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**Censorship and Book-Burning
in Imperial Rome and Egypt**

by

Susan Rahyab

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Date

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Thesis Sponsor

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Second Reader

To my mother.

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Abbreviations

Citations of ancient authors follow the abbreviations of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4th ed.). Papyri are cited per the *Checklist of Editions* (<http://papyri.info/docs/checklist>) and abbreviations of inscriptions follow those of “A Preliminary Checklist of Greek Epigraphic Volumes,” *Epigraphica* 56 (1994), 129-169.

Table of Contents

Dedication	i
Acknowledgments	ii
Abbreviations	iii
Part One: Censorship in Imperial Rome	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Suppression of Ideas During the Republic	5
1.3 Censorship Under the Empire	8
1.4 Reactions to Censorship	14
Part Two: Censorship in Roman Egypt	
2.1 Book-Burning in Roman Egypt	20
2.2 Septimius Severus and Diocletian	22
2.3 <i>Damnatio Memoriae</i>	26
2.4 The Case of the <i>Acta Alexandrinorum</i>	28
2.5 Conclusion	35
Bibliography	36

Part One: Censorship in Imperial Rome

1.1 Introduction

In a letter recounted by Suetonius, the emperor Augustus assured his step-son Tiberius that he need not meet criticism against him with a heavy hand: “My dear Tiberius, do not be carried away by the ardor of youth in this matter, or take it too much to heart that anyone speak evil of me; we must be content if we can stop anyone from doing evil to us.”¹ But Augustus’ actions did not reflect this advice and several acts of censorship are attested in his reign. With the ample evidence for censorship during the empire, which contrasts sharply with our meager documentation from the republic, one wonders how this phenomenon changed over time and how it was applied in the provinces. This study considers censorship, book-burning, and the suppression of public memory in Rome and Egypt from Augustus to Diocletian (31 BCE-305 CE).² To trace the evolution of this phenomenon, this paper analyzes literary treason, the impact of the rise of an imperial government on censorship, the role of emperors in this suppression, and changing notions of subversive behavior.

¹ Suetonius, *Life of Augustus*, 51.3.

² These parameters are largely due to the nature of our available evidence. We lose sight of censorship after Diocletian until the suppression of “pagan” texts under Christian authorities. The role of Christianity in book-burning is a topic that requires full treatment in its own right.

“Censorship” is used here to refer to the suppression of anything deemed harmful or unacceptable on political, social, religious, moral, or cultural grounds. When considering ancient Rome, this definition encompasses the written word (books, documents, pamphlets, scriptures, oracular pronouncements, prophecies, etc.), speech, and public memory. Latin does not have a word for what we understand as censorship and it lacks a term akin to the Greek *παρρησία* (“freedom of speech”). But the Romans were acutely aware of the practice that occurred often enough in Rome to be termed a “Roman peculiarity” by Rosalind Thomas in her study of orality in Greece.³

This paper will argue that emperors were more involved in these cases than previously thought, what was considered dangerous and in need of censoring changed over time as we move further away from the establishment of the emperor’s office, and that the purpose behind censorship and book-burning rested not with total oblivion (as this was too difficult a task), but with overt punishments meant to deter such sentiments being made public in the future. I will also argue that Roman authorities interpreted criticism against an emperor as dangerous for its direct challenge to imperial authority and legitimacy as well as the established social order. This study contributes not only to the ongoing study of censorship and book-burning in Rome, but also to the study of the topic in Roman Egypt, which is yet lacking. By considering Rome and Egypt in conjunction with each other, this thesis makes connections between Rome and its most well-documented province in order to better understand this practice and its application in the provinces. The Egyptian evidence provides a useful framework through which one can consider

³ Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 169. Censorship cannot be thought of as a “Roman peculiarity” in the sense that the Romans were the only ones in the Mediterranean with such practices, but as our documentation from Greece or Egypt, for example, is meager and often questionable at best, our available evidence from the region at present suggests that the Romans dealt with this issue far more frequently than the rest of the Mediterranean.

this phenomenon comparatively and the integration of this evidence ensures that our analysis is not confined merely to the city of Rome itself. This comparative approach reveals that dissident literature was not curbed in Roman Egypt and the focus of censorship shifted to ideas and actions with broader social, political, and economic ramifications. While criticism against the emperor was often perceived as a threat to the newly established political order in Rome, after the Flavians, we see a disinterest in such criticism and are instead faced with the suppression of texts and memories that threatened the imperial order throughout the empire. These developments in turn reveal which ideas the state perceived as dangerous, some of which remained static while others changed over time.

