's account on later descriptions of the celebration, including those of Dionysios of Halikarnassos (whose text 'preserves' the 'fragment' of Fabius Pictor), Vergil, Ovid and Statius. Latham highlights the particular Augustan context for making canonical Fabius Pictor's account of the *pompa circensis*, itself a curation (at least) of the proceedings. In addition, he speculates on the possible influence that Fabius Pictor's account may also have had on historical celebrations of the *pompa circensis*. This speculation takes Latham beyond the more familiar territory of reception and intertextuality within ancient texts. The discussion draws on both cultural memory literature and briefly (and a little distractingly) on cognitive psychology and neuroscience to buttress the argument about Fabius Pictor's influence on the manner in which the *pompa circensis* was described, and even experienced.

In 'Remembering the Future in Tacitus' *Annals*: Germanicus' Death and Contests of Commemoration' (37–53), Seider offers a reading of the sense of

uncertainty and unpredictability that permeates Tacitus' account of the tensions around Germanicus' status in his lifetime, and responses to his death. Cognition theory figures prominently in this chapter, and specifically the challenges encountered in 'predictive processing' in the face of unfamiliar situations in which it is hard to pattern the future by reference to the past. Seider tracks the cognitive experiences of Tacitus' characters, before suggesting in his conclusion some of the different lessons that a contemporary audience might have drawn from the account. His emphasis on uncertainty captures the tense thriller-esque quality of these episodes. However, Seider does not spell out the implications of applying cognition theory to fictional ancient characters: would he want to imply that Tacitus intuitively understands these processes, or rather that our understanding of such processes illuminates *our* reading of these episodes? At points, especially when reflecting on these Tacitean episodes in the latter part of the chapter, Seider seems to blur the distinction between fictionalised characters and 'the Romans', perhaps encouraged by the promise of cognition studies to uncover more of the inner lives of Germanicus' contemporaries.

In '*Ad futuram memoriam: The Augustan Ludi Saeculares*' (54–72), Eric Orlin discusses the ways in which the epigraphic memorialisation of the Secular Games of 17 BCE (*CIL* 6.32323) does not so much document the celebration of the games, but rather curates the memory of them for posterity, projecting a strikingly Augustan world-view through selection and emphasis. Orlin invokes the concept of 'collective future thought', and highlights both top-down attempts to control future memory and action, and the limitations of such attempts to exert control over what is actually said, thought, and done in the future. Comparison with the inscription commemorating the Severan Secular Games of 204 CE, and other notices of Secular celebrations, including Claudius' games in 47 CE, and Domitian's in 88, suggests the different choices that might be made, and the degree to which the Augustan version did and did not determine the shape and even the timing of future celebrations. Orlin concludes the chapter by locating the case study within the framework of scholarship on the agency of objects in memory making.

Molly Swetnam-Burland's chapter, 'Staging Memories in the Home: Intention and Devotion in Pompeii and Herculaneum' (73–92), along with the other contributions in the second half of the collection, uses cognition theory to try to get closer to the intentions and thinking of non-elite individuals, in this case members of the *familia* in the Roman Empire. She focuses on 'private', graffiti-ed examples of vows made for the safety of fellow members of the household, and futures hoped for or denied through childbirth or, heart-breakingly, a child's death. Swetnam-Burland treats fascinating material with great empathy and thoughtfulness, including a tantalisingly brief discussion of homemade effigies of gods or ancestors that do indeed invite many questions about what was going through their makers' minds, and what they prompted

earlier generations to think about the past. However, it remains unclear that an intellectual framework of cognition studies can help to get closer to the intentions and experiences of the individuals involved, beyond general suggestions about the workings of memory, and people's recourse to objects and technologies in the act of reminding and remembering.

In 'Synagogue Inscriptions and the Politics of Prospective Memories' (93–112), Karen B. Stern begins with a lengthy theoretical, material, and historical preamble that remains on a rather general level, before turning to a discussion of donor inscriptions, as well as the large number of graffiti, and dipinti within ancient synagogues, including one remarkable example in Dura Europus, in addition to graffiti by Jewish individuals within 'pagan' temples. Stern is careful to locate Jewish donor inscriptions within the broader Mediterranean phenomenon of euergetism, especially in their reflection of the desire not to be forgotten, but to be remembered in positive ways. At the same time, she has very interesting things to say about the distinctiveness of the aspirations of some of these formal and informal memorials. Emphasis on piety and achieving salvation through donation is notable, and suggests the importance of a future divine audience as well as a human one that will learn moral and religious lessons from the memorial. Stern focuses particularly on the intentions behind memorials that were informally carved or painted by Jewish individuals, often above doorways in the Dura Europus synagogue, and on non-Jewish shrines, and that exhort viewers within these holy spaces to remember the individuals' names. She cites a 'pagan' example of an Aramaic graffito, this time from the border city of Hatra, threatening a curse by a god on the passer-by who does not memorialise the writer by saying his name out loud. Her suggestion that the informal Jewish memorials might signal similar kinds of ritual practice, and confer blessings on viewers who read out the names, and curses on those who did not, is a fascinating speculation.

