

History and the Nature of Cultural Memory: The Alamo and the “Masada Complex”

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The concept of cultural memory is, I think, one long known to historians. What is new is not the concept but the formal study of it in the context not only of history but other disciplines, such as anthropology and literature. My aim here is to look at two graphic examples and then tease out the implications of these in the light of current study of cultural memory. The examples are the siege of the Alamo at the time of the Texas war of independence in 1836 and the so-called “Masada Complex” in modern Israel.

Two Case Studies

The Alamo

As a native Texan I grew up with the image of the Alamo from pre-school days, as I recall, but certainly through many classes of Texan history in my 12 years of school. Yet it was a part of my cultural heritage, something known and accepted by all those around me, whether school mates, teachers, parents, or other adults in my community. In recent years some aspects of this popular image have been questioned or challenged by historians. I could examine a number of topics relating to the siege, e.g., the famous “line in the sand” drawn by W. Travis. This is one of the more striking images, often cited and depicted, about which the Texan journalist J. F. Dobie (1940) wrote, “The old story, the cherished story, the heroic story of the line that Travis drew seems to me vindicated sufficiently for credence. The mere absence of documentary proof never repudiated it anyhow.” But because of constraints on space, for purposes of this illustration I shall look at only one of the areas of revision that have arisen among historians of the Texas revolution: the death of David Crockett.

One of the iconic images that I grew up with was of David Crockett, James Bowie, and others fighting to the death in spite of facing hopeless odds. This is graphically presented in a number of famous 19th and 20th century paintings but

is probably best known through the 1955 Walt Disney TV miniseries episode with Fess Parker as “Davy Crockett at the Alamo” and the 1960 film, *The Alamo*, with John Wayne. The figure of Crockett, who shoots his rifle “Old Betsy” until he no longer is able to reload and then wields it as a club against the attacking soldiers, is a mental image imprinted firmly in many American minds. The TV series and film were not the source of my knowledge of the event, but they largely agreed with what I was taught in school or read in books on the subject.

The idea that Crockett might not have died heroically in battle but might have surrendered or been captured became a major news item in 1975, when the diary of the Mexican officer J. de la Peña was released in an English translation by C. Perry. Surprisingly, this apparently was a common view during the 19th century (cf. Roberts and Olsen 2001: 288). Some—perhaps much of the negative—reaction was from the gut, but there also were attempts to refute the revisionist view of Crockett’s death by historical argument. A leading objection centered on the issue of authenticity—an interesting parallel to questions about some recent ancient Near Eastern artifacts. B. Groneman, a captain in the New York fire department but a capable and knowledgeable amateur historian, argued that the diary was a modern forgery.¹

One of the main advocates of a revision of the history surrounding Crockett’s death is J. E. Crisp, a professional historian and academic at the University of South Carolina. He got involved in the matter when asked to review Groneman’s book. Crisp was not initially opposed to Groneman’s thesis, but as he began to check on some of Groneman’s claims, he started to find discrepancies. This especially applied to the translation of documents that were originally in Spanish; Groneman apparently did not know Spanish and relied on English translations. Crisp’s review finally appeared as a full-length article (Crisp 1994) that went into all the major aspects of Groneman’s arguments.

Contrary to what his review might suggest, Crisp was not one of the “New Western Historians” (or revisionists) who wrote of the Texas revolution in essentially negative terms; on the contrary, he supported many of the traditional views, but as a *historian*; that is, he supported what could be shown by proper historical documentation, not patriotic fervor. Crisp’s conclusions depend essentially on three documents that he argues give independent witness to the execution of Crockett at the command of Santa Anna.

First, there was the diary of Santa Anna’s secretary, R. Martínez Caro, published in 1837 (quoted from the English translation in Hansen 2003: 384):

The enemy died to a man and its loss may be said to have been 183 men, the sum total of their force. Six women who were captured were set at liberty. Among the 183 killed there were five who were discovered by General Castrillón hiding after

1. Groneman 1994, 1999. See also Lindley 2003 and his debate with Crisp below.

the assault. He took them immediately to the presence of His Excellency [General Santa Anna] who had come up by this time. When he presented the prisoners, he was severely reprimanded for not having killed them on the spot, after which he turned his back upon Castrillón while the soldiers stepped out of their ranks and set upon the prisoners until they were all killed.