Before moving to the evolution of censorship in Rome, I will briefly outline the mechanics of such suppression. Censorship included *damnatio memoriae* (removing names from public records and monuments, etc.), book-burning, imperial influence on texts, and the sentence of exile or death for one's work, speech, or religious practices. The actual crime that led to censorship was treason. A *senatus consultum* was needed to condemn an individual or, during the empire, the independent actions of an indignant emperor. Accusations of written or spoken treason came from emperors, senators, or fellow writers. As Dirk Rohmann has shown, the majority of these cases were at the hands of senators rather than emperors.⁴ But there was no consistent or systematic suppression of the written or spoken word in Rome in either the Republican, Imperial, or Late Antique periods.⁵ Emperors and the senate were not consistent in

⁴ Dirk Rohmann, "Book Burning as Conflict Management in the Roman Empire (213 BCE – 200 CE)," *Ancient Society* 43 (2013): 115-149.

⁵ Cramer and Speyer's studies on censorship remain fundamental (Frederick H. Cramer, "Bookburning and Censorship in Ancient Rome: A Chapter from the History of Freedom of Speech," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6.2 [1945]: 157-196; Wolfgang Speyer, *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes bei Heiden, Juden und Christe* [Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann Verlag, 1981]). For late antiquity, see Dirk Rohmann, *Christianity, Book-burning and Censorship in Late Antiquity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

their punishments and some writers managed to escape retribution despite openly criticizing the emperor. If enacted, such punishments were not uniform and some were harsher than others, sometimes encompassing an author's entire oeuvre and other times merely the offensive work itself. Other crimes were sometimes combined with that of literary treason, usually magic but also adultery. The aediles oversaw public displays of book-burning and it is important to note that we do not have evidence to suggest that the jurisdiction of the aediles extended to the private sphere. That is, aediles were not knocking on doors and searching shelves in private homes. Consequently, removing a banned text from public libraries and marketplaces did not fully eradicate banned books.

In treatments of censorship in Rome, *damnatio memoriae* is often overlooked in favor of book-burning and literary treason, but the Romans understood that memory was just as dangerous as the written or spoken word. Memory, after all, prevented the total loss of the written word, and the use of *damnatio memoriae* demonstrates an understanding of the importance and power of memory. The state strove to censor the memory of any whose very recollection was considered harmful through the destruction of texts and visuals that attested to them. These memory sanctions were a recognizably dangerous punishment for deeds that were deemed equally as dangerous to the political, social, religious, or cultural good order of Rome. Documents, inscriptions, statues, and monuments were among the victims of *damnatio memoriae*.⁶ Just as the perceived threat of certain religions did not disappear over time (see section 2.2), so too did the use of *damnatio memoriae* remain. That is, as the Romans continued to view certain actions from its high-ranking officials and emperors odious enough to be

⁶ On *damnatio memoriae*, see Harriet Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

censored, *damnatio memoriae* remained in use. I will now turn to the evolution of censorship in Rome to discuss how this phenomenon changed over time.

1.2 The Suppression of Ideas During the Republic

Before considering the empire, it is necessary to first consider its precursor. Book-burning and censorship have often been reported as originating during the republic, gaining in frequency when the political framework shifted with the advent of the principate. This was certainly the case and the difference in the structure of the republic with that of the empire accounts for the sudden frequency in censorship cases. There was no law that guaranteed freedom of speech during the republic and no law that prohibited any speech other than slander.⁷ But while the law that targeted defamation from Rome's earliest written form of laws, the Twelve Tables, was concerned with songs, we nonetheless see the censoring of texts and authors during the republic, albeit less frequently than under the empire. The cases of censorship that we have from this period were concerned with either religious texts or rites, philosophical texts, or defamation. The first case of censorship (213 BCE) and the first case of book-burning (181 BCE) were both concerned with religious texts.⁸ In between these two cases we see censorship on the stage (204-205 BCE) and the suppression of the Bacchic rites (186 BCE).

