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Written Communicating in Public: Some Examples of the Roman World

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Written Communicating in Public: Some Examples of the Roman World

Sabine Lefebvre

Newspapers, television and the Internet did not exist in the Roman world. Messages from the imperial authorities to all subjects of the empire were one-sided. This type of 'communication' could only be achieved through a very limited number of media, including coins. Roman currency, ranging from bronze to gold coins, functioned as a medium for the dissemination of images and abbreviated texts that represented the political agenda of the reigning emperor in a highly condensed form. Two examples are provided here to illustrate the intended messages within.

The first is an Augustan coin dated between 9 and 3 BCE struck in Nimes in Gallia Narbonensis (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Bronze As of Augustus. *RIC I* (2nd ed.), Augustus 158. © American Numismatic Society

On the obverse, the busts of Augustus (27 BC–14 CE; on the right) and Agrippa (on the left) are shown back-to-back. Agrippa is depicted wearing a crown combining the rostral crown and the laurel wreath, while Augustus is shown wearing an oak wreath. The abridged inscription reads *Imp(erator) diui filius*). Notwithstanding the fact that Agrippa had passed away in 12 BCE, Augustus incorporated him into his genealogical construction: Augustus is the (adopted) son of Caesar deified, and Agrippa, his companion and son-in-law, is his colleague, an aspect emphasised by Hurlet (1997). Agrippa was supposed to be the tutor for his children Caius and Lucius Caesar, the grandsons who were adopted by Augustus as sons. Both boys are depicted on other coin series from the mints of Gaul.

The reverse of the coin features an image of a crocodile bound to a palm tree with a (much worn) chain that overlaps a wreath with long ties. This imagery serves as an allusion to the conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE. The abridged mention of the *Col(onia) Nem(ausus)* reminds the reader of the location of the coin's minting and underscores the promotion of the city's status under Augustus. At the time of the minting, Nîmes had become a Latin colony, likely incorporating a settlement of veterans from Actium.

The second illustration is a coin from 248 CE, issued by Emperor Philip the Arab (244–249 CE) to commemorate the millennium of the foundation of Rome. This coin provides a valuable example of how messages could be condensed and transmitted during this period (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Silver Antoninianus of Philip the Arab. *R/C* IV, Philip I, 12. © American Numismatic Society

On the obverse, the emperor is depicted wearing a radiant crown, a cuirass and a *paludamentum*; the abridged inscription reads *Imp(erator) Philippus Aug(ustus)*. The portrait of the triumphant emperor must be seen within the broader framework of Philip's ascent to power, particularly in the context of his military campaign against the Sassanid Persians.

The reverse of the coin features a lion combined with the legend *saeculares Aug(ustorum)*. This alludes to the splendid secular games including hunts of exotic animals,

which took place in the arena of the Colosseum in the city of Rome. The elevation of Philip's ten-year-old son Philip the Younger to the role of co-emperor signifies the dynasty's commitment to ensuring the continuity of its reign. The commemoration of the millennium of Rome and the endurance of the empire was intended to symbolise a new and in the future long living dynasty. However, this was not to be, as two years later both father and son were killed in a battle.

The two examples illustrate that the limited space available on coins for images and text means that they are not suitable for the dissemination of multiple pieces of information and announcements with complex content. Therefore, to decipher the intended messages, it is often necessary to resort to other means of communication.

Another significant medium of communication is inscriptions; in contrast to coins that serve as a form of currency within a city, country or empire, their messages were not dominated by the voice of a single (imperial or local) authority. Inscriptions were ubiquitous throughout the empire, in the centre of power, Rome, in the provincial capitals or near legionary camps – as well as in the rural hinterland and the remotest corners of the border provinces.

This raises questions regarding literacy and the reception of inscriptions: Who could read these texts and comprehend them – and to what extent? I assume that in the urban environment at least, the level of literacy was sufficiently high to enable a large part of the population to comprehend these texts, including the many abbreviated words and formulae.

However, the extent of alphabetisation and reading abilities in the Roman imperial period remains a subject of debate in Ancient History. Without a time-machine at hand, it is difficult to get a detailed insight into past realities.

The extant evidence (several hundred thousand of inscriptions) suggests that the use of inscriptions in public spaces as social media was of considerable relevance. In the following part of the paper some examples are presented to illustrate this point. These examples are drawn from a variety of contexts beneath the milieu of the elites whose cultural level and knowledge of Latin and Greek are well documented. The private and public libraries in Rome and some provincial cities provide compelling evidence of the sophisticated knowledge of writing and reading that was widespread among the elites during the Roman period. Not just inscriptions but also satire (see below) and a few other literary genres provide an insight into a different world of literacy.