Sergeant G. M. Dolson was a soldier in the Texan army and, knowing Spanish, was often called on to act as an interpreter. This extract is quoted from a letter of his that first appeared in the Detroit *Democratic Free Press* in September, 1836 (quoted from Connelly 1960: 373–74). It reports a conversation he translated between a Mexican officer being held as a prisoner-of-war on Galveston Island and the Texan commander, James Morgan. Note that two passages are marked in italics, since there is a dispute about their authenticity as a rendering of the original account and will be discussed below:

The Mexican was then requested to proceed with the statement according to promise; and he said he would give a true and correct account of proceedings of Santa Anna towards the prisoners who remained alive at the taking of the Alamo. This shows the fate of Colonel Crockett [*sic*] and his five brave companions. . . . He states that on the morning the Alamo was captured, between hours of five and six o'clock, General Castrillion [*sic*], who fell at the battle of St. Jacinto, entered the back room of the Alamo, and there found Crockett and five other Americans, who had defended it until defence was useless; they appeared very much agitated when the Mexican soldiers overtook to rush in after their General, but the humane General ordered his men to keep out, and placing his hand on his breast, said, "here is a hand and a heart to protect you; come with me to the General-in-Chief, and you shall be saved." . . . The brave but unfortunate men were marched *to the tent* of Santa Anna. Colonel Crockett was in the rear, had his arms folded, and appeared bold as the lion as he passed *my informant (Almonte.) Santa Anna's interpreter knew Colonel Crockett* and said to my informant, the one behind is the famous Crockett. When brought in the presence of Santa Anna, Castrillon said to him, "Santa Anna, the august, I deliver up to you six brave prisoners of war." Santa Anna replied, "who has given you orders to take prisoners, I do not want to see those men living—shoot them." As the monster uttered these words each officer turned his face the other way, and the hell-hounds of the tyrant dispatched the six in his presence, and within six feet of his person. Such an act I consider murder of the blackest kind.

Several points led some to question the authenticity of the letter. We know, for example, that the Mexican officer Colonel J. Almonte was a fluent speaker of English and would not have needed an interpreter; furthermore, he apparently was not present on Galveston Island at that time. However, as this was published in the letters column of a newspaper from a handwritten copy, it has been suggested

that the typesetter misunderstood the original, which had the name “Almonte” inserted above the line but should have read something like the following: “my informant. Almonte, Santa Anna’s interpreter, knew Colonel Crockett.”² This makes sense and fits the situation.³ There is also the difficulty that the prisoners were taken to Santa Anna’s “tent”; as Crisp shows, this is an English rendering of a Spanish narrative (1996a: 5–7). Although “tent” was a possible rendering of the Spanish word *pabellón*, it could also refer to the “national flag” in usage of the time.

Probably the most controversial is the account of J. E. de la Peña, who served with Santa Anna as an officer (quoted from the English translation in Crisp 1994: 288–89):

Some seven men survived the general massacre and guided by General Castrillón, who protected them, were presented to Santa Anna. Among them was one of great stature, well-formed and with regular features, in whose face was stamped the pain of adversity, but in which could be observed a certain resignation and dignity which spoke well of him. It was the naturalist David Croket [*sic*], very well known in North America for his novel adventures, who had come to examine the country and who, happening to be in Béjar [San Antonio] in the moments of surprise, had confined himself in the Alamo, fearful of not being respected in his capacity as a foreigner. Santa Anna answered the intervention of Castrillón with a gesture of indignation, and addressing himself immediately to the sappers, which was the soldiery he had nearest, ordered that they shoot them. The junior and senior officers became indignant at this action and did not repeat the command, hoping that with the passing of the first moment of fury, those men would be saved; but different officers who were around the President and who perhaps had not been there in the moment of danger, made themselves conspicuous by a despicable act; surpassing the soldiers in cruelty, they pushed themselves forward to them, in order to flatter the [cruelty] of their commander, and sword in hand they threw themselves on those unhappy defenseless men, in the same way that a tiger leaps upon its prey.