Livy recounts the suppression of religious rites and the surrender of books related to them in 213 BCE as well as the destruction of the books of Numa in 181 BCE. Both acts of suppression dealt with religious practices or texts that were deemed disruptive and not in keeping with the

⁷ On freedom of speech as a political entitlement and its legal restrictions, see José Manuel Díaz de Valdes, "Freedom of Speech in Rome," *Revista de Estudios Histórico-Jurídicos* 31 (2009): 125-139. On the use and curtailment of free speech in the Roman army, see Stefan G. Chrissanthos, "Freedom of Speech and the Roman Republican Army" in Ineke Sluiter and Ralph Rosen (eds.), *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill: 2004), 341-367.

⁸ Livy, *History of Rome*, 25.1.6-12 (213 BCE; Suppression of religious rites, but no book-burning); Liv. 40.29 and Pliny, *Natural History*, 13.84-88 (181 BCE; Destruction of certain religious and philosophical texts).

mos maiorum. The playwright Gnaeus Naevius was imprisoned around 204-205 BCE on the grounds that he violated the Twelve Tables law against slander when he attacked the consuls of his day in a comedy, but his plays themselves were not suppressed.⁹ There was another case with a mime actor in which the satirist Lucilius unsuccessfully accused the actor of attacking him from the stage.¹⁰ The suppression of religious rites intensified only 27 years after the first case of censorship in Rome.

The *senatus consultum* of 186 BCE on the Bacchanalia ordered the suppression of all Bacchic rites in Italy.¹¹ Livy notes that executions (the prescribed punishment for participating in these rites) outnumbered imprisonments.¹² An important source on the Bacchanalia, Livy's treatment of this decree also serves as a useful example on the use of censorship for the purported safety of Rome and the longevity of Roman traditions. Livy suggests that such censorship was done out of a desire to uphold the well-being of Rome and the very control of the state. Livy's harsh language ("The destructive power of this evil spread from Etruria to Rome like the contagion of a pestilence")¹³ frames this suppression as a necessary precaution against a *nefanda conjuratio* ("wicked conspiracy").¹⁴ Livy's speech for one of the consuls who addressed the public about the decree outlines the dangerous implications should the cult survive:

[N]ever has there been so much evil in the state nor affecting so many people in so many ways. Whatever villainy there has been in recent years due to lust, whatever to fraud, whatever to crime...has arisen from this one cult...Their impious compact still has limits

⁹ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 3.3.15.

¹⁰ For Lucilius' case, see Alan A. Stambusky, "Roman Comedy on Trial in the Republic: The Case of Censorship Against Gnaeus Naevius the Playwright," *Educational Theatre Journal* 29.1 (1977): 32-33. On the limits of freedom of speech on the stage, see Gesine Manuwald, "Censorship for the Roman Stage?" in Han Baltussen and Peter J. Davis (eds.), *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 94-114. For hidden meanings on the stage during the empire, see Shadi Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹¹ CIL 10.104 = ILS 18.

¹² Liv. 39.18.

¹³ Liv. 39.9, trans. J.C. Yardley (ed.), *Livy, History of Rome, Books 38-40* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Liv. 39.18.

itself to private crimes, since as yet it does not have strength enough to crush the state. Daily the evil grows and creeps abroad...It is already too great to be purely a private matter: its objective is the control of the state.¹⁵

This clashes with the views put forth by Suetonius, Tacitus, and Quintilian, as we will see below. But of note here is Livy's characterization of this suppression. Rather than frame this as a despotic and tragic act that resulted in countless deaths, Livy instead echoes the sentiments of the senate in the second century BCE and characterizes the cult as dangerous, evil, and worthy of suppression. This case likewise demonstrates the growing harshness in such cases. While there were no arrests or executions in 213 BCE, this was not the case with the suppression of the Bacchic rites. These punishments were the precursors for censorship and book-burning under the empire; punishments that increased in frequency as the definition of subversive behavior and speech expanded.

Our evidence for censorship in the republic is not bountiful, and as Rudich has argued, the focus in this period weighed more heavily toward acts that were considered dangerous rather than ideas, most clearly seen in such cases as those of Catiline and the Gracchi.¹⁶ While we only have a handful of cases of censorship from the republic, it was used in Rome under the reigns of most of the emperors from Augustus to Domitian. The frequency in which we see this phenomenon rests with changing notions of what constituted a dangerous idea. With an emperor suddenly at Rome's head, it now became imperative to maintain control and consensus regarding the emperor's legitimacy and authority. This brought to the state the new problem of protecting the office of the emperor and consequently, uses of censorship expanded to encompass a broader range of offenses worthy of censorship, be they written or spoken. During the republic, we see

¹⁵ Liv. 39.16, trans. Yardley, *Livy, History of Rome, Books 38-40*.

