

Violent transmissions:

Transmissions of violence

RESOURCES FOR TEACHING VIOLENCE AND COMMUNICATION IN
CLASSICAL SUBJECTS, AT KS5 AND ABOVE.

The Gemma Augustea

Period: 2nd or 3rd decade of the 1st Century AD

Attributed to: Dioscurides or one of his disciples

Findspot: Was probably always above ground, first recorded in the treasury of the Basilica of St. Sernin, Toulouse

This gem was cut in great detail by one of Augustus' favourite gem cutters, showing its importance to his, and Rome's, image. It was likely a gift to a noble family or close friend/ relative, used to show Augustus' dominion of the world and its peoples. We can understand its function as a mode of communication through its imagery and grandeur. Imagine a Roman diplomat wearing it to a meeting with a foreign or subjugated king – it was intended to be a reminder of the constant threat Rome posed to its colonised populations. We can see, for example, how Augustus encouraged himself to be portrayed as a god outside of Italy and Rome (but not within), all of this is able to be expressed through this single piece of jewellery .

Augustus crowned by *Oikoumene*, the personification of the world



Augustus raising a *tropaion* upon a battlefield littered with defeated Gauls

The Gemma Augustea

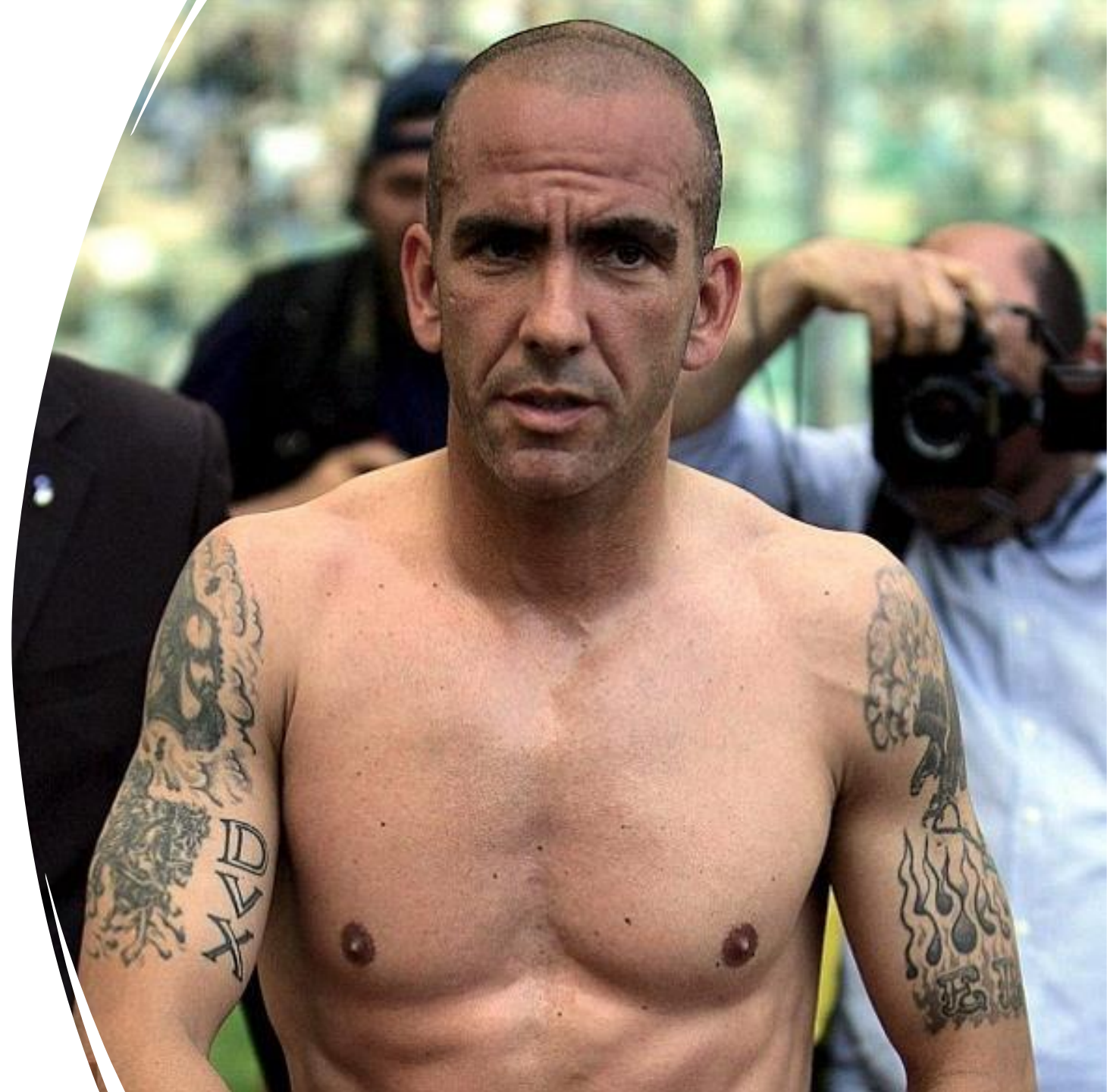
Prompt questions



1. Who would be viewing this gem?
How does this change our understanding of it?
2. What are the implications of Augustus presenting himself as a god? What are his intentions for communicating this image of himself?
3. Who would be wearing this gem?
How might it transmit a violent message to onlookers?

Violent transmission of a tattoo

- Paolo di Canio is a former well-known football player and team manager, as well as a declared fascist. He has several tattoos including the Latin word "DVX" on his right biceps.
- While this word was used in different ways in the Roman world, Di Canio picked on its meaning in the military and political sphere: *dux* was the leader of the Roman army but was also the eponym for the dictator Benito Mussolini during the fascist era in Italy. Di Canio perpetrated the aggressiveness of *dux* by carrying this word ostentatiously and provocatively on the football pitch. In 2005 he was suspended for one match and fined €10,000 after raising this arm to give a fascist salute to fans.





Questions for discussion

- How does the medium used by di Canio affect his message? In general, does the use of the body as medium modify the message and in which way?
- Does it matter at all whose body it is? For instance, what would *dux* communicate on the body of a top model?
