

# Political Publicity in Ancient Rome. A Case Study: Honorary Latin Inscriptions

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## Abstract

Ancient Rome was an organizational model for the three continents: Europe, Africa and Asia that it controlled to a lesser or greater degree. The gendarme of the ancient world was also an initiator of communication models, a power through communication (it is not accidentally that the word has a Latin etymology, meaning “to make common, while giving”). The term ‘publicity’ also has a Latin etymology, especially since Rome is the one that innovated and implemented a “public”, original democracy: **res publica**.

Publicity was also an essential part of Roman communication, because the addressees had to share the Roman values, in other words to “become Romanized”. The most effective form of Roman publicity was political, besides the legal and military one. Latin honorary inscriptions are the most faithful source of these Roman policies, at the highest level: the imperial policy. Through them we can find out the political programme accomplished by the Roman emperors, be they simple constructions for military, civil or religious use.

The Roman Empire was a communicational empire that used all means of communication in its mission to make Roman values “common”, including those of publicity, thus integrating its subjects. Our study selected honorary inscriptions referring to one of the founders of the Roman hegemonic empire: Augustus.

**Keywords:** Latin epigraphy, Roman civilization, communication strategies, policy, publicity.

## 1. Terminological premises

The term *publicity* (just like the term *communication*) has a Latin etymology, the Eternal City having the paternity of many terms in the field of communication sciences and not only, due to its extremely effective and modern politico-organizational system at that time. Thus, in Latin there are about seven terms (coming from the Latin verb *publico*, -are, -avi, -atum vt.) (terms that we selected from three reference dictionaries of the Latin language: Gh. Guțu, Elena Crăcea and \*\*\**Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*) underlying the notion of modern *publicity*. We will describe these terms in order to demonstrate what has been previously said, while illustrating this influence not only by defining the meanings of the Latin words, but also by describing expressions that contain these terms, for a better argumentation:

### A. Terms:

1. *publico*, -are, -avi, -atum vt. I =1. *to confiscate (for the benefit of the state)*,  
2. **a.** *to make available to everyone.* **b.** *to make known to all.* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 3. *to give for public use, to publish.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:573.)
2. *publice*, adv.= 1. *officially, on behalf of the state, publicly.* 2. *without any differentiation, jointly.* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 3. *at the expenses of the state, massively, in public.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:573.)
3. *publicatio*, -onis, sf.= 1. *selling at auction, (confiscation for the benefit of the state)* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 2. *disclosure.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:573.)
4. *publicanus*, -i, sm.=1. *tax tenant.* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 2. *tax collector.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:572.) 3. *public works contractor.* (\*\*\**Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1995, 2005: 152.)
5. *publicum*, -i, sn.=1. *state property.* 2. *state thesaurus.* 3. *state incomes.* 4. *public interest.* 5. *public, public place.* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 6. *tax, deposit, public document, archive, crowd.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:573.)
6. *publicus*, -a, -um adj. (3),= 1. *official, of the state.* 2. *public, belonging to everybody.* 3. *common, regular..* (Guțu, Gh., 1993: 335.) 4. *publicus*, -i sm.= *civil servant.* (Crăcea, Elena, 2007:573.) 5. *publicus*, -i, sm.= *slave of the state.* (\*\*\**Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1995, 2005: 152.)
7. *publicitus*, adv.= *for public expenses.* (*Ibidem*: 152.)

### B. Expressions:

- publicum ius*=*public law* (Cocoș, Ștefan, Toma, Mircea, Pârvan, Gheorghe, 2001:1.)
- leges publicae Populi Romani*=*laws adopted by the popular assemblies* (*Ibidem*:9.)
- ius publice respondendi*= *to provide legal advice* (*Ibidem*:13.)
- vi publica*= *public violence* (*Ibidem*:17.)
- ager publicus*= *the land of the Roman state (generally consisting of all territories conquered by the Roman power)* (*Ibidem*:52.)
- Res publica*= *the Roman state* (*Ibidem*:46.)
- res publicae*=*things that entirely belonged to the Roman state.* (“They were part of the public property, or the private property of the state. The public property of the state consisted of roads, markets, ports, theatres, rivers, amphitheatres etc.; the private property of the state consisted of the things producing money for the state such as *ager publicus* and *servi publici*.”) (Sâmbrian, Teodor, 2009:173-174.)
- societas publicanorum*= *society (association - our expl.) of publicans (public contractors - our expl.)* (Cocoș, Ștefan, Toma, Mircea, Pârvan, Gheorghe, 2001:46.)
- servus publicus*= *slave of the Roman state* (*Ibidem*:58.)