¹⁶ Vasily Rudich, "Navigating the Uncertain: Literature and Censorship in the Early Roman Empire," *Arion* 14.1 (2006): 13.

cases of censorship that dealt with religion (which posed broader social and cultural problems as their spread throughout Rome and its territories were taken as a detriment to the *mos maiorum*) and defamation. During the empire, we see both offenses combined: An attack on the emperor was both slander and an attack on the legitimacy of the current political system which had broader social and political ramifications (that is, until the end of the first century CE when we lose sight of punished criticism).

1.3 Censorship Under the Empire

During the empire, Roman officials censored political pamphlets, religious texts, histories, anything related to those who suffered *damnatio memoriae*, and literary works. In the interest of upholding social order and the Roman way of life (however that may be perceived), texts were sometimes censored and in some cases, burned entirely. The texts of foreign cults or faiths, literature with criticism aimed at the emperor, and certain ideas deemed harmful to the state and its wellbeing were at risk of suffering this fate. Personal vendettas were sometimes the culprit as well as the political climate in which an author wrote. Whether a text was considered dangerous depended on the time in which it was written and circulated. MamerCUS Scaurus' fate perfectly encapsulates this lack of uniformity: While Scaurus' play *Atreus* did not offend Augustus when it was performed, Scaurus was nonetheless tried under Tiberius' reign on the accusation that Scaurus' criticism of Agamemnon was in fact veiled criticism of Tiberius.¹⁷ It is during the empire that we see a shift in censorship practices. While certain foreign cults and faiths never ceased to be seen as dangerous and in need of suppression under the empire, criticism against the emperor was eventually disregarded as the focus shifted to issues with broader implications. I

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Annals*, 6.29.

now turn to the reign of Augustus and the precedent that was set for subsequent acts of censorship.

In his new-found capacity as pontifex maximus in 12 BCE, Augustus ordered the public destruction of over 2,000 prophetic texts in Greek and Latin, saving only the Sibylline books.¹⁸ Augustus likewise targeted political pamphlets as well as astrologers and diviners, but criticism against him eventually became a concern. Such attacks will form the bulk of my ensuing analysis as views on the dangers of criticism slowly changed over time. Initially, Augustus did not act against denunciations. His inactivity was a source of frustration for Tiberius, who favored a stricter approach. Augustus held fast to his notions, as seen in the letter sent to Tiberius with which this paper began. But the emperor was not wholly immune to punishing written criticism and was responsible for the legal basis for censorship. Augustus combined a law from the Twelve Tables against defamatory writing with that of the *lex maiestatis* (“law of treason”), thereby making literature susceptible to charges of *maiestas*.¹⁹ This change made criticism against the emperor treasonous and set the stage for subsequent cases of censorship on charges of literary treason. This development demonstrates the importance Augustus placed on censoring dissent. Before this, Tacitus relates that “*facta arguebantur, dicta impune errant*” (“deeds were denounced, words went unpunished”).²⁰

New crimes require new punishments, and book-burning became one such punishment for this newly minted offense: literary treason. This sets censorship under the empire apart from our cases of censorship under the republic as book-burning was not used as a punishment against any authors during the republic. Punishments for dissent became more severe with the

¹⁸ Suet. *Aug.* 31.

¹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.72.

²⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 1.72.

introduction of a law that targeted criticism against the emperor, and this severity grew until it encompassed death sentences. Before this new law, the few cases in which men were punished for criticizing Augustus resulted in either a fine or exile. By 6-8 CE, Titus Labienus became the first victim of book-burning when he was charged with literary treason.²¹ Labienus' intensely anti-imperial work, as well as his merciless attacks against others, earned him the nickname Rabienus ("rabid"). The destruction of his work was ordered by a *senatus consultum*. The second victim of censorship and book-burning under this new charge, Cassius Severus, was exiled to Crete in addition to the loss of his work.²²