After Crisp’s review of Groneman, a debate between him and T. R. Lindley, who supported Groneman, was published in the pages of the *Alamo Review* (1995–1996). This debate is very useful in that it lays out most of the issues and arguments, some of which have already been discussed. However, Groneman had also

2. A suggestion apparently first made by D. Kilgore. See the discussion in Crisp (1994: 288–89; 1996a).

3. It should be noted, however, that Roberts and Olsen remain somewhat sceptical, commenting that “although Almonte had spent considerable time in the United States, he probably had never met Crockett, never seen Crockett in person” (2001: 193). However, they fail to note Crisp’s cogent explanation (1996a) of how Almonte (although probably never meeting Crockett in person) could well have known him by sight, because he spent time in New York in 1835 when Crockett was in the national news for his anti-Jackson congressional campaign and was honoured with a life-size painting at the New York National Academy of Design.

called for a forensic examination of the diary, to establish its authenticity or otherwise by scientific means, as has been done on a number of questionable artifacts found in the Near East. Testing eventually was done by D. B. Gracy II, a specialist in the authenticity of documents, and the results appeared in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 105.2 (October 2001). Gracy and a number of other experts and associates examined the paper and watermarks, the chemical composition of the ink, water stains, damage from drugstore beetles, and especially the handwriting, as compared with known genuine documents written by de la Peña or with his signature. A number of the tests showed that the paper and ink were from the right period of time, and the manner of insect damage and the mechanics of writing showed that it was not done by a modern forger on ancient paper (as clever forgers will try to do). Gracy (2001: 291) concludes as follows:

(1) The physical characteristics of the Peña document conform to the characteristics known and expected of documents of the period of the 1830s and 1840s in which the manuscript purportedly was written.

(2) No physical characteristic of paper, ink, and condition of the document alone, and especially none of them in combination, point to the Peña document being a twentieth-century forgery of an item dating from the period of the 1830s and 1840s.

(3) Neither does the penmanship exhibit signs of forgery, nor could John Laflin be the forger [as suggested by Groneman]. More importantly the characteristics of the penmanship at critical points in the document correspond to those exhibited in unquestioned examples of Peña's handwriting.

In summary, the facts, as the spread before me, lead to the single ultimate conclusion that the manuscript account of the Texas campaign purported to be the product of José Enrique de la Peña written in the years following the campaign is, indeed, what it is purported to be.

To summarize, even when questions of authenticity are positively answered, only one of the accounts as preserved is certainly from an eye-witness: that of Martínez Caro. Otherwise, all are accounts given to the authors by others who claim to have been eye-witnesses; even de la Peña's account may have been gleaned from reports of others, though it possibly represents his own eye witness account. This means there is no certainty. Nevertheless, there is a persistent story that certain individuals surrendered, a mere handful, and were executed on Santa Anna's orders. Not quite as definite—though still extensively attested—is the story that David Crockett was one of these men. If he was, this in no way discredits his bravery or fighting ability, since in battle—especially against overwhelming odds—surrender or capture can happen to the bravest and most able. Yet it does make the fall of the Alamo somewhat more complicated and uncertain—more “messy”—than in standard texts and portraits. On the other hand, historical reality is often rather complicated and “messy.”

*Masada*⁴

Nearly one thousand Jewish men, women and children who had survived the fall of Jerusalem refused to surrender to Rome. They took over King Herod's fortress on the steep rock-mountain of Masada by the Dead Sea. For three years they managed to hold their own against repeated Roman attempts to dislodge them. When the Romans finally broke through, they found that the Jews had committed suicide so as not to surrender to the enemy.⁵

Today, we can point only to the fact that Masada has become a symbol of heroism and of liberty for the Jewish people to whom it says:

“Fight to death rather than surrender;
Prefer death to bondage and loss of freedom.”⁶