*salus rei publicae*=salvation of the Roman state (Săuleanu, Lucian, Rădulețu, Sebastian, 2007:293.)

*cursus publicus*= Roman postal service (\*\*Larousse. *Dicționar de civilizație romană*. 2000:157.) (the exclusive privilege of the Roman state, a militarized service- our expl.)

*sacra publica*=official cults (*Ibidem*:65.)

Therefore in the Roman world the notion of publicity had social, political, legal, institutional, informational meanings and last but not least utilitarian and commercial meanings, as seen in the above terms and expressions. The Roman publicity was the attribute of the state and for the benefit of the state, understood as a community of Roman citizens. In the imperial period, the state is embodied by the emperor, so the political publicity in the empire was meant to make the emperor present in the conscience of the Romans.

The language of this publicity was grammatically correct, especially since the laws were published so that everyone knew the rights and obligations (and Roman laws were not meant to be interpreted) that they had in the Roman state. This Roman publicity has been mainly preserved in inscriptions, faithful evidence of an entire civilization. In our study we selected honorary inscriptions (Petolescu, Constantin, C., 2001:30) also called *elogia*, the most accurate sources of Roman political publicity.

## 2. Political publicity in Rome

The history of the phenomenon of publicity is as long as the history of writing, both of them serving the history of civilization (Popa, Dorin, 2005: 9.). It is not incidentally that the first evidence of the Latin language, the Praeneste fibula, is actually an advertisement: *MANIOS MED FEFKED NUMASIOI* – *Manius me fecit Numerio*=*Manius made me for Numerius*, a kind of commercial inscription, an ancient label.

The most important form of Roman publicity was political because it was a key component of communication, a basic component in the “communication-community relation” (*Ibidem*:27.). The Romans understood publicity as a cultured form of communication, since it was written. Whether it was about laws (such as the Law of the Twelve Tables), or it was about commercial works (streets, public buildings, temples, aqueducts etc.) or about *elogia*, laudatory/honorary inscriptions for the emperors, Roman publicity had a social function for informational purposes, and its message was both national and international (*Ibidem*:21,49.), along with the expansion of Roman power (especially in the imperial period).

The reasons behind Roman publicity (*Ibidem*:86.) were: emotional security of the Romans, recognition of the political leader’s merits, Roman power, eulogy for the personality of the emperor and the universality of Roman power visible through the formula *orbs terrarum*. The Eternal City was a good

publicity market because communication was “the substance of its society” (*Ibidem*:64.) and the public presentation of the political, legal, utilitarian and religious acts was a real *argumentum ad populum*. (*Ibidem*:102.)

The English word *advertising* has a Latin etymology: *advertere* = *to move towards*, because in the Roman case publicity was meant to inform the community of Roman citizens. And in Rome publicity made use of feelings, built realities and used symbols. (Goddard, Angela 2002: 15, 73, 136, 167.)

The Roman state, *res publica*, was the business of the Roman citizens who voted for their representatives, the form of *res publica* remained during the reign of Augustus (who inaugurated a new form of government, the Principate), he disguised his regime in a *res publica restituta* (restored republic) for reasons of mentality because in the public opinion, *res publica* was the homeland for the community of Roman citizens.