- Can you think about another example of violent manipulation of messages or symbols from the ancient world? How about [*fasces*](#)?

Can Transmission be Violent?

Sophie Kefford – Communications and the Classics
Maddie Barclay – History of Violence

The background features several concentric red circles of varying radii, centered on the left side of the frame. A dashed red line follows a similar path, slightly offset from the solid lines. The text is positioned in the center of the innermost solid circle.

▼ Ancient Media: The Rostra



The Rostra as a symbol of violence

The Rostra was a speaker's stage built in the 6th Century. After the battle of Antium in 338 BCE, the bronze prows from captured battleships of this battle called 'Rostrum' were added to line the platform. Hence it got the name the 'Rostra'. From the beginning, therefore, violence was integral to the building and the structure itself communicated violence. Roman politicians would stand on the Rostra to deliver speeches to an audience of Roman citizens. Instead of communicating from one person to another, the communication was unidirectional and from one person to a mass of people in the forum, thus eliminating the chance of meaningful dialogue. This form of communication delivered against the background of fallen enemy battle-ships would have amplified the force and aggression of the speeches, through the constant violent reminder of the might of Rome. Towards the late republican period, Roman politics became increasingly authoritarian. The aesthetics too of the Rostra reflected this change by the barbaric display of decapitated heads of defeated political enemies.



Tiberius Gracchus

Violence at the Rostra

Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 12

Published:1921, Trans: Bernadotte Perrin, Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library

‘but on the following day, after the people had come together, he mounted the rostra and once more attempted to persuade Octavius. When, however, Octavius was not to be persuaded, Tiberius introduced a law depriving him of his tribuneship, and summoned the citizens to cast their votes upon it at once. Now, there were five and thirty tribes, and when seventeen of them had cast their votes, and the addition of one more would make it necessary for Octavius to become a private citizen, Tiberius called a halt in the voting, and again entreated Octavius, embracing and kissing him in the sight of the people, and fervently begging him not to allow himself to be dishonored, and not to attach to a friend responsibility for a measure so grievous and severe.