These two quotations illustrate the place of Masada in recent thinking. The term “Masada complex” (“Masada syndrome,” “Masada myth”) has been around quite some time.⁷ It has been defined as follows: “. . . the conviction . . . that it is preferable to fight to the end rather than to surrender and acquiesce to the loss of independent statehood” (Rolef [ed.] 1988: 214). It was about the turn of the 19th to the 20th century that the Masada mythical narrative apparently began to be created.⁸ Several developments gave it a considerable boost in the 1920s and 1930s,⁹ but it was the archaeological finds in the 1960s that gave a new impetus to national interest in Masada. Few, if any, had more influence than Y. Yadin (1917–1984), who had been chief of staff of the Israel Defence Forces before studying for a career as an archaeologist and Dead Sea Scrolls scholar. It was he who excavated Masada in 1963–1965. The English version of his book in 1966 was *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand*, but the earlier Hebrew title was *מצודה: כימים ההם בזמן*

4. For the history of Masada I draw on primary sources, as discussed in Grabbe 1992 and Grabbe forthcoming. But for discussion and examples relating to the modern situation, I have depended primarily on Ben-Yehuda 1995, 2002; Zerubavel 1995. Also consulted were Ben-Yehuda n.d.; Alter 1973.

5. From 1985 booklet, *Facts about Israel*, published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Information Division (p. 22).

6. Dayan 1983: 21.

7. It has been traced back as early as 1963 (Zerubavel 1995: 209).

8. Ben-Yehuda n.d.; Zerubavel 1995: 62–65. It was used in a debate between two famous Zionist ideological leaders, Achad Ha'am and Berdyczewski.

9. These included: a Hebrew translation of Josephus in 1923; the publication of Y. Lapidan's most popular Masada poem in 1927; and the promotion of Masada as a heroic tale by S. Guttman and the academic Y. Klausner in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Guttman (1909–) took a tour of the Dead Sea with friends in 1933 and climbed Masada, for which he had Josephus' account. He was the main one fostering a pilgrimage to Masada as a regular part of youth movements and Hagana training. He believed that knowing the land and fighting for it were essential elements of the Zionist consciousness.

ההה = *Masada: In those Days, At this Time*, a phrase taken from the Hanukkah liturgy.

N. Ben-Yehuda (n.d.) did a thorough survey of the cultural elements of the nation to check for the place and use of Masada in those contexts. He concluded that examining all these areas gave a powerful cultural analysis with regard to the amount of correspondence between the presentation of Masada in Israeli culture and our primary source, Josephus. Yet we also find in the Zionist collective memory some definite changes of emphasis—if not of the actual story—from the account in Josephus. Some of these are the following:¹⁰

1. *Some of the “Zealots” who were defending Jerusalem took refuge in Masada after the fall of the city in 70 C.E.* Josephus tells us that Masada was taken over in 66 C.E. by members of the *Sicarii*. They were a group who mainly attacked other Jews who supposedly were collaborators with the Romans, even the high priest, using a hidden *sica* (type of dagger), beginning already in the 40s or 50s (*War* 2.13.3 §§254–57). Their leader was assassinated by other Jewish groups in 66 C.E., and they were driven out of the city and took refuge in Masada already at the beginning of the war (*War* 2.17.8–9 §§433–48; 4.7.2 §§398–405). They had no part in the defence of Jerusalem, but lived by raiding the local villages and robbing and killing fellow Jews (*War* 4.7.2 §§398–405; 7.8.1 §§254–58).
2. *It is common to refer to the defenders of Masada as “Zealots” (as Yadin does).* As noted in the previous point, the defenders were members of the *Sicarii*. The “Zealots” were one of the groups defending Jerusalem, and most of their members seem to have died there.¹¹
3. *A long siege (e.g., “three years”) is implied in most discussions.* While the *Sicarii* continued to occupy Masada after the fall of Jerusalem, the Romans did nothing for three years. Then, when they instituted the siege, it was actually brief, first building a wall around the site to prevent escape, then constructing the ramp to get to the top (*War* 7.8.2–9.2 §§275–406). Once it had reached the top and they were able to deploy the battering ram, the climax came quite quickly. The siege lasted a few months at most.
4. *Eleazar son of Jairus, the leader of the Sicarii, made a striking speech on the nature of freedom on the eve of the final Roman attack (War 7.8.6–7 §§320–88).* It was common for Greek and Roman historians to invent speeches and put them into the mouths of historical characters. The

10. Ben-Yehuda (2002) has catalogued most of these. Although I have worked from Josephus' own account, I find that Ben-Yehuda has done his research on Josephus carefully. For information on the modern situation, I depend on him and others mentioned above.

