Domitian (r. AD 81–96) and *damnatio memoriae*

In contrast to a curse tablet, which was a private and personal mode of defamation (nailed shut and placed out of sight), a *damnatio memoriae* was the Roman public version of 'naming and shaming', which involved the desecration of a person's name and image (often a 'bad' emperor) from public buildings and monuments. This practice has survived throughout history, from ancient Egypt and Rome to the recent iconic images of Saddam Hussein's toppling statue (Slide 2). While there was a formal decree for this process in the Senate called *abolitio nominis*, literally abolishing a person's name, the term *damnatio memoriae* has a slightly different meaning, referring not so much to the name as to the memory of an individual. The implication is not necessarily that a removed name was forgotten, but that it was remembered in shame (perhaps the only thing worse than being forgotten).

Who erased the names on the monuments? Was this carried out throughout the empire? What did it look like, and perhaps most importantly, what did it mean to the Roman audience? This case study will examine the *damnatio memoriae* of Domitian both in Rome, where he was despised, and in the city of Ephesus (Asia Minor), where he was a devoted patron. It will also consider how universal and formal this act was in practice, looking at historical sources as well as the actual monuments (Slide 3).

Domitian and damnatio memoriae *in Rome*

Domitian was not a favourite of Roman historians. Known for building a stadium (now the Piazza Navona) and a palatial home on the Palatine, and assuming the names *Dominus et Deus* 'Lord and God', his reign was marked by good administration, profligate spending and brutal punishment. Suetonius' account of Domitian's disgrace in Rome illustrates beautifully how those living in Rome may have reacted (Slide 4):

'Though the general public greeted the news of Domitian's fate with indifference, it deeply grieved the troops, who at once began to speak of Domitian the God and … insisted that his assassins should be brought to justice. The senators, on the other hand, were delighted, and thronged to denounce the dead Domitian in the house with bitter and insulting cries. Then, sending for ladders, they had his votive shields and statues hurled down before their eyes and dashed to the ground; and ended by decreeing that all inscriptions referring to him must be effaced, and all records of his reign obliterated.'

(Suetonius, *Domitian* 23)

In addition to recording the Romans' (and particularly the senators') zeal in condemning Domitian, Suetonius offers a broader picture of an apathetic Roman people and sorrowful troops. Not everyone greeted this news with joy. The passage implies that the senators initiated the desecration of his monuments but that the resulting process, like its modern equivalent, was somewhat less formal in nature. Already, it is clear that *damnatio memoriae* was complex, with respect to both the act itself and to its reception by the ancient audience.

Archaeological evidence in Rome, which has yielded few statues, portraits or records of Domitian's name, supports Suetonius' account. Sculptures, such as the Cancelleria reliefs, found in the Papal Chancellery in Rome in the 1930s, depict partial recarvings of Domitian's face as Nerva (Slide 5). While these must have been formally recarved

by an artist, we do not know who erased the inscriptions, for while an expert was required to erase a text, one could argue such skills were not necessary for removing a name. In search of more answers, one must travel outside of Italy, to a city where Domitian's subsequent disgrace is attested more clearly.

Domitian and damnatio memoriae *in Ephesus*

Domitian was a fair administrator, and his brutal actions in the Roman courts as well as his extravagant personal expenditure on his palace were not key issues for the inhabitants of Ephesus, upon whom Domitian lavished his beneficence. Not since Augustus had an emperor taken such interest in the city, providing tax breaks for the Artemision by extending its boundaries and supporting a new aqueduct to the city's civic centre (Slide 6). The increased revenues of the Artemision may have been used by the *polis* and *demo*s, who repaved the *embolos* (a thoroughfare to the city centre) and renovated the theatre. Domitian also granted Ephesus the ultimate imperial favour: a prestigious 'neokoros' status, which allowed the townsfolk to set up an imperial cult temple to the emperor. The cities of Asia Minor competed fiercely for this status, and a number of them set up honorary bases in and around the temple to Domitian at Ephesus. All of these factors made Domitian's downfall awkward for the Ephesians, but how much impact did it have on the city?

The removal of a person's name did not necessarily remove that person's acts. While unpopular projects in Rome, such as Nero's golden palace and gardens, were dismantled, in Ephesus Domitian's building projects, including the aqueduct and even the imperial cult temple, continued to function. Statues may have been changed, but the inscriptions on the buildings and monuments were only partially altered. A reconstruction of the large monumental dedication on the stage building at Ephesus (Slide 7) illustrates that Domitian's name and his agnomen Germanicus were removed, but his other titles (Imperator, Caesar) remained intact. This explains another important aspect of *damnatio memoriae*: it was a personal attack on the *individual*, not on the office of emperor. While the person who removed these names may not have been an experienced carver, he had to be aware of which specific parts of the text were to be removed, so it would not have been merely anyone with a hammer and chisel.

Hacking away at the wrong official titles could be seen as an act of treason (*maiestas*), and individuals were tried for desecrating or mistreating statues of the emperor on similar grounds. Suetonius (*Tiberius* 58) records that a man accused of decapitating a statue of Augustus was examined under torture. Thereafter, an individual could be executed for undressing too close to an image of Augustus, taking a coin bearing his portrait into a brothel or a public toilet, or openly criticizing him in public. As Suetonius wrote openly critical exposés of several emperors without suffering exile (let alone execution), it is clear that some of these measures were subsequently relaxed. However, it is worth noting that his attacks on the emperors, like the erasure of certain names, was personal. He did not overtly criticize recent rulers or the titles and role of an emperor.

In a majority of cases, *damnatio memoriae* is simply the removal of a name (sometimes the wrong name) from a statue or a monument. However, the situation was slightly more complex at the imperial cult temple in Ephesus, where the deity of

the temple had been subsequently undeified. Instead of scrapping the temple, its statue and all of its dedications, it was decided to rededicate the temple to the Flavian family: the Divine Vespasiani (Vespasian and Titus, Domitian's father and brother, respectively). Domitian's name and his agnomen were chiselled from a number of bases honouring the imperial cult at Ephesus. The chiselled part was left rough and the reinscribed text did not fit properly into the space (Slide 8), thus the mark of condemnation for the damned emperor was retained, despite the rescripting of the text. Although most of the imperial cult bases were reinscribed, at least one was not (Slide 9), suggesting that the reinscription process was not universally carried out. As these bases were dedicated by different cities in Asia Minor, one wonders if the recarving of the text was a matter for the Ephesians or for whichever city set up the monument.

The saddest *damnatio memoriae* attested in Ephesus is a dedication that originally included Nero's name (until he was condemned) (Slide 10). The text was later reused with Domitian's name in bronze letters (until he suffered the same fate) By the mid-first century AD, a number of Greek dedications had switched to the term *theoi sebastoi* (the 'divine Augusti'), perhaps to avoid future alterations. In the provinces *damnatio memoriae* was not only an act, but a physical testament to the capricious nature of imperial favour.

Conclusions

There is a great deal that we still do not know about *damnatio memoriae*.
A closer examination of the process reveals that it was not universal with respect to either the act or its audience. The intended result was not for a name to be totally forgotten, but to confer a lasting judgement on an individual, transforming glory to shame. One could argue that the scar of *damnatio memoriae* was powerful insofar as it is visible across the urban landscape at Ephesus. However, what remained constant in the act, both in the text (the dedicator, the local deity, imperial titles were untouched) and in the buildings/monuments, could have resulted in the opposite conclusion: that the personal fate of the emperor was not so significant. At end of the day, Ephesus retained its tax breaks, its buildings, its aqueduct and its neokoros status. Did the senators' vendetta in Rome mean that much to the Ephesians? This also carries over to the imperial cult at Ephesus. It is hard to see how a figure whose divinity could be granted and revoked by the Senate was viewed on the same level as an Olympian goddess such as Artemis. Domitian's *damnatio memoriae*, rather than casting him as a divine being, portrays him as a wonderfully human individual who was subject to the judgement of others: liked by some, ignored by some, hated by others.

Web resources

For a good slideshow of the Cancellaria reliefs in Rome, see:
http://www.rome101.com/Topics/Cancelleria/pages/
For a catalogue of all imperial *damnatio memoriae*, see: http://www.livius.org/da-dd/damnatio/damnatio_memoriae.html

Bibliography

A.S. Graham, ‘The word is not enough: a new methodology for assessing monumental inscriptions: a case study from Ephesus’, *AJA* 117 (2013), pp. 1–30.
M. Kajava, ‘Some remarks on the erasure of inscriptions in the Roman world’, in H. Solin-Salomies-Liertz (ed.), *Acta colloquii epigraphici Latini: Helsingiae 3-6. Sept. 1991*, 1995, pp. 201–210.
S. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
S Price, ‘Gods and emperors: the Greek language of the Roman imperial cult’, *JHS* 104 (1984), pp. 79–85.
R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture*, Leiden, 2005.