On hearing these entreaties, we are told, Octavius was not altogether untouched or unmoved; his eyes filled with tears and he stood silent for a long time. But when he turned his gaze towards the men of wealth and substance who were standing in a body together, his awe of them, as it would seem, and his fear of ill repute among them, led him to take every risk with boldness and bid Tiberius do what he pleased. And so the law was passed, and Tiberius ordered one of his freedmen to drag Octavius from the rostra; for Tiberius used his freedmen as officers, and this made the sight of Octavius dragged along with contumely a more pitiful one. Moreover, the people made a rush at him, and though the men of wealth ran in a body to his assistance and spread out their hands against the crowd, it was with difficulty that Octavius was snatched away and safely rescued from the crowd’

Analysis of the passage

In this text Plutarch recounts Politician Tiberius Gracchus' attempt to pass laws for the benefit of the Roman public. The scene portrays the failed communication between Gracchus and his tribune Octavius who 'Stood silent' in refusal to engage in dialogue and accept Tiberius' reforms. By the end, the failure of their communication results in violence and Octavius is dragged off the Rostra forcefully by Gracchus' freedmen. Furthermore, the audience, who had been receivers of the unidirectional communication as spectators by watching the political scene unfold, unable to have their voices heard turn to mob violence and 'Rush at Octavius'. Octavius' silence in this passage is what halts any chance of communication where either side could sympathise with or understand the other. In the end it is the lack of dialogical engagement that causes the violence.

The background features several concentric red circles of varying radii, some solid and some dashed, creating a ripple effect. A small red downward-pointing triangle is positioned to the left of the text.

Modern Media: Twitter, Capitol Riots



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump



These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!

11:01 PM · Jan 6, 2021



66 19 people are Tweeting about this

This Tweet is no longer available. [Learn more](#)



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump



Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!

! This claim about election fraud is disputed

7:24 PM · Jan 6, 2021



194.6K 146.5K people are Tweeting about this

Twitter and the Rostra

Just as the Rostra was a platform on which speeches were made to the public, Twitter is a virtual platform that allows for communication. Again, it is often used as a place of unidirectional communication as was the case of Donald Trump when he tweeted to his mass of followers. Modern communication and media such as Twitter is often ego-centric and promotes echo-chambers.

On January 6th, 2021, Donald Trump used it to communicate with rioters attacking the USA's Capitol. In these tweets, Trump encourages the violent behaviour performed by the rioters. Twitter is a public platform, like the Rostra, however by being a digital platform Trump's followers could regularly access these tweets at any time. Followers can also further engage with the ideas by liking or retweeting them. Unlike the Rostra, followers of Trump did not have to be at the same location as him to hear these ideas. Communication has become so accessible through these platforms which allow political leaders to be violent through communication and cause direct violent action towards others.

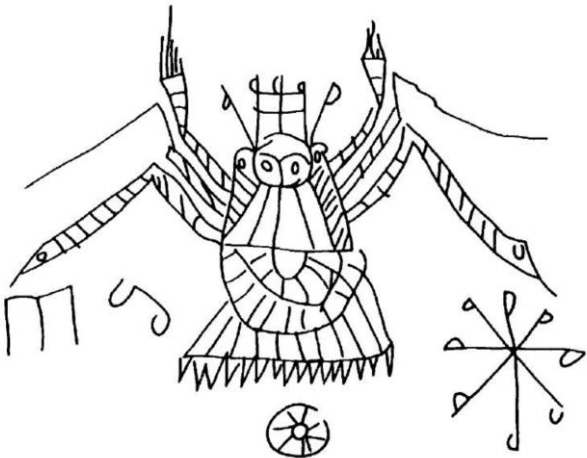
Questions

- 1.** Can you think of other ways violence can be communicated through modern or ancient technology?
- 2.** How does unidirectional communication lead to violence?
- 3.** Is the transmission of violence more effective verbally rather than written?

Roman Curse Tablets (Defixiones)

Violent anonymity in the ancient/modern world

- You are *cursing* the individual; it is believed that any curse enacted would certainly happen; the user is passively causing harm to the individual as the god would be enacting the violence, not the mortal.
- Zimbardo's study shows 'a tendency for many people to act rudely, aggressively or illegally when their faces are hidden.' [psychologicalscience.org](https://www.psychologicalscience.org) [Dawson, 2018.]
- Thus, it allows for unadulterated feelings to be demonstrated - no one is going to see the curse, so one may be as crude as they like without repercussion.
- This brings into question the cruelty of human nature; why are we so willing to be violent when we know that no one can see/hear us?



The tablet includes several illustrations. Here a three-winged (six-armed) Hekate is being evoked as the supreme power.

Curse Tablets communicate a grievance, are inscribed in lead and thrown into the lake of a god/goddess, appealing for revenge. They range from petty grievances to serious crimes.

The case study tablet states that revenge is to be enacted on a thief, since justice is desired more than the return of the goods.

Specifically: 'Cut out the hearts of the thieves ... let the earth not be walkable, the sea not sailable; let there be no enjoyment of life, no increase of children, but may utter destruction visit them or him'

It was important to use the correct terminology of binding to ensure inescapable justice. Verbs such as *katagraphein* (to register, consign) and *katatithenai* (to hand over) guaranteed the agreement.

Twitter/Anonymous messaging

“The modern day curse tablet”

- You are by no means obliged to give your real name/face when creating a Twitter account.
- People use it as a trauma-dumping platform and often take out their frustrations/insecurities online;
- It is a low-stakes environment which permits many violences with little recourse or punishment.

There are some differences between the two.

- ❖ You are inciting verbal violence when you toss a curse tablet into a lake, but rarely will anything physical actually result from it.
- ❖ Tweets can be deleted, and thus in a way ‘taken back’. Curses cannot.

Notate Bene: anyone with an account can view a person’s tweet (unless they have a private profile). With curse tablets, its contents are kept privately between you and the gods.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Robert Pattinson should not take back Kristen Stewart. She cheated on him like a dog & will do it again--just watch. He can do much better!
2:47 PM - 17 Oct 2012

Lizabeth Paulat @LizabethPaulat
Replying to @GovMikeHuckabee
I'm going as Huckabee for Halloween. In that I will dress as a failed presidential candidate who sends out racist tweets.

Anonymous
5:06 PM
Why do we celebrate Black history? Why not Mexican history? Or white history?

Dr. Jennifer Kwan @jkwon_mid - Dec 26, 2020
PSA: Reminder that even with the holidays & #OntarioLockdown, hospitals are open 24/7 & if you have a medical emergency, GO TO THE ER - don't wait!

Anonymous
5:09 PM
Why do we act like all black people don't well? There are also white, Mexican, Ch other races not getting treated well.

Hansel @Hansel98996304 - Dec 27, 2020
Shut up with u need to be jailed caged and sentenced to something worst than death

Milo Yiannopoulos @Nero
Fat and ugly, ugly, ugly, fat

Ghostbusters News @GBNewsdotcom
New photos from the set of the 2016 #Ghostbusters fl @Lesdoggg @paulfeig @melissamccarthy

Milo Yiannopoulos @Nero
POLL: I'd rather my child had

| | |
|----------|-----|
| feminism | 45% |
| cancer | 55% |

21,232 votes • Final results

RETWEETS 94 LIKES 266
7:02 AM - 3 Feb 2016

Prompts for Teachers

- How are curse tablets reciprocated?
- Is Twitter our modern day curse tablet?
- How would you define violent anonymity?
- Why is anonymity such an attractive concept to us?
- Why do we feel more able to transmit violence through anonymous means of communication?
- Which is more violent - the curse tablets or Twitter?

