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SPECIAL SECTION: ARCHAEOLOGY AND MEMORY IN MIDDLE AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

Memory has always been important for archaeologists, and it has recently been thrust onto the center stage of archaeological inquiry (Alcock 2001, 2002; Boric 2010; Fowler et al. 2010; Megged 2010; Stanton and Magnoni 2008; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003; Mills and Walker 2008; Yoffee 2007). Discussions of subjects such as revitalization, continuity of cultural traditions, long-term ritual activity, and the interpretation of monuments all employ the idea of memory, even if only implicitly. Over the past 20 years memory has been given much more serious attention by archaeologists and anthropologists in general (Flores 1994; Hoffman 2002; Kaplonsky 1993; Olick and Robins 1998; Sharp 1991; Teski and Climo 1995). A great part of the attention in archaeology has focused on what Richard Bradley (2002) calls "The Past in the Past," the study of the construction and use of memory by past societies. A second source of the increased attention garnered by studies of memory in archaeology comes from the rather recent realization that archaeologists create memory. While a rather obvious observation to some, this realization has brought forth a host of ethical issues as we now more than ever face the reality that archaeological interpretation and the construction of a modern past can affect people in ways that were largely ignored by previous generations of researchers.

This Special Section is the result of a symposium held at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Austin, Texas, in 2007 in which 10 papers were presented and analyzed by two discussants. During the course of that symposium and subsequently it became evident that researchers working in Mesoamerica and adjacent areas were looking at memory using diverse concepts. For instance, forgetting or erasure of memory (for example, Forty and Küchler 1999; Küchler 1987; Woolf 1996), a topic touched upon in the paper by **Marcus Winter**, was a recurrent theme, one that archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and ethnographers encounter with frequency in Mesoamerica. Destruction of, or deterrence from using, cultural heritage such as language, monuments, dress, and rituals can greatly affect how memory is transmitted.

Even people themselves can be obliterated from social memory. For example, among Late Postclassic Nahua groups, Motolinía (1971:73) registered a form of punishment inflicted on individuals who had not observed restrictions such as sexual abstinence. According to Motolinía, such transgressions resulted in the death and cremation of the individual. In contrast to the burials of the members of the elite whose cremated remains were placed in tombs, the ashes of the transgressor would be scattered. Therefore, the punishment served to obliterate the person from the collective and in the words of Motolinía "para que no hubiese memoria de este hombre." Since cemeteries and graves can be considered places of memory (Nora 1989), this account shows how the Late Postclassic Nahuas could eliminate memory, in this case denying access to a particular kind of place for memory, thus hastening the process of social death, or the elimination of the transgressor from social memory.

Another recurring concept, one that invokes the idea of collective or social memory (Confino 1997; Connerton 1989; Fentress and Wickham 1992; Gedi and Elam 1996; Halbwachs 1925, 1950; Jonker 1995; Le Goff 1992; Pennebaker et al. 1997) is social imagination. In accordance with the ideas of Castoriadis and Lefort (cited in Thompson 1982:674–675) the imaginary is a creative nucleus that brings figures and forms pertaining to this world into being. The individual imaginary is a repertoire of forms connected to the motivations of the individual's consciousness, to desires. The collective imaginary is the negotiation of this repertoire among various individuals. As we know, collective memory can arise from a historical fact. Yet it can also be the product of the collective imaginary or from a combination of both the collective imaginary and historical fact.

While we know that it was common for ancient Mesoamerican societies to intertwine myth with history, as aptly demonstrated in the paper by **Gabrielle Vail** and **Christine Hernández**, more contemporary examples of the collective imaginary can be brought to bear on the subject. For example, the archaeological site of Piedra Labrada, located in the southern part of the state of Guerrero, is an excellent case in point. Unlike many contemporary Maya or Nahua communities that have been directly established on pre-Columbian sites sharing possible genetic or cultural affinity with modern populations, the present community at Piedra Labrada has no connection to the ancient inhabitants of the site. For this reason the modern population's perception of the site is different than in many other places where some kind of continuity can be traced. For its modern inhabitants Piedra Labrada is not a place built by their ancestors; therefore, there is no sense of affinity with this past, this past is in some sense foreign. Consequently, several of the concepts these people have concerning that history in particular are more related to the imaginary than to memory. Naturally, as time goes by, this imaginary will be remembered and will become part of the social memory (Cuauhtémoc Reyes

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Álvarez, personal communication 2007). While this example demonstrates the imaginary in a community with no connection to the local past, we would argue that the imaginary is an important aspect of all memory construction.

A rather complicated issue in memory studies that surfaced in a number of the papers including those by **Adrián Velazquez** and **César Villalobos** is the relationship between memory construction and cultural traditions. The very fact that iconographic styles, technologies, and customs continue in a society for hundreds if not thousands of years implies their transmission through social memory. Yet the reasons why certain things are "remembered" while others are "forgotten" are complex, as demonstrated in **Adrián Velazquez's** paper on the use of ancient shell-working technologies by the Aztecs. The task is not to simply identify memory, but to understand it within its cultural context.

The relationship among memory, landscape, and identity is probably one of the most popular lines of inquiry in memory studies in archaeology today. Peoples' relationship with the built and natural environments is inextricably intertwined with how they use the past to define themselves. **Marcus Winter's** reevaluation of the founding of Monte Alban and **Payson Sheets**' discussion of cemeteries in Costa Rica are excellent examples of how places resonate in the construction of memory.

On a final note, archaeological work and representations have important and often unintended impacts in the creation of modern memory and identity. A discussion of museums can well-illustrate this point. In museums with archaeological exhibits, visitors establish a relationship with both the artifacts and the interpretations of them as placed by the curators. Interestingly, visitors frequently indicate having encountered some sense of their own identity in the museum. In a sense, collective memory is created through the repeated individual use of particular exhibits in identity construction. This phenomenon is encountered not only in small local museums, but also in large national museums such as the Templo Mayor Museum situated in the heart of downtown Mexico City where many visitors attempt to take a more active role in the use of the museum as a memory site. For example, visitors often donate pieces to the museum; some donors believe that ancient objects in their possession should return to a symbolically more appropriate space and hence contribute to the transmission of history. In one case, a visitor donated a maguey plant because he had read in an archaeological publication that such plants were sacred in the past. Therefore, he decided that the most suitable place for the plant would be in the ruins of the Templo Mayor.

Likewise, the memory of a more recent past is manifest with the anniversary of the archaeological discovery of the Coyolxauhqui monolith on 21 February 1978; on this day each year she receives bouquets of flowers to commemorate the day she "came to the light again." This modern interest in Aztec antiquities and the desire to preserve and appreciate them that one perceives today on the streets of the Centro Histórico of Mexico City is strongly evident from the late eighteenth century, as seen, for example in the sketchbook of Colonel Guillermo Dupaix recently described by Leonardo López Luján (2011). Here again we are confronted with the imaginary intertwined with historical fact in the creation of modern memory and identity. Such vivid examples of the role of memory in the creation of the past provide clear indications of the central place of memory in the archaeological gaze.

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