Maggie L. Popkin's 'The Vicarello Milestone Beakers and Future-Oriented Mental Time Travel in the Roman Empire' (113–32) concerns a case-study of four silver, milestone-evoking beakers inscribed with variations on itineraries between Gades and Rome. In addition to offering a brief biography of these beakers, deposited far from home in Aquae Apollinares, on the northwest side of Lake Bracciano, Popkin reconstructs the kinds of 'future thinking' that they may have stimulated, especially in anticipation of setting out from Gades, stopping on the way, and imagining future journeys, and ultimate dedication to the gods, emphasising the significance of handling and other sensory experience of the beakers during use. This is an evocative piece, but it is not clear to me that Popkin's extensive citation of technical cognitive science literature adds much to the discussion.

In 'Ancestors, Martyrs, and Fourth-Century Gold Glass: A Case of Metaintentions' (133–49), Susan Ludi Blevins offers an interpretation of the widespread practice of breaking off the bases of gold glass vessels, which

sometimes feature portraits of saints, biblical figures, or religious architecture incised into the gold, and setting them in the plaster or cement that sealed the burial niches of Christian catacombs. Like Popkin, Blevins emphasises the repurposing of possessions in their final location, in this case in the visible context of memorialising the dead. Speculating on the meanings, intentions, and associations of these repurposed gold glass bases, Blevins intriguingly suggests that they might have conveyed something of the sacred aura of martyr veneration cults, blurring the boundaries between the burial niches of ordinary Christians and the tombs of martyred saints.

In the final chapter, 'Prospection in the Wild. Embodiment, Enactivity, and Commemoration' (150–65), Diana Y. Ng seeks both to pull the preceding chapters together and to offer a substantive contribution to the overall theme of 'future thinking'. Dividing the chapters into two groups, she begins with those by Swetnam-Burland, Stern, Popkin, and Blevins, arguing that they exemplify 'embodied and enactive cognition', referring to the role of (primarily) sensory experience and the agency of objects in making future memory, as well as emphasising the participation of non-elite actors in the case-studies explored. Turning next to the chapters by Latham, Orlin, and Seider, she characterises them as exemplifying 'collective' rather than 'intensely personal' perspectives (154). Finally, she returns to Blevins' discussion of re-used glass vessel bases in Christian burial niches, possibly to evoke martyrs' tombs for future viewers, as a jumping-off point for her discussion of her own case-study on honorific statues in the cities of the Roman Empire, specifically the focus of their accompanying inscriptions on the future, in the form of fulfilment of pledges, continued benefaction, and more general hopes of others' generosity.

Considering the volume as a whole, what does it all add up to? It is clear that, especially for some of the contributors, the theorisation of future memory provided some common language and encouraged thinking across and beyond their individual case-studies. One can imagine that the two 2019 paper sessions in which the volume originated, one a joint AIA/SCS panel, and one an SBL panel, were exciting and generative. The editors, Popkin and Ng, have made great efforts to pull the volume together, through their Introduction and Ng's concluding essay (which takes several dense pages to reiterate and re-emphasise the preceding papers' relationship with key features of prospection theory) and, presumably, by encouraging the individual authors to engage with theoretical approaches to future memory in their contributions. For those of us who were not at the panels, and who were not caught up in the buzz of this collaboration, the end result is, frankly, very hard work. I confess that I had to force myself not to skip the discussions of prospection theory, which are generally laboured, burdened with multiple acronyms, not closely integrated with the ancient material, and not especially interesting in their own right. The laboriousness of the theoretical framing is likely to discourage readers. That is a pity, not least because the authors of the second group of papers in particular

have tried hard to use prospection theory to get at the inner thought processes—the intentions, desires, and hopes—of non-elite actors, seeking to answer questions that generally remain tantalisingly out of reach. The problem is that prospection theory seems to be better at addressing species-level questions than socio-specific ones, and that despite the authors' best efforts, we are left with suggestive associations and speculation. The editors are keen to look beyond the elite, and beyond the kinds of future thinking that might be played out in institutional and economic contexts, which is all well and good. But reading this volume against a twenty-first-century backdrop of widespread, heightened anxiety in many parts of the world about whether humans have a future at all, articulated in apocalyptic imaginings across every medium, as well as in politics, institutions, and economic trajectories, and presumably top of mind as editors and authors lived through a global pandemic, I can't help thinking that opportunities were missed. Just for starters, given the volume's admirable attention to the religious pluralism of the Roman world, how about looking harder at the variety of future and end of the world scenarios articulated, and the ways in which individuals and groups (certainly including the non-elite) acted on those beliefs, complementing Orlin's essay on the Augustan Saecular celebrations?¹ Or taking a close look at the actions of a sector of Roman society that notably invested in and advertised future generations, that is freed people, in contrast to the ancestor-preoccupied Roman elite?² There is much low-hanging fruit here, and the future looks bright, at least for the study of the Roman world.

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¹ Paul J. Kosmin's *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018) provides much inspiration for envisaging and acting on futures (or the end of everything) in the Roman world.

² See Véronique Dasan, 'Wax and Plaster Memories: Children in Elite and Non-Elite Strategies', in ead. and Thomas Späth, edd., *Children, Memory, and Family Identity in Roman Culture* (Oxford, 2010) 109–46 for an evocative case-study.