Funerary inscriptions

The first example pertains to the realm of the deceased and encompasses the freedmen, who are Roman citizens of the first generation. The section under consideration is an excerpt from Petronius' *Satyricon* (a satirical work), which recounts the discourse between Trimalchio and his architect concerning the construction of the tomb for this

wealthy freedman. Trimalchio dedicates a significant amount of attention to the epitaph, which is to be inscribed on his tomb. As envisioned by him (Petronius, *Satyricon*, 71, 12), the epitaph should read as follows:

C Pompeius Trimalchio, Maecenatianus, hic requiescit, huic seviratus absenti decretus est, cum posset in omnibus decuriis Romae esse tamen noluit, pius, fortis, fidelis, ex parvo crevit, sestertium reliquit trecenties, nec unquam philosophum audivit, vale et tu.

C. Pompeius Trimalchio, a worthy emulator of the patron of the arts, rests here. In his absence, the title of *sevir* was bestowed upon him, even though he could hold his own in all the Roman decuries, but he refused this honour. Pious, valiant, faithful, starting from almost nothing, he left thirty million sesterces. He never attended the lessons of the philosophers. May you also fare well.

(translation by S. Lefebvre)

In the final words of his future funerary inscription, he addresses the passer-by directly, thereby indicating his hope that the text will be read: the deceased communicates beyond death. All those who read his epitaph will echo his life and wealth. This written self-portrait is set in the context of a splendid mausoleum.

A second Roman illustration, once more from the context of the necropolis (although the aforementioned text of Trimalchio is a literary fiction), corroborates the notion that the funerary texts were intended to be read, as the deceased addresses the passer-by in the second person singular (Fig. 3):



*D(is) M(anibus) s(acrum)
L(uci) Vibi Felicis hic
suptus positus est
moneo te lectis lit-
teris ne contemnas
et velis tit(u)lum mo-
vere et corpori in-
iuriam facere si
quis autem sibi ad-
miserit non bono
suo fecerit et superos
et inferos iratos
habeat lecto me-
ru(m) profunde.*

Figure 3: Epitaph on a marble slab from Rome (CIL VI 36537 = CLE 2164 Rome).
© Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, BBAW

To the sacred Manes
of Lucius Vivius Felix ...

When you have finished reading it, I am warning you: do not vandalise it! Do not steal the inscription or insult my body! If anyone does, he will bite his fingers and have the wrath of God against him, both from above and from below!

When reading is finished, pour out wine.

(translation by S. Lefebvre)

Funerary inscriptions have been shown to provide insight into the status and rank of individuals within society. They provide data on funerary and religious practices, on the careers of senators, knights or local notables, on living in the city or lifestyles and cultural choices across the empire. Inscriptions are a medium for communication over a fairly long period of time. Furthermore, they can be regarded as a medium with educational value, given that their content conveys values and messages concerning 'Romaness'.

Abolitio memoriae

Inscriptions constituted a vital component of the communication within Roman society and could be altered under specific circumstances as the subsequent two examples show. They illustrate what happened when outstanding persons fell victim of the *abolitio memoriae*.

After the death of an emperor, the responsibility for determining the appropriate course of action fell upon the Senate. This entailed a decision between the deification of the deceased emperor and the condemnation of his memory. In the latter case, one of the consequences was an erasure of his name in the inscriptions already in place. These inscriptions, however, were not destroyed; rather, they were most often left in place, serving as a reminder to the populace of the consequences of defying the Senate and the successors who gained power through force.

The first example is a very fragmentary inscription (Fig. 4) that pertains to Constantine the Great (306–337) and his sons. It was discovered in Augusta Emerita (present day Mérida), the capital of the Roman province of Lusitania. Lusitania was one of the most distant western provinces from Rome, the main centre of power until 330 CE. In late antiquity, Augusta Emerita also served as the capital of a large district known as the *Diocesis Hispaniae*, which encompassed the late antique diocese of Spain and Portugal. The following inscription (and its later 'treatment') will give an insight into what extent Constantine's seizure of power and victories received popular acclaim. Furthermore, the emperor's personal presentation within the city and the way he engaged with the populace and disseminated information regarding decisions made in Rome will become obvious.