11. On the Zealots, see Grabbe 2000: 287–88.

speech supposedly given by Eleazar was an invention of Josephus though, interestingly, it is very religious: God as the only king, God's having abandoned the Jews, and the immortality of the soul. It makes great copy for modern readers of the story, but we have no idea whether Eleazar made a speech or, if he did, what its contents were.

5. *Most or all the defenders died fighting the Romans.* Josephus says nothing about attacks on the Romans (*War* 7.8.5 §§304–19). As the Romans were besieging the site and constructing a ramp to get to the top, they fired arrows and other missiles at the defenders. In Josephus' account, all the defenders did was to try to defend against the siege measures, such as building a second defence wall when the first was breached. No doubt some defenders would have been killed by the Roman siege engines, but the vast majority died by suicide, before the Romans broke through.

As Ben-Yehuda pointed out (1995: 14), “The Masada mythical narrative played a crucial role in the crystallization of a new individual and collective identity for generations of Israeli Jews between the early 1940s and the late 1960s.” At this point, however, we have a curious development. During the early days of statehood, many Israelis found the Holocaust embarrassing, a symbol of the Jewish victimhood that the new state aimed to eliminate. It was only from the early 1960s, with the Eichmann trial, that the Holocaust came to be an important part of collective memory. A commemorative day for the Holocaust was established by law in 1959, but this date served both for the Holocaust and Masada: Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day.¹² Initially, the focus was on the heroic aspects of the Holocaust, such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, but attitudes to both events began to change in the late 1960s.

Even more significant were the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and the events following. They helped to create a new commemorative narrative that saw the similarities between the two events: the “tragic narrative” as opposed to the earlier “activist narrative.” The tragic version “redefines Masada as the very end of Antiquity and the beginning of Exile. . . . The tragic commemorative narrative thus establishes a continuity between Masada, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel” (Zerubavel 1995: 194–95). The two narratives exist side by side in modern Israel and tend to be called upon in different situations. As with the Bar Kokhva revolt, there have been scholarly debates about the facts of the siege of Masada and objections to its use as a symbol. Yael Zerubavel (1995: 213) summarizes the current situation thus:

12. Holocaust Memorial Day is 27th Nisan, unless it falls on a Friday (in which case it is put on the 26th [Thursday]) or a Sunday (in which case it is postponed to the 28th [Monday]).

In spite of these multiple voices of criticism, Masada has not lost its symbolic significance. Clearly, both the site and the myth have been transformed. In a more diversified and more politically polarized Israeli society, there is much less agreement on the interpretation of the past as well as its implications for the present. But Masada is still part of Israeli collective memory and still evokes strong responses. In this respect the criticism of Masada provides further evidence of its continuing, if transformed, symbolic significance for Israeli and Jewish political discourse.

Discussion: Implications for Cultural Memory

A pioneer of cultural memory studies, P. Nora, made the point that cultural memory is ceasing to exist in industrialized societies because the formal study of history is taught in schools. He spoke of “the end of a tradition of memory”: “What we call memory today is therefore not memory . . . voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous; psychological, individual, and subjective; but never social, collective, or all encompassing” (1989: 11, 13). Assuming I understand his comments correctly, it is doubtful that his observations were true even in France, but it is certainly not the case in many examples I can think of around the world. Indeed, many professional historians feel themselves in a battle with cultural memory to get across academic historical discoveries to a broader public. This point is well illustrated by the two examples discussed in the present paper.

There is also another point, which is perhaps one of the most important points to come out of studies of cultural memory as it applies to the study of the history of ancient Israel: the significance of certain events as symbols for views important to people’s identity. This was noted with regard to Masada, which has been such a strong symbol in modern Israeli society. Yet also in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in the so-called “third battle for the Alamo,” the San Antonio shrine became a symbol for two opposing camps:¹³ on the conservative side, the Alamo was associated “with a forceful American foreign policy,” but for liberals, it “was recalled as a warning more than an ideal” (Roberts and Olsen 2001: 282–83). “By the 1980s, the Alamo was one of the most hotly contested symbols in the nation” (Roberts and Olsen 2001: 296).