Despite his urging of Augustus, Tiberius was also slow to punish written and spoken criticism. But while Tiberius ignored some cases, his reign saw the first executions for written and spoken words that did not bode well with Roman authorities. In 16 CE, a *senatus consultum* (possibly at Tiberius' instigation) ordered the expulsion of astrologers and magicians from Italy, two of whom were executed.²³ In 21 CE, the poet Clutorius Priscus prematurely wrote an epitaph in the memory of Tiberius' son Drusus while he was ill. Hoping to be rewarded as he had been previously, when he wrote an epitaph for Germanicus, Priscus hastily revealed the epitaph to a few nobles. Drusus soon recovered and Priscus was tried and sentenced to death in Tiberius' absence, who later expressed disappointment in the verdict.²⁴ As noted above, an emperor's disinterest in one's work did not provide the author with guaranteed safety under the reign of another. While Mamercus Scaurus' tragedy *Atreus* did not spur Augustus into action when it was performed before him, he was nonetheless sued on the grounds of treason during Tiberius' reign when it was argued that Scaurus' criticism of Agamemnon was actually veiled criticism of

²¹ Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 10.5.

²² Tac. *Ann.* 1.72.

²³ Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius*, 36; Tac. *Ann.* 2.32.

²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 3. 49-51.

Tiberius. Accused of multiple crimes (adultery among them) and accused for the second time of treason, he committed suicide in 34 CE before the verdict was passed.

The other documented cases of censorship under the Julio-Claudians (31 BCE-68 CE) all deal with attacks against the emperor, either spoken or written, real or perceived. With the exception of Claudius,²⁵ each of the Julio-Claudians had at least one such case in his reign. Caligula reinstated the works of Labienus, Severus, and Cordus, but his reign too saw charges of treason that resulted in censorship.²⁶ While more cases were ignored than taken to court under Nero, the emperor banned Lucan from making his work public and a few men were tried and punished for slander against senators or the emperor himself during his reign.²⁷ We even see these charges during the Year of the Four Emperors (69 CE) and throughout the reign of the Flavians (69-96 CE), but we lose sight of them in Rome after Domitian's rule until cases of censorship and book-burning that were sanctioned by Christian authorities in late antiquity.²⁸ After the Flavians, the focus shifts away from the emperor and to empire-wide issues with bigger ramifications (section 2.3).

The emperors themselves were not always formally involved in these cases. They could instigate proceedings in the senate that led to a *senatus consultum* that suppressed whatever work offended the emperor, but in most cases, it was not the emperor who brought such cases about, but senators or fellow writers. Take for example Mamercus Scaurus' case. The playwright incurred the wrath of a praetorian prefect who may have pushed Tiberius to see himself in

²⁵ A work by the name of *Moron Epanastasis*, "The Rise of Fools," was published during Claudius' reign, but there is no evidence to suggest that the author was punished despite the work's obvious attack against the emperor (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 38.3).

²⁶ Suetonius, *Life of Caligula*, 16.1; Suet. *Calig.* 27.4.

²⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.49.3; Tac. *Ann.* 14.50; Tac. *Ann.* 14.48-49; Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 39.3. See also V. Rudich, *Dissidence and Literature Under Nero: The Price of Rhetoricization* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁸ Vitellius: Suetonius, *Life of Vitellius*, 14.4. Vespasian: Suetonius, *Life of Vespasian*, 15. Domitian: Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, 10.1-4, among others.

Scaurus' portrayal of Agamemnon.²⁹ But emperors were capable of acting on their own, most clearly seen in Augustus' law-making and in punishments inflicted by Nero, Caligula, and Domitian, which suggests that emperors were rather active in identifying treasonous behavior in need of censoring.³⁰ While not involved in every case, emperors instigated enough of them to warrant our attention.

Aside from the prophetic texts and political pamphlets, Augustus was mostly uninvolved with these cases, but such was not the case with his successors. Cassius Dio reports that Tiberius put many to death for criticizing him, Aelius Saturninus among them, and that Tiberius' obsession with remarks against him made some suspect that "he was bereft of his senses."³¹ Caligula alone punished at least three men: the orator Carrinas Secundus was banished for delivering a speech against tyrants, the Stoic Julius Canus was executed for a dispute with the emperor himself, and an unnamed writer was burned alive for double meanings in his Atellan farces.³² Nero acted against a few writers, including Anteius Rufus for a biography of Ostorius Scapula, and Domitian executed even more writers than Caligula: Maternus for a speech against tyrants, Mettius Pompusianus for reading speeches of kings from Livy, Hermogