

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE: IS IT EVER CORRECT TO REWRITE HISTORY?

Recent events in the USA, UK and around the world have raised interesting questions about our ability as humans to reflect on past behaviours and how we respond to make amends in the present day. On 7th June, the statue of Edward Colston was pulled down by protestors in Bristol. Colston was a prominent and powerful slave dealer who traded over 80,000 African slaves to America over the course of 12 years. Colston's statue was erected as a thank you to the money he had pledged to Bristol throughout his life but was and has been seen by many to be a promotion of slavery as this is how he had made the money he pledged.

At the time of writing it remains to be seen what will happen to the statue of Edward Colston or indeed the statues of other prominent contributors to Britain's role in the Slave Trade. The conversation is starting to spread to other controversial figures with discussions around the legitimacy of the statues for those who played a part in British Imperialism. Whether you think this statue should have been pulled down is a very personal decision but it has raised an interesting question about how we treat uncomfortable periods of history; do we leave these monuments as a reminder of our dreadful past? Do we effectively erase them from history and therefore remove the idol status that these statues give them?

The Romans had an interesting method of approaching difficult history. In many ways the Romans faced similar anxieties about their past as modern Britain does (although they were perhaps less apologetic about empire). The process of '*damnatio memoriae*' or the 'condemnation of memory' was used for several prominent but problematic Roman leaders, the most famous being Mark Antony, the best friend of Julius Caesar and husband of Cleopatra.

WHAT IS DAMNATIO MEMORIAE?

'damnatio memoriae' was a process of erasing politicians and Emperors from public history. Public

history was not the texts which we read about in authors such as Tacitus or Suetonius but rather public inscriptions and public documents. This involved physically scratching off names from inscriptions and in some cases, toppling statues.



Mark Antony's oration at the funeral of Julius Caesar, John Sullivan

WHO WAS CONDEMNED?

Some pretty famous Emperors that were condemned included Nero, Caligula, Domitian, Commodus and Elagabalus. All the above have very problematic histories and play a role in creating difficult periods for the Roman people.

CAN WE LEARN SOMETHING FROM THE ROMAN APPROACH?

The Roman approach of '*damnatio memoriae*' was to essentially make sure bad emperors were not idolised. Is this something we should consider in our modern world? The statues of controversial figures in British history do not stand in a museum with clear educational purpose, so should they be repurposed?

I would be really interested in hearing what you have say on this.

Do you think it was correct for the protestors in Bristol to pull down the statue of Edward Colston?

Do you think it is right to erase negative figures from history as the Romans did?

I have created a Google form so you can let me know, anonymously, what you think on the matter.

<https://forms.gle/PTSQMMRwg3iDKV3W6>

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