Figure 4: Inscription from Mérida, found near the theatre, reconstructed from several fragments (two further fragments belonging to the left part are not shown). © Archivo Epigráfico de Hispania

The text is reconstructed from several fragments:

*Dom[ini nostri Imp(erator) Caes(ar) Fl(auius) Constantinus, max(imus), p(ius), f(idelis), uict]or
semper Augustus e[st] [[Constantinus]], / Consta[ntius, Constans, beatissimi et felices Caesa]
res, the[a]trum c[oloniae] (vacat) / [E]merite[nsium indignam arbitrati ruinam operis tam an]
tiqui, o[r]natu [me]liore quam fuerat / [adiecto, restitui iusserunt, disponente ...]o Seuer[o, uiro]
c[larissimo, comite, / [curante praeside prouinciae] Lusitan[iae] (vacat).*

(AE 1915, 33 = AE 1935, 4 = ERAE, 81 = CIIAE, 62 (HEp, 13, 111) Mérida = Edmondson 2016, 194–197 fig. 5)

Our Lord, the Emperor Caesar Flavius Constantinus Augustus, the greatest, the most pious, the happiest and the everlasting victor, and the most joyful and happy Caesars Constantine, Constantius and Constans, have ordered that the theatre of the *colonia* of Emerita, which was in an unworthy ruinous state, be restored not so much with the ornaments of the old times as with the addition of more beautiful ones, under the order of ... Severus, *vir clarissimus, comes* and governor of the province of Lusitania.

(translation by S. Lefebvre)

The inscription begins with the name of the reigning emperor Constantine together with elements of the imperial title. In the context of the Lusitania of that era, where peace prevailed throughout the 4th century, the barbarian threats and internal struggles for the imperial power must have appeared rather remote, despite the Iberian Peninsula having been affected in the 3rd century. It is therefore important to note that there are few references in the inscribed texts from Lusitania pertaining to the tensions or victories of the emperors, *Augusti* and *Caesares*. The title of *uictor* is mentioned in our inscription. It provides evidence for the re-occupation of the Iberian Peninsula following the failure of Maxentius and the subsequent elimination of his co-emperor Licinius.

The inscription was engraved at the end of Constantine's reign, between 333 and 337. It contains the names of his sons and heirs, Constantine II, Constans and Constantius II. However, the eldest son, Crispus, born in 303 to his concubine Minervina, is absent from the inscription. Named *Caesar* in 317, he, like his brothers, also received the title of *princeps iuuentutis*, meaning Prince of Youth. He was dispatched to Trier to act as his father's representative and subsequently served as consul in 318, 321 and 324. He was entrusted with the responsibility of protecting the Rhine border, a task which he accomplished by vanquishing the Franks in the years 320 and 321 and the Alamanni in 323. In the year 324, he joined his father in the fight against Licinius. However, in 326, he was executed on his father's orders, with reasons varying according to the ancient authors. This brutal act was used by pagan propaganda to demonstrate the non-Christian behaviour of the first Christian emperor.

At the time of the engraving of the inscription from Augusta Emerita, Crispus had been deceased for a minimum of seven years. Consequently, there was no requirement for his name to be included in the dedication inscription. As a result, only the remaining three sons and potential heirs to the throne are mentioned. However, the text also provides evidence of the tensions between the brothers following the death of their father Constantine I in 337. Shortly thereafter, the three sons and one of their cousins, Dalmatius, who had been *Caesar* since 335, began to compete for power. This story is not told in the inscription; however, it is obvious and – for our issue of communication – most important, in the inscription from Mérida the name of Constantine II was erased.

He was subjected to *abolitio memoriae* in April 340, following his brother Constans's victory over him at Aquileia. The removal of the inscribed slab from public space was deemed unfeasible as this act would have affected not only the names of Constantine I and Constantine II but also of Constans and Constantius II. The erasure was targeted: the nomen *Constantinus* was affected alone, as the name personifies the individual person, while the remainder of the denomination (... *Caesares*) refers to his brothers as well: Constans and Constantius II both held this important title and shared the duties connected to it. The *abolitio memoriae* of Constantine II was thus implemented with a high degree of rigour, albeit probably exclusively in the capital, Augusta Emerita. This was due to the presence of representatives of the Roman state, who were able to verify the execution of the imperial directive. In conclusion, it appears that the order was observed to a lesser extent, as if the vicissitudes of politics in the heart of power did not garner

much interest among the populace, who did not feel concerned and considered that the time devoted to erasing could be used for more useful activities.

