

# On Remembering Names in Antiquity

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ANY ONE WHO WISHES TO ILLUSTRATE the fundamental sameness of human nature throughout the ages might well begin by noting the importance that the great leaders of antiquity, especially kings, generals, and statesmen, attached to remembering the names of persons with whom they came in contact. A good memory for names and faces has always been helpful in the conduct of war, politics, and business.

In the *Iliad*, our earliest Greek literary work, Agamemnon is fully aware that one honors a man by calling him by name and showing a knowledge of his lineage.<sup>1</sup> The use of patronymics must also have been especially flattering in an age when a man had only one name.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps no one ever laid greater stress on remembering names than Cyrus the Great did. The effect of his addressing officers by name in an assembly while giving them their assignments is well described by Xenophon,<sup>3</sup> who also records Cyrus's reasons for learning names:

"Hereupon they [the officers] went to their tents, and, as they went, they remarked to one another what a good memory Cyrus had and how he called every one by name as he assigned them their places and gave them their instructions. Now Cyrus made a study of this; for he thought it passing strange that, while every mechanic knows the names of the tools of his trade and the physician knows the names of all the instruments and medicines he uses, the general should be so foolish as not to know the names of the officers under him; and yet he must employ them as his instruments not only when he wishes to capture a place or defend one, but also when he wishes to inspire courage or fear. And whenever Cyrus wished to honor any one, it seemed to him proper to address him by name."<sup>4</sup>

A great Athenian statesman, Themistocles, enjoyed a wonderful

reputation for remembering names. We are told that he had learned the names of all the citizens of Athens,<sup>5</sup> but perhaps this feat did not require much effort by a man with his phenomenal memory. He himself said that he remembered things he preferred not to and that he could not forget what he wished to.<sup>6</sup>

Like Agamemnon, Nicias, one of the commanders in the ill-fated Athenian expedition against Sicily (415–413 B.C.), realized the value of knowing the names of the men under him. Before the final engagement of the fleets in the harbor of Syracuse, Nicias spoke to each commander of a trireme, using the man's own name, his father's name, and the name of his tribe.<sup>7</sup> Diodorus Siculus (13, 15, 1) says that Nicias visited each ship and addressed the trierarch of each one as he came to it.

Two of the greatest Greek philosophers thought that the state would benefit from a wide acquaintanceship among its citizens. Plato believed<sup>8</sup> that citizens should take advantage of opportunities to become better acquainted, and Aristotle<sup>9</sup> held that, if citizens were to distribute offices according to merit, the state should be small enough for them to know one another's character.

As one would expect, several prominent Romans cultivated the art of remembering names. In *De Senectute*, 7, 21, Cicero makes Cato the Elder say in his old age that he knew not only those persons then living (presumably all Romans worth knowing), but also their fathers and grandfathers.

Cicero, too, learned names, and he even familiarized himself with details about the lives of persons he knew. His attitude seems to have been influenced by that of Cyrus the Great (already quoted), as the first part of the following quotation shows:

“And now that he was engaging in public life with greater ardour, he considered it a shameful thing that while craftsmen, using vessels and instruments that are lifeless, know the name and place and capacity of every one of them, the statesman, on the contrary, whose instruments for carrying out public measures are men, should be indifferent and careless about knowing his fellow-citizens. Wherefore he not only accustomed himself to remember their names, but also learned to know the quarter of the city in which every notable person dwelt, where he owned a country-place, what friends he had, and what neighbours; so that whatever road in Italy Cicero travelled, it was easy for him to name and point out the estates and villas of his friends.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps no eminent Roman was more successful than Crassus in winning the good will of the Roman populace, for he was both courteous and unpretentious, and he always returned the greetings of citizens by calling them by name, even though they were humble and low.<sup>11</sup>

The magic of the personal touch was realized by Julius Caesar also. When his legions were hard pressed in a battle with the Nervii and defeat seemed imminent, he snatched a shield from a soldier, hastened to the front ranks, and addressed the centurions by name in the midst of the fighting.<sup>12</sup>

Some remarkable feats of memory are recorded by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, 7, 88. After stating (obviously in error<sup>13</sup>) that Cyrus the Great called by name all the soldiers in his army, he adds that Lucius Scipio knew the names of (all?) the Roman people and that Cineas, King Pyrrhus's envoy to the Roman Senate, has mastered those of the senators the day after he arrived in Rome.<sup>14</sup>

A most extraordinary feat of memory is attributed to the orator Hortensius. After he had sat at an auction through an entire day, he enumerated the things sold, the prices, and the names of the buyers, all in proper order and without a mistake in any detail.<sup>15</sup>

The memorizing of names seems to have been stressed in the days of a Roman philosopher named Favorinus (c. 80-c. 150). He says that to fail to designate a thing by the proper word was as disgraceful for a Roman as not to call a person by his own name.<sup>16</sup> Apparently he considered a good mental directory of names as essential as a good vocabulary.

