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CORRECTING HISTORIC MONUMENTS: HOW DISPLAYING SCARS HONOURS CHANGE

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Does highlighting the history of a public monument – with evidence of dishonour on display – a more complete record that honours the protesters and the changes that they have are making?

The bronze statue was attacked as if “blood and pain would follow every single blow.” Although this description resonates with international events from this week and last, such as the defacement of Belgium’s King Leopold II in Brussels,¹ the toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol,² as well as statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia and Christopher Columbus in St. Paul, Minnesota,³ it is a first-century CE description of the violence inflicted on a statue treated as a substitute for the person depicted (Pliny, *Panegyricus* 52.4-5). The phenomenon of iconoclasm, that is the destruction of images, has gained new relevance today. Critical issues raised by removing public monuments connected to slavery and colonialism as part of the Black Lives Matter movement have been the focus of sustained global attention. A key question that stems from the removal of public monuments dismantled during anti-racism protests around the world is whether leaving a testament to the controversial history of the statue’s

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53017188>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52954305>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53005243>

presence – with evidence of dishonour on display front and centre – is a more complete historical record that in fact honours the protesters and the changes that they have are making.

Anti-racism protests have not only re-ignited debates around the world concerning historical monuments, they have also raised the critical question of how best to do justice to the inequalities exposed. So far these debates have centred on two opposing and rather limited views: whether to display or to remove these statues. But are these the only options?

With over 2,000 years of tradition and innovation, the history of Roman art reveals a range of options when it comes to revising ancient statues to reflect current opinion. In addition to the entrenched all-or-nothing options to continue the status quo by displaying a statue in its original form, or complete removal leaving no trace, three more possibilities should be added to the mix: partial excision, nearly complete removal, and a revision that leaves part of the original, that is a visual palimpsest.



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⁴ Public domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severan_Tondo#/media/File:Carole_Raddato_\(13543792233\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severan_Tondo#/media/File:Carole_Raddato_(13543792233).jpg)

This exceptionally well-preserved family portrait from c. 199 CE in Egypt illustrates the strategy of partial erasure to highlight disgrace. On the lower left, the face of Emperor Septimius Severus's younger son could have been photoshopped out of history altogether. Instead, by blotting out his face but leaving his body, his disgrace became the focus of the painting. Whether the revised portrait was meant for a private or public audience the message of the figure's partial mutilation is crystal clear.

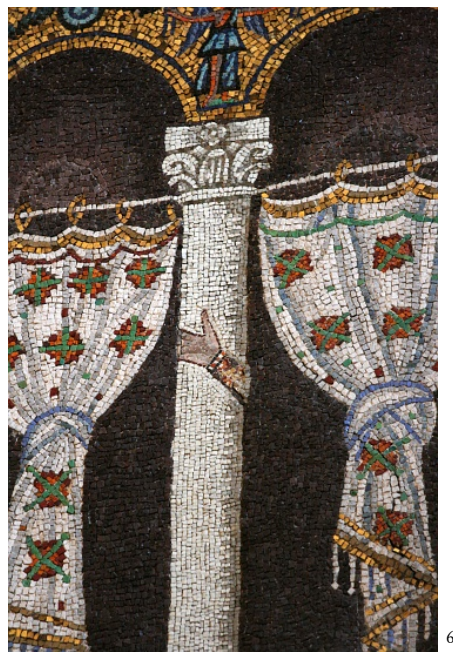


This mosaic represents the façade of Ostrogothic king Theodoric's palace revised in a surprising way by the conquering Byzantines in the mid-sixth century CE. Still the subject of ongoing discussion over a millennium later, what is striking about this nearly complete erasure is the choice to combine both nearly complete excision and complete removal. Similar to the third-century Romans, instead of only displaying or removing, the Byzantines decided to enhance their victory by diminishing king Theodoric's memory at the same time.

Museum image, <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=681547&viewType=detailView>

⁵ Photo José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_of_Theodoric#/media/File:Theodoric's_Palace_-_Sant'Apollinare_Nuovo_-_Ravenna_2016_\(crop\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_of_Theodoric#/media/File:Theodoric's_Palace_-_Sant'Apollinare_Nuovo_-_Ravenna_2016_(crop).jpg)

The least powerful part of the image is the complete removal evident in the golden voids in the central archway and in the triangular space above the inscription. We can only speculate about who or what was originally there, so there is no meaning for us today. Nearly complete erasure, however, can make later viewers stop and think about what they are witnessing. From the viewer's left, the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 11th columns each retain an image of a raised hand. Although the identities of these four figures were all annihilated, their right hands, the hand of honour, were kept and continue to be displayed in a diminished state. The power of this image lies in the choice to preserve these dismembered hands.



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The site now known as S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy is considered a palimpsestic site, that is early sixth-century Gothic portraits were selectively removed and reintegrated in the mid-

⁶ Public domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PalatiumTheodoricMosaicDetail.jpg>

sixth century revision deliberately leaving traces of the original. This revised mosaic shows the incredible power that showing two different moments in time continues to have on viewer's today.



Similarly, the anonymous British artist Banksy recently made a suggestion that ties in these ideas. Commenting on the toppled Colston statue in Bristol, where he is believed to be from, Banksy suggested returning it in a revised form as a palimpsest. He astutely observed that the complete destruction of this public memorial would leave no record of the revolutionary moment that exposed the statue as a racist commemoration. Removing this memorial would not provide an opportunity for the public connection necessary to heal.

⁷ Accessed 12th June 2002, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBNmTVZsDKS/>

It may be that a visible scar – and its prominent display as a testament to change – may be a more powerful way, not only to remember a corrected version of historical memory, but also to honour those protesting. As a shared narrative, it is important to consider public monuments that memorialise the process of change. The fundamental question in this debate is what do we want to commemorate as part of social memory? Is it the removal of statues that should not have been there in the first place, or the power of public protests to expose this?

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