The inscription also attests to the meticulous attention bestowed upon the monumental embellishment of the capitals of the imperium. The role of Augusta Emerita was increased under Diocletian and the city benefited from this improvement. It appears that the construction of buildings for spectacles was not accorded the highest priority: the restorations were executed in the aftermath of Diocletian's provincial reforms and are undoubtedly part of a series of work carried out during the final years of Constantine I's reign, shortly after 337, at a time when Augusta Emerita served as the nexus of all administrative functions within its walls. The emperor and his sons assumed responsibility for the most substantial expenses, which pertained to the construction of buildings of considerable proportions that could be considered of public benefit.

The construction and rebuilding of the theatre were carried out by order of the reigning family, with responsibility for this task (*cura*) being entrusted to the governor of the province. The *comes* Severus, who is mentioned in the final line, participated in the restoration process. The inscription emphasises the opulent nature of the restoration. The slab affixed to the building stands as a testament to the imperial attention bestowed upon Augusta Emerita, the capital of the province of Lusitania. Subsequently, the circus was restored as well (*ERAE*, 82 = *CIIAE*, 63). In such public spaces, the great provincial ceremonies of the imperial cult and provincial gatherings were held; in a provincial setting, such places reminded the populace constantly of the far-away imperial authority. The spaces also provided a platform for Roman representatives to be present and allowed local elites to demonstrate their allegiance and commitment to the emperors.

As is apparent, this building inscription from Mérida/Augusta Emerita facilitates to raise numerous points pertaining to both local and general politics and fills with flesh from the furthest west of the empire information derived from literary sources. Inscriptions of this nature, such as that in Mérida, was part of the official communication supporting and highlighting issues of political messages such as the generosity of the emperor and the correct administration by all Roman officials involved. A notable aspect of such inscriptions is their longevity; they are designed to remain in situ for extended periods, ensuring their visibility and accessibility to the public.

This spatial dimension of communication through inscriptions is one of the points that interests me, and it lies in the very heart of the subject addressed in Giovanni Naccarato's thesis.¹

The management of public spaces, where the decisions of the *ordo* were posted, was crucial for optimal communication. The forum functioned as the central hub of communication, where both local and imperial news was disseminated orally and, in some cases, inscribed on stone.

¹ Giovanni Naccarato, *Staging Death: Making a Difference. Carmina Latina Epigraphica from African Provinces*, Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté 2024 (<https://theses.hal.science/tel-05148063/>).

The northern forum of Cuicul (modern Djemila in Algeria) provides a valuable insight into the way such a communication functioned. In this colony founded by Nerva or Trajan (Dupuis 2001), the first fully enclosed forum was encircled by the curia, the capitole, and then, more than 60 years later, by the judicial basilica.

The forum was a well-organised space, with a set of specific buildings and honorific monuments (Gros 1990–92). Excavations revealed a significant number of inscribed statue bases, which had been gradually erected at several locations. The majority of them were situated in front of the porticos and along the eastern wall of the basilica, both within and outside of the building (Fig. 5–9).

