Cultural Memory: Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations

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Translated from German by Ursula Ballin

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Abstract:

This is the first chapter of Jan Assmann’s book on “Cultural Memory, Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations” (so far only available in German) in which the author develops a theory of collective memory in related to examples from early high cultures. The author stresses that the culture of recollection is a form of social obligation determining the identity and self-assessment of a group. It is a universal phenomenon, as every collective needs to define itself with the help of memory and thus brings about communion. The culture of recollection pertains to staking out social horizons of meaning and time. It is in one’s memory that one reconstructs the Past, and it is the culture of recollection that supplies us with different forms and means of relating to the Past. Death is the most basic form of a break with the past, a break that provokes the necessity to relate to the past and stands therefore at
the beginning of the culture of recollection. While the word tradition only stresses continuity, progression, and resumption, Jan Assmann introduces the notion of “cultural memory” characterized by emotive attachment as well as a deliberate reference to the past that overcomes the breach by allowing for both: memory and oblivion.

Based on the writings of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann discusses the possibility of collective memory as opposed to individual memory. While individuals are the carriers of memory, the memory of individuals cannot exist without the social frames a given collective defines. Recollections, even of the most intimate kind, are formed solely through communication and interaction within the scope of a social group. This implies that the individual can only remember what fits into the social frames of his or her present. Thus every historical fact is transposed into a memory figure to be substantiated by a specific place and a specific time. This form of collective memory testifies to their group membership for those who share in it. A social group that constitutes itself as a memory communion will safeguard its past mainly under two aspects: its unique character, and its duration. It will, in its self-image, emphasize external distinctions while playing down internal ones. At the very point where the past is no longer remembered, history sets in. Historiography starts where memory ends. History as the product of historiography is abstract, and the opposite of memory which is always collective, i.e. group-specific and identity-concrete.