Clear indication of the value the Romans placed upon recognition of friends and acquaintances is seen in the institution of the *nomenclator*, "name caller (or prompter)," who made sure that the great man whom he served would not be embarrassed by a faulty memory for names while attending large functions or being carried about Rome in a litter. But having a name prompter just for show was, of course, the acme of bad taste, and Cicero thus ridicules the pretensions of one candidate for office who employed a *nomenclator*:

"... What about your employing a *nomenclator*? In this surely you are playing a trick and a deception. For if it is honourable for you to call your fellow-citizens by name, it is a disgrace that they

should be better known to a slave than to you! But if you know them already, do you for all that, when you are seeking election, have to address them through your prompter as if you were uncertain? What about your greeting them as if you yourself knew them after you had been prompted? What about your greeting them much less cordially after you have been elected? If you treat all these acts on the basis of the common practice here in the city, they are correct enough, but if you wish to weigh them in the scale of the tenets of philosophy, they are found utterly vicious."<sup>17</sup>

As might be inferred from the material here presented, the ancients, like us, experienced no little difficulty in remembering names. The question that Cicero put into the mouth of Cato the Elder,<sup>18</sup> "Do you think, therefore, that in his advanced years Themistocles was wont to greet Aristides as Lysimachus?"<sup>19</sup> implies that failures to call people by their right names were not infrequent among the Greeks. The excerpts about Cyrus the Great and Cicero show that their studied efforts to learn names contrasted sharply with the general laxity in this respect. And the very existence of nomenclatores in Rome indicates that many distinguished Romans could not keep a great number of names in mind or else would not try to do so.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 10, 68-69. Cf. 10, 87, 144, 150.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, many Greek patronymics were naturally adapted to hexameter verse.

<sup>3</sup> *Cyropaedia*, 5, 3, 46-47. The translation that follows is by W. Miller in the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>4</sup> Several Roman authors go so far as to say that Cyrus knew the names of all his soldiers. They are: Pliny, *Natural History*, 7, 88; Quintilian, 11, 2, 50; Valerius Maximus, 8, 7, Exteri 15. The statement by these authors is incredible. It would seem to be an error that may hark back to the inadvertence of someone who mis-translated the Greek word for "officers" in Xenophon by the Latin word for "soldiers."

<sup>5</sup> Cicero, *De Senectute*, 7, 21. See also Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 5, 4. It is said that former Postmaster General James A. Farley remembers the names of 20,000 persons he met on political campaigns.

<sup>6</sup> See Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2, 32, 104: "Oblivionis," inquit, "mallem; nam meminisse etiam quae nolo, oblivisci non possum quae volo."

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides, 7, 69, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Laws*, 738 D, E.

<sup>9</sup> *Politics*, 7, 4, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *Cicero*, 7, 1-2. The translation is that of B. Perrin in the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, *Crassus*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *De Bello Gallico*, 2, 25. In describing battles of the First Crusade, Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Canto 20, Stanzas 17-18, puts these words into the mouth of Godfrey of Bouillon, who thus contrasts the aloofness of the enemy general with his own intimate relations with his men (translation by John Hoole):

"Scarce is he known, and scarce his troops can name,  
Nor calls them partners of his former fame:  
We every toil and every triumph share,

Fellows in arms, and brothers of the war!  
 Is there a warrior but your chief can tell  
 His native country, and his birth reveal?  
 What sword to me unknown? What shaft that flies  
 With missile death along the liquid skies?"

Ovid would have approved Caesar's psychology in calling the centurions by name, for he represents horses as reacting to names like human beings. When Pluto wishes to urge on his steeds as he carries Persephone away in his chariot, he calls each one by name (*Met.*, 5, 402-403). Phaethon's efforts to regain control of the horses of the sun god as they dash wildly across the heavens are made hopeless because he does not know their names (*ibid.*, 2, 191-192).

<sup>13</sup> See note 4.

<sup>14</sup> Seneca, *Controversiae*, 1, Praefatio, 19, adds that Cineas also greeted "omnem urbanam circumfusam senatui plebem." I do not see just what these words mean in this connection unless they refer to plebians who had duties to perform for the senators.

Like Cineas, Montezuma was eager to learn names. Soon after Cortés's entry into Mexico City, Montezuma paid him a formal visit. "Before his departure Montezuma made himself acquainted with the names of the principal cavaliers, and the position they occupied in the army" (W. H. Prescott, *Conquest of Mexico* [New York: The Book League of America, c. 1934], p. 186).

<sup>15</sup> Seneca, *loc. cit.* Cicero, *Brutus*, 88, 301, testifies that he did not know anyone else with a memory for detail like that possessed by Hortensius.

<sup>16</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 4, 1, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 36, 77. Louis E. Lord's translation in the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>18</sup> Cicero, *De Senectute*, 7, 21.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Shakespeare, *King John*, Act I, Sc. 1: "And if his name be George, I'll call him Peter."

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Nomen atque omen.

—Plautus

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Nomen est quasi rei notamen.

—Legal Phrase

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It is called after him, and preserves his name forever throughout the ages.

—Virgil, *Aeneid*