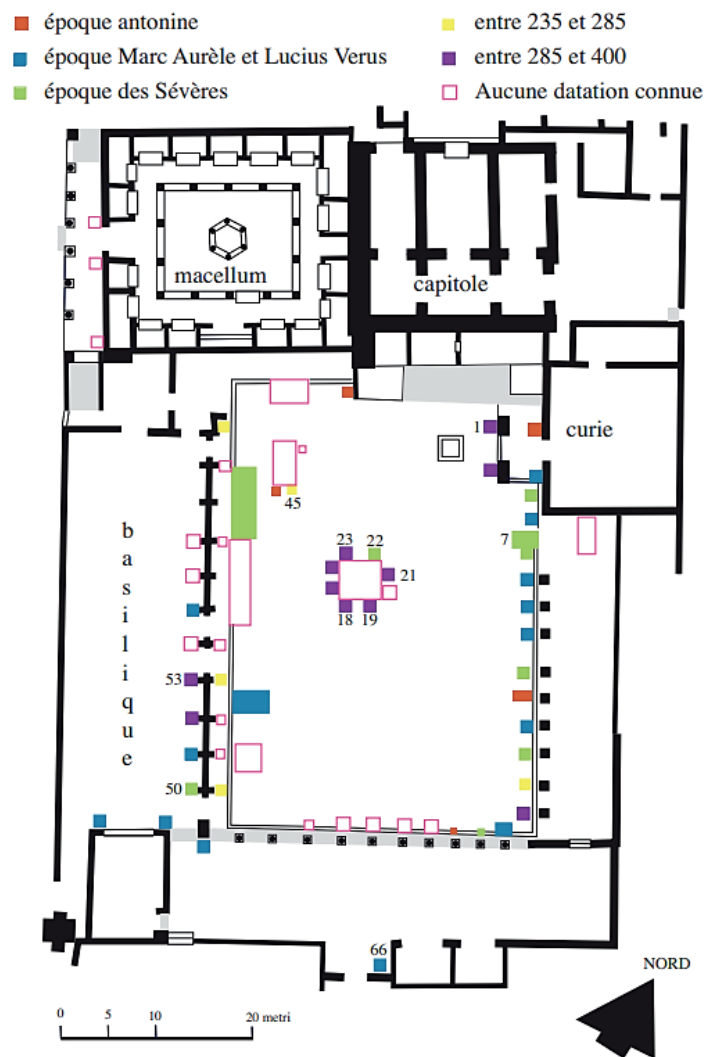


Figure 5: Cuicul, northern forum; datable statue bases are marked in different colours in order to visualise the stages of their erection. Lefebvre 2006, Annexe 1

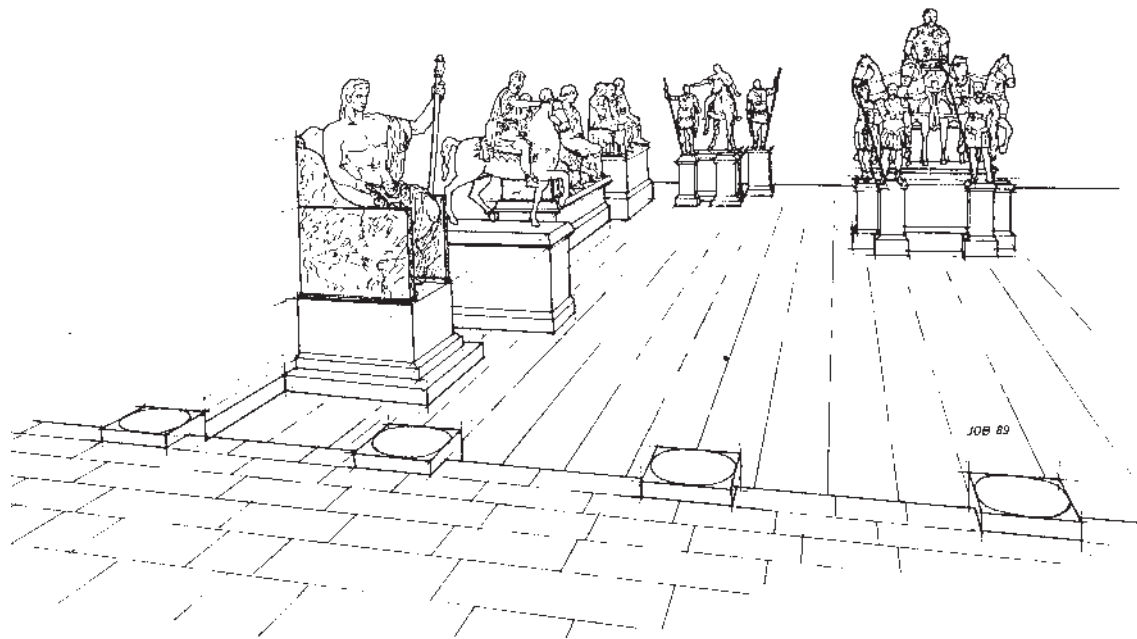


Figure 6: Cuicul, reconstruction of the placement of the statues in the western part of the forum. Zimmer 1989, 33 fig. 14

