



THREE MONTHS IN A MEMORY PALACE
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When I came to Grunewald in January, I had no idea what would be waiting for me. I was happy to have been given an opportunity to concentrate on my project connecting ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and the classical art of memory (with the working title *Ars Memoriae Aegyptiaca: Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the Classical Art of Memory*) and basically thought I would use the lovely Berlin environment and the break from my usual teaching duties back home for catching up on reading and getting some time to think.

I had, however, not expected to arrive right in the middle of a scholar’s Utopia. First there is the library. Incredibly, the quite small but incredibly conveniently organized library was able to find everything I needed, including books I had been seeking for a

long time on my own. I did not have to travel around Berlin; everything was made available for me right at the Wiko.

Then there were the communal lunches every day and one amazing dinner per week. I felt positively spoiled, not only by the healthy and tasty food, but especially by the amazing, stimulating company of the other Fellows. Basically every conversation at the lunch or dinner table widened my horizons, as everyone came from a different field and even finding a common language could sometimes prove a challenge – a challenge, though, that most Fellows seemed to have accepted with an open mind. The knowledge of the natural sciences that I attained through both formal and informal talks at the Wiko has significantly heightened my general understanding of humanity (and changed my thinking in and about the humanities).

This is connected to the most important part of the Wiko experience, and that is the company of brilliant people from all over the world and a wide variety of subjects. As one of the younger Fellows, I initially felt a little overwhelmed by the company of people who were often downright famous in their respective fields, but soon found all these people were open-minded and accepting, and soon we were having not just serious conversations, but also tremendous fun together. I learned a lot from various fields and often found I could use much of this new information in my own work.

And then, last but not least, there is the location of the Wiko premises in Berlin, just at the boundary of the Grunewald forest. This may well be one of the best places in the world to live. One has at one's disposal all the cultural scene of a metropolis, but at the same time, there is the calm and quiet of the forest just behind the corner. I had spent two years in Berlin before, and returning to Berlin was something I was looking forward for from the very beginning.

My previous stay in Berlin, where I was working in a multidisciplinary project dealing with the iconicity of writing (*Graduiertenkolleg Schriftbildlichkeit*), was actually where I originally came up with the idea of my Wiko project. As I do a lot of teaching at the Czech Institute of Egyptology in Prague and work on translating texts from our excavations, I can usually hardly find the time for such extensive research that reaches well beyond the boundary of my discipline. I took the time at the Wiko as my chance to really get started with the project, collect and read materials, and present the main ideas and theories to the other Fellows.

I spent most of my three months at the Wiko looking for and reading materials on the art of memory, as books and articles on details of the Egyptian writing system are available

to me at home. As I need to compare the system of the art of memory, which I understand as a kind of mental writing system, and the logophonetic (and on the surface also highly iconic) writing system of the ancient Egyptians, I need to understand in detail how the art of memory worked, both in Antiquity and in later times, when, as it would seem, the same rules were applied and the same system was used.

As the art of memory consists of encoding meanings in visual signs (using various, sometimes very elaborate, coding strategies), it can be seen as a form of immaterial or mental writing. Indeed, in her research on the art of memory in medieval times, Mary Carruthers has shown that, far from being an art connected with oral cultures (which have their own memory strategies based primarily on rhythm and sound similarity), the art of memory is actually to be seen as belonging to the so-called manuscript cultures, i.e. the cultures of the Ancient world and the European Middle Ages, and its dark ages came only with the rise of the printed – and thus generally accessible – book.

Before my time at the Wiko, I have had access to only one book by Mary Carruthers – her *The Book of Memory*, but in the course of my stay, I was able to study two more, as well as a vast number of material on the art of memory and its various aspects, including its connections to Hermetism and the occult. Thanks to having access to these materials and the time I had to concentrate on the project, I was able to formulate an initial (still very much “work in progress”) theory, which I presented at the Forschungskolloquium close to the end of my stay. The valuable criticism and remarks I have received from a number of Fellows helped me to better see the strengths and weaknesses of the theory, and I was recently able to formulate an updated version in written form in an article for the *Prague Egyptological Studies* (in Czech).

But it did not stop on the theoretical level in the Wiko. To my astonishment, quite a group of the Fellows were interested in memory, the art of memory, and the way (individual) memory functions, which led to prolonged stimulating discussions and even the formation of an informal group around the practice of the art of memory, culminating in the transformation of the Wiko main building into a kind of memory palace.

I learned more during my short three months’ stay at the Wiko than I ever did in any other two years. The intensity of work, the conditions that the Fellows work in, and the intellectually stimulating community all added to what was an incredible experience.

References

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