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*Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance and
political imagination*

**(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, First English edition, 2011,
319 pp., index. ISBN: 978-0-521-18802-9)**

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This is a book that has to be read many times, and digested slowly. Much of the information needs to be assimilated and thoroughly processed, but the effort required is extremely rewarding. There is no doubt that this is a seminal work on ancient civilization. Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, is a prolific and prodigious scholar. In this work, he focuses on Israel, Egypt, and Greece, drawing on his extensive knowledge and research to examine the implications that history and writing had on these civilizations. He ranges from the concept of memory through to the political changes that the new technology of writing brought about. The book is impeccably researched and referenced, with many footnotes that provide even more insights for the reader.

The book is divided into two parts, the first being the contextualisation or theoretical framework of the topic, and the second being case studies used to illustrate the theoretical framework. The depth of information provided in the first part of the book lays an excellent foundation for the case studies.

Assmann emphasizes the relationship between memory and culture, and argues that the two are closely intertwined. In the first part of the book, he sets out to describe and discuss the relationship between the two. He identifies early civilisations and shows how the approach to their histories governed the manner in which citizens perceived society at the time, as well as the rest of the world did once the information became part of “Western Civilization”. He notes that “memory culture is universal” (p.16) but that differing approaches to memory define societies. In other words, the significance of the past in human consciousness is vital to all societies, but different cultures deal with documentation and preservation in such a way that cultural identity is defined and maintained.

Assmann explores the concepts of collective memory in depth and provides insights that assist the reader in making sense of the current social context. He uses Maurice Halbwachs’ concept of “memoire collective” (p. 21) to explain and illustrate his message, but does not hesitate to disagree with some of his ideas. He believes that although his work was ground-breaking, there are flaws that can be recognised only once an appropriate period has passed. An important aspect that he examines is the difference between history and mythology in the context of religious practice. The long-term consequences of this differentiation enables the reader to gain insights into the impact of secularisation in the modern world.

He distils from Halbwachs’ framework an approach that he calls “socio-constructivist” (p. 33), which is more accessible in the 21st Century. He also differentiates between “communicated” and “cultural” memory using a table to contrast and contextualise the concepts, making them more readily understandable. He then moves on to written culture, the development of writing, and how societies’ attitudes to writing governed the way in which they developed. Cultural continuity depends on the written word (script), whose nature governed the manner in which societies changed. The Egyptian hieroglyphics, which are both text and image, provide a radically different representation of the written word from the Greek alphabet, which depends solely on letters that are used to create words and meaning.

These insights explain how and why cultures and their different forms of writing and communication produced differences in societies' self-understanding. Attitudes to writing and communicated information, namely "canon" and "interpretation" (p. 78) influenced the ways in which civilizations developed. The political complexities of these civilizations are explained in detail to identify profound differences in their approach to government.

In the second part of the book, Assmann successfully uses case studies to inform and illustrate these ideas. He starts with Ancient Egypt where his knowledge and expertise is obvious. At times, the content can be rather dense and more than one reading is required. Nonetheless, the facts are informative and capture the imagination.

The next case study is that of Israel, where the tension between canonisation and interpretation is extended. The point that culture is maintained through strict adherence to the biblical text as well as self-imposed isolation of the group is not new, but is presented in a manner that provides the reader with insights into the nature of religion. The third case differentiates between the spirit and the letter of the law. This led to more flexibility in society, but also strengthens the case for individual difference as a new dimension of "humanness". These ideas pave the way for the fourth case study, which addresses the development of Greek philosophy and government. While this is more familiar territory, it still challenges the reader to reassess many ideas and clichés.

In each chapter there are diagrams that prove very useful in making the complex ideas more accessible. There are also a number of helpful summaries in the book that keep track of the multifaceted concepts. This is a work that I would highly recommend to any person interested in the history of humanity, both spiritual and secular, as it takes one on an extremely interesting journey into the past from which parallels with modern society can be drawn.