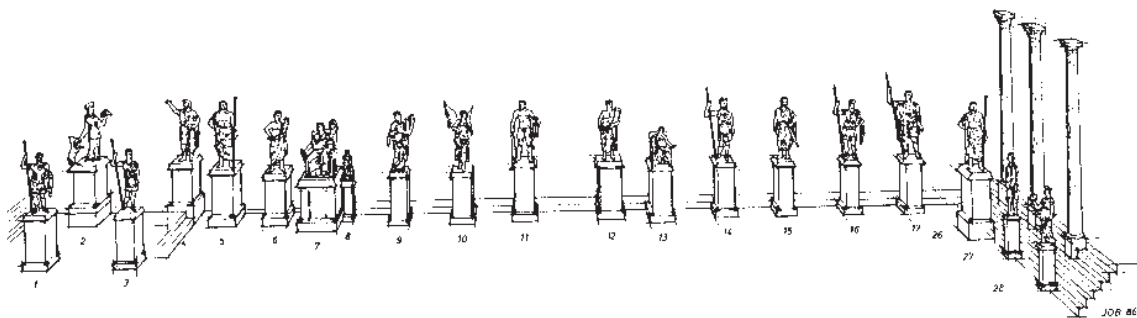


Figure 7: Cuicul, reconstruction of the placement of the statues in the eastern part of the forum. Zimmer 1989, 35 fig. 15

It appears that the first statues dedicated to emperors, members of the imperial family and deities were placed without an overall plan for the arrangement of statues on the forum: during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, dedications to emperors were concentrated in and around the basilica. Concurrently, the area also saw the erection of statues honouring provincial governors and their families. The eastern part of the forum appears to have been dedicated predominately to deities. Only later a kind of division of honorific spheres took place. Under the Severi public dedications to local notables and religious ones to deities were placed in the eastern part of the forum. Gradually, a statue base was placed in front of each column of the porticos. Concurrently, the western part retained its imperial vocation. These trends continued in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The strategic placement of the statue bases provides compelling evidence that the spatial configuration was meticulously designed, as asserted by Lefebvre (2006).



Figure 8: Cuicul, entrance to the curia at the north corner of the forum; the statue base on the left (no. 1) shows traces of the erased name of Diocletian. © S. Lefebvre



Figure 9: Cuicul, view of the statue base of the triumphal quadriga, surrounded by smaller bases (see Fig. 10), in the centre of the forum. © S. Lefebvre

Eleven of the sixty-five statue bases bear partially erased inscriptions, i.e. an impressive 17 % (Table).

Erased name	Number of statue base	Date of erasure	References
Commodus	66	193	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7798–7799</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 66
Geta	7 22	212	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7645</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 7 <i>AE 1989, 900 = ILAlg II/3, 7813</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 22
Unknown, <i>euocatus</i>	50	222–235 or later	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7911</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 50
Maximus	45	238	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7827</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 45
Maximian (?) Maxentius (?) Maximinus II Daza (?)	19	311 (?) 312 (?) 313 (?)	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7864</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 19
Maximian	23	311	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7858</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 23
Diocletian	1	313	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7856</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 1
Galerius (?)	53	311 (?)	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7863</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 53
Crispus (?)	21	326 (?)	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7873</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 21
Constantius I Chlorus (?) Constantius II (?)	18	306 (?) 361 (?)	<i>ILAlg II/3, 7874</i> ; Zimmer 1989, C 18

Table: Cuicul, northern forum; statue bases with partially erased inscriptions

The centre of the forum (Fig. 5, 9–10) was occupied by a large but undatable base, which must have been surmounted by a quadriga; all eight bases next to it were mainly set up at the end of the 3rd century, including the one mentioning Commodus deified (no. 22), an inscription in which the name of Geta was erased. Six of the other bases are later than 285, and among them, four have an erased name (nos. 18, 19, 21, 23).

The five altered (partly erased) inscriptions on these bases remained *in situ* for several decades, serving as a testament to the reign of so-called “bad emperors”. Figure 10 illustrates the arrangement of the bases around the quadriga. The modified parts of the inscriptions are highlighted in two different colours.

The condemnation of the memory of one of the emperors was swiftly disseminated among the inhabitants of the Roman empire. Oral communication, the removal of statue bases and inscriptions was not enough. It was necessary to leave evidence that names had been erased in the public space for future generations to come. Inscriptions, therefore, represent an essential means of communication.