It was in that context that attempts at revising the narrative of Crockett’s death took place. An example of those attacking the Crockett phenomenon was John Haverstick of the *Saturday Review*. As the authors of *Line in the Sand* commented,

13. Chapter 11 in Roberts and Olson (2001) has the title, “The Third Battle of the Alamo.” What has been referred to as the “second battle for the Alamo” was the struggle between A. De Zavala and C. Driscoll over two separate visions for the restoration of the Alamo (see Roberts and Olson 2001: 197–229). The comments here on the Alamo as a symbol are heavily based on the discussion in Roberts and Olson (2001: especially 277–314).

“Surprise—Haverstick unearthed the fact that the Davy Crockett of children’s literature is a sanitized version of the historical David Crockett” (Roberts and Olson 2001: 249). But much more than simple historical fact was at stake: a political agenda was often, even explicitly, involved.

Yet we need to realize that such debates are not new; they are not even just a phenomenon of modern times. It is becoming clear that antiquity also witnessed ferocious battles about the symbolic significance of a particular cultural memory. There is evidence in the biblical text, for example, that king David was also the subject of a debate in antiquity, perhaps even in his own lifetime. This does not appear to be the result just of the Dtr outlook on the deeds—good and bad—of kings. We know that in the writing of the DtrH, the ruling monarchs and others were judged according to how they measured up to the standards set by the Deuteronomists.¹⁴ This is especially indicated by the various attempts at legitimating his rule found in the present narrative of David’s life.¹⁵

This is an important point for evaluating aspects of the Davidic tradition when it comes to writing a history of Israel. David was a symbol for the author of 1 and 2 Samuel and other biblical passages. This no doubt shaped the Davidic tradition and needs to be taken into account in evaluating the narrative about David. The same applies to other figures in the biblical text that acted as important cultural symbols. Part of the task of critical analysis is to attempt to discover how being a cultural symbol caused aspects of the tradition to be exaggerated, sanitized, suppressed, invented, or otherwise altered in order to enhance the image. Likewise, for those who took the opposite view, the tradition was altered in the other direction, and the historian needs to devote appropriate scrutiny to discovering how the tradition might have been developed in this way.

Conclusions

Two examples will hardly exhaust the ramifications of cultural memory, but the two graphic case studies in this essay suggest some possibilities:

1. Some aspects of cultural memory develop naturally in a human community. The community remembers in certain ways, even when we learn history in schools and universities. Our modern concept of critical analysis and historical method is practised by only a small number of indi-

14. In the present biblical text, there is of course a heated debate over the merits or otherwise of having a monarchy. The debate over the question of having a king may have been late (depending on when you date 1 Samuel 8 and related passages), but in any case the question of David’s rule was separate from this.

15. See the list of various attempts at legitimating David: anointing by Samuel (1 Sam 16:1–13); armour-bearer who plays the lyre (1 Sam 16:14–23); slaying of Goliath (1 Samuel 17); marrying the king’s daughter whom he has won by military feats (1 Sam 18:20–27).

viduals, usually in an academic context. But this leads to our second and perhaps more important point:

2. Cultural memory is manipulated by many parties in the community, especially those related to leadership positions and institutions with vested interests. Some writers on cultural memory have talked as if moderns were in a different category from the old “peasant culture,” but this is simply not the case. Most moderns exhibit at least some of the habits and biases well known from previous generations. In spite of their education, which varies greatly in content and continued effects, the average person’s concept of history is still fairly basic. The critical study of history gradually filters from academic circles into the wider public consciousness, often because of TV documentaries or stories in various news media.
3. Cultural memory is not necessarily wrong from a historical point of view. Often it has just distorted the data and given an incomplete picture. Its outline might be basically correct, especially if it relates to recent events. But the presence of distortions must make us look at any popular tradition carefully and critically. This becomes especially important when we deal with ancient history, where the data are often very sparse.

It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this essay to long-term colleague and friend, Ehud Ben Zvi.

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