Therefore we chose honorary inscriptions as a case study of Roman political publicity. These inscriptions, *elogia*, were devoted to Augustus, in order to observe how the first of all Roman citizens manipulated (a word with a Latin etymology, too) through publicity as well, the Roman public of his time, assigning himself many of the essential republican institutions: *tribunicia potestas*, the *consulate* and *imperator* (title of army commander, tantamount to the rank of general today) thus convincing his citizens that he was a real *Divus* (godlike, a sort of demigod) just like Romulus, son of Mars, the founder of Rome. The tradition was also maintained by mentioning parenthood, Augustus constantly specifying that he was Caesar’s heir, *filius Divi Iuli*.

During the imperial period, political publicity reached its peak because it had to support and substantiate the cult of the emperor and the state, since both the state and its leader were perceived as “heroes”. (Moraru, Mădălina, 2009:81.) The king has a “stereotypy of personality” (*Ibidem*:156.), so he was *IMPERATOR*, *CAESAR*, *DIVUS*, *AUGUSTUS*, holder of a tribune’s power (sacrosanct power by which he defended the interests of the Roman people, he had the right to summon and preside over public meetings, he had the right to propose laws, the right to convene and preside over the senate, the right to consult the auspices etc.) (Dr. Cucu, Ștefan, no year:159.); and the emperor was also a consul, commander of the army (*imperator*), the high priest (*pontifex maximus*) and *pater patriae* (father of the homeland, a kind of protector), he was *primus inter pares* (Wattel, Odile, 2002: 6.) (first among equals) who had absolute immunity because: *Princeps legibus solutus est*= *The emperor is beyond the laws*.(\*\*\**Adagii juridice latinești*, 2007:98.)

The eulogy of the personality was actually the eulogy of the state that he begins to be confused with, by inaugurating the “brand of identity” (Drewniany, Bonnie, L., Jewler, A., Jerome, 2009:53.) Roman identity or *Pax Romana* (Roman peace), which actually replaced the older republican formula of the Roman state: *Senatus populusque Romanus* (the Senate and the Roman people).

### 3. A case study: *Elogia Augusti*

1. The inscription on *Ara Pacis*, (Bunt, P., A., More, J., M. 1969.) (beginning) ([http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/8161\\_-Roma\\_-Testo\\_Monumentum\\_Ancyranum\\_presso\\_Ara\\_Pacis\\_-\\_Foto\\_Giovani\\_Dall'Orto\\_29.\\_Mar.2008.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/8161_-Roma_-Testo_Monumentum_Ancyranum_presso_Ara_Pacis_-_Foto_Giovani_Dall'Orto_29._Mar.2008.jpg).)

*RES GESTAE DIVI AVGVSTI QVIBUS ORBEM TERRARVM IMPERIO POPVLI ROMANI SVBIECIT ET INPENSAS QVAS IN REM PVBLICAM POPVLVMQVE ROMANVM FECIT...*

*The deeds of godlike Augustus, who conquered the whole world and subjected it to the power of the Roman people and enlarged the republic and the Roman people... - our translation*

In this case we deal with an Augustan inscription, remade by the Italian authorities and currently placed near the Altar of Augustan Peace (*Ara Pacis*), actually the history of Augustus' deeds. We only gave the beginning of this inscription for the sake of economy.

An advertising message unquestionably results from this inscription, primarily with a national political impact, on the one hand, Augustus enlarging the state and increasing the influence of the Roman people and the international impact, on the other hand, since the first of all citizens conquered the entire world for the Roman people (*orbis terrarum*). Basically this inscription advertised not only the emperor but also the whole Roman power, it was a kind of political testament, made public so that all emperors could rule over the world in the interest of the Roman people and the Roman state.

This sort of advertisement is relevant, it has the strong function of persuading Roman citizens who supported the policy of the Roman state with their fundamental obligations: military service, paying taxes and serving the Roman state through their skills. Augustus also inaugurated, *avant la lettre*, what was called enlightened Absolutism in the Age of Enlightenment, namely that the person of the leader was the state, *Res gestae Divi Augusti* actually are *Res Gestae Rei Publicae Populique Romani*.

Through this political publicity, Augustus also justifies his actions meant to increase the power of the Roman people (*inpena*). He spares the conservative tendencies of his age, maintaining and insisting on the Roman state, *res publica populusque Romanus*, the hegemonic power of which (*imperium*) he actually increased. His cult is mentioned by the *DIVUS* particle, which conferred the role of *model hero* (another publicity-related reason, "the eulogy of the leader" was often applied in the Roman, imperial world) of all Roman citizens.