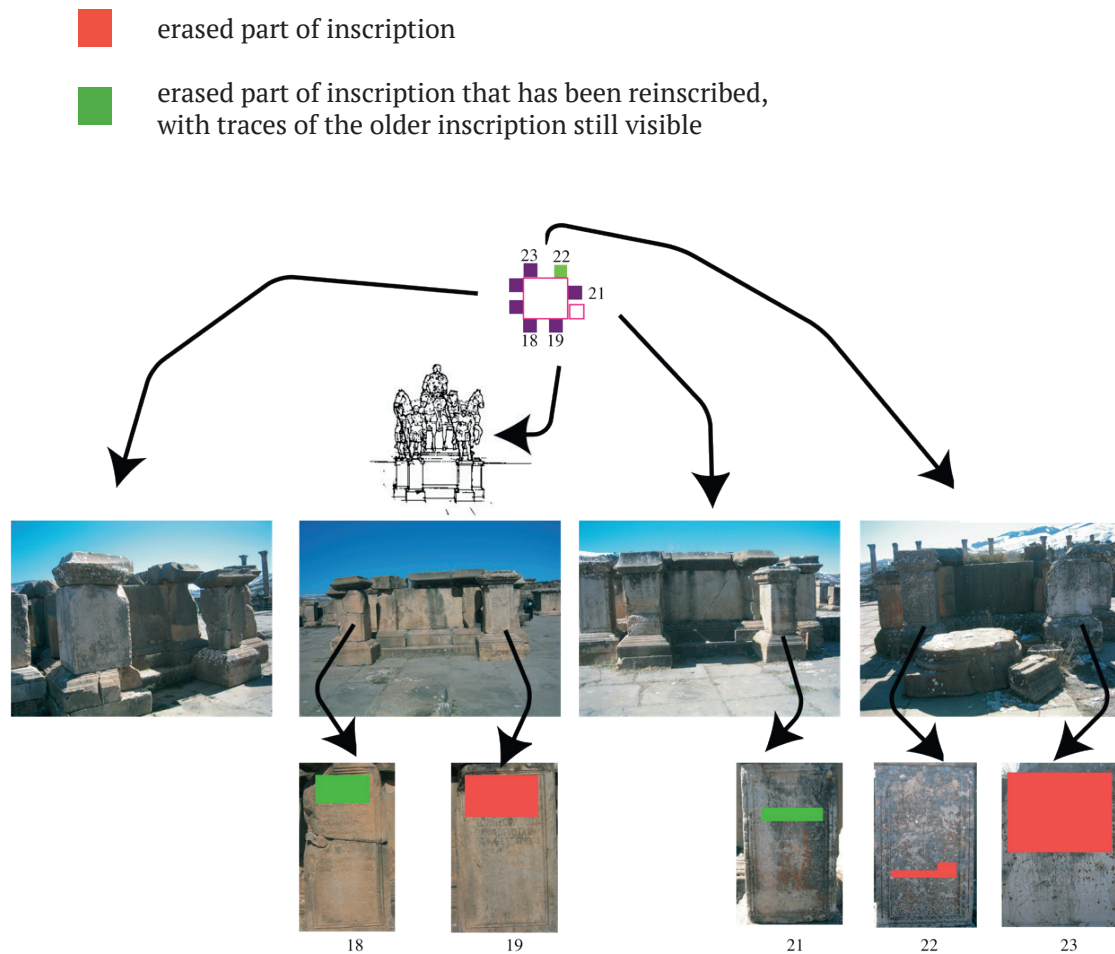


Figure 10: Cuicul, forum; statue base of the triumphal quadriga, surrounded by smaller bases; layout of the altered inscriptions of the bases nos. 18–19 and 21–23. After Lefebvre 2006, Annexe 2

Bibliographical Abbreviations

- AE* *L'Année épigraphique*, Paris 1888 sqq.
BSNAF *Bulletin de la Société nationale des antiquaires de France*, Paris 1883 sqq.
BCTH *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques*, Paris 1872 sqq.
CIAE Ramírez Sádaba, J.L., *Catálogo de las inscripciones imperales de Augusta Emerita*, Mérida 2002.
CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin 1862 sqq.
CLE *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*, ed. F. Bücheler – E. Lommatzsch – P. Cugusi, 4 vols., Lipsiae 1895–1926; Berlin 2023.
ERAE García Iglesias, L., *Epigrafía romana de Augusta Emerita*, Madrid 1973.
HEp *Hispania Epigraphica: Archivo Epigráfico de Hispania*, Madrid 1989 sqq.
ILAlg II/3 *Inscriptions latines de l'Algérie II/3. Inscriptions de la confédération cirtéenne, de Cuicul et de la tribu des Suburbures*, ed. H.G. Pflaum – X. Dupuis, Paris 2003.
RIC *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, London 1923 sqq.

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