2. CIL, VI, 1244; ILS 28 (Inscription on an aqueduct)

([http://www.romanaqueducts.info/picturedictionary/pd\\_onderwerpen/inscriptions.htm](http://www.romanaqueducts.info/picturedictionary/pd_onderwerpen/inscriptions.htm).)

*IMP.(erator) CAESAR DIVI IVLI F.(ilius) AVGVSTVS  
PONTIFEX MAXIMVS CO(n)S.(ul) XII  
TRIBVNIC.(ia) POTESTAT.(e) XIX IMP.(erator) XIII  
RIVOS AQVARVM OMNIVM REFECIT.*

*Imperator Caesar Augustus, son of godlike Iulius, the highest priest (the highest pontiff), a consul 12 times, with the 19th tribunician power, supreme commander of the army (imperator) 14 times, rebuilt all water canals.- our translation*

This epigraphic text mentions the extremely important, utilitarian activity of Augustus, extremely important to make publicity, namely Rome's water supply by rebuilding all aqueducts. The cult of Augustus is made public by his title which includes all republican essences: *consul*, *tribunicia potestas*, *imperator* and parenthood, from which he inherited the heroic character, *divus*, for he was *DIVI IULI Filius*.

The utilitarian publicity in this inscription was meant to show the Romans Augustus' professional competence of republican magistrate, since he took care of the Roman community's needs, such as water supply, a vital need for an international city.

3. CIL, I, 701(Henzen, Wilhelm, Rossi, Giovanni Battista de, Bormann, Eugen, 1876: pars prima.)

*IMP.(erator) CAESAR DIVI F.(ilius)  
AVGVSTVS  
PONTIFEX MAXIMVS  
[I]MP.(erator) XII CO(n)S.(ul) XI TRIB.(unicia) POT.(estate) XIV  
AEGVPTO IN POTESTATEM  
POPVLI ROMANI REDACTA  
SOLI DONVM DEDIT.*

*Imperator Caesar Augustus, son of the godlike one, the highest priest (the highest pontiff), supreme commander of the army (imperator) 12 times, a consul 11 times, with the 14<sup>th</sup> tribunician power, paid homage to the Sun for the country of Egypt was brought again under the rule of the Roman people. – our translation*

The epigraphic text above is informative publicity with religious overtones, since Augustus, the subject of the inscription offers a divine gift to the sun, the star of the whole world, to celebrate the submission of Egypt.

Although Egypt becomes the personal possession of Augustus, the text of the inscription shows that this country of the pharaohs, the granary of the ancient world, was brought under the rule of the Roman people. This victory belongs to the first of the magistrates of the Roman people, Augustus. The publicity meta-text of this inscription is that Augustus is Rome itself, the state man under the protection of the Sun with which he has a contract through this



*donum*, according to the Roman mindset with regard to religion: *Do ut des* = I give so as to be given.

The cult of the sun was part of *sacra publica*, therefore Augustus is thankful to it, hoping that it will provide perpetual domination over Egypt. So the epigraphic text advertises a victory with a strong economic feature, for the possession of Egypt meant grain supplies for imperial Rome.

4. CIL, I, 94 (*Ibidem*: pars prima.) (Triumphal arch in honour of Augustus) fragment

*IMP.(eratori) CAESARI AVGVSTO DIVI F.(ilio)*  
*PONTIFICI MAXVMO TRIBVNIC.(ia) PTESTATE XV IMP.(eratori) XIII*  
*M.(arcus) IVLIVS, REGIS DONNI F.(ilius) COTTIVS*  
*PRAEFECTVS CEIVITATIVM QVAE SVSCRIPTAE SVNT: .....*

*To Emperor Caesar Augustus, the son of the godlike one, the highest priest (the highest pontiff), with the 15<sup>th</sup> tribunician power, supreme commander of the army (imperator) 13 times, the inscription was placed by Marcus Iulius Cottius son of Rego Donnus, prefect of the cities (peoples) that were recorded below: ..... our translation*

This eulogy is dedicated to Augustus by a prefect (a high rank officer), Marcus Iulius Cottius, actually a triumphal arch in honour of the *princeps*. In this case it was a military and social publicity, because a triumphal arch was meant for the parade of the victorious Roman troops.

There appears the stereotype name that Augustus, former Octavian, took, a particle which became the Roman imperial brand, all the emperors were called so: *Imperator Caesar Augustus*; this title became a standard in the inscriptions. The prefect Marcus Iulius Cottius dedicates the inscription to Augustus, the emperor being associated with the Roman state itself, another publicity stereotypy quite frequent in the imperial period.

5. ILS, I, 140 (Cizek, Eugen, 2000:240.)

*(Augusti) MAXVMI CVSTODIS IMPERI ROMANI, TOTIVS ORBIS TERRARVM PREASIDIS...*

*To Augustus, the greatest, (eulogy) to the guardian of Roman power, (eulogy) to the ruler of the entire universe ... our translation*

The honorary inscription above has publicity motives, on the one hand the “emotional security” of the Romans, on the other hand the eulogy of the “political leader”, the Romans were actually some “ego-centrists” who rightly believed, in Antiquity, that Rome was the ruler of the Universe. Again, public opinion is manipulated, Augustus is described as the greatest guardian of the Roman people’s power, in other words he does not exercise his power

personally, but in the interest of the Roman people, as the leader of the entire universe, controlled by Rome. This text proves his status of *Pater Patriae*, abbreviated *P.P.*, through the term *custos*, *custodis* = guard, guardian, protector of the Roman people. He is also *praeses*, *praesidis* because he follows the traditional Roman political principle: *he who defends the country will also rule it*.

#### 6. Inscription on the Altar of Potenza (*Ibidem*:268.)

SENATVS POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS  
IMP.(eratori) CAESARI DVI F.(filio) AVGVSTO  
CO(n)S.(uli) VIII DEDIT CLVPEVM  
VIRTVTIS CLEMENTIAE  
IVSTITIAE PIETATIS ERGA  
DEOS PATRIAMQVUE.

*The Senate and the Roman people (the Roman state) offered the shield (medallion) of virtue, goodness, justice, faith towards the gods and homeland, to Imperator Caesar Augustus, son of the godlike one, a consul for the 8th time.*  
– our translation

The last epigraphic text of political publicity devoted to Augustus, which we selected for this study, presents the publicity of a decoration dedicated to the personality of Augustus. The Roman state, *Senatus populusque Romanus*, confers on him, for his merits towards the gods and homeland: *erga Deos patriamque*. This publicity text is an *argumentum ad populum*, because the merits of the decorated one are justified, this is a “communication-community relation”.

As the first of the citizens and *primus inter pares*, Augustus is a social model by virtue, tolerance, justice and faith (Roman moral meta-values), that he proved towards the gods and homeland. The manipulative message in this homage is clearly expressed while mentioning the Roman state as a republic: *Senatus populusque Romanus*, (although Augustus turned it into a hegemonic empire) and the qualities of the decoration/ homage are all republican, therefore the Roman public was thus convinced that they still lived in a republic, a conviction also strengthened through the term *patria*.

## 4. Conclusions

Imperial ancient Rome was a world power especially through its effective and “public” organization. Therefore the Romans managed to “Romanize” others because they communicated their values, sharing them with the nations they conquered and thus integrating them into the Roman power. Publicity was a different kind of communication, perhaps the most effective, because it was mostly written, and therefore still preserved on the Roman ruins today. The most effective was political publicity or honorary inscriptions, called *eulogia*, devoted to the Roman emperors.



Roman publicity was a successful communication phenomenon, especially in the imperial period as it expanded its purpose, Rome becoming the “*patria...communis*” (\*\**Adagii juridice latinești*, 2007:111.) on three continents, a model of communication even today.

### ABREVIERI:

CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.

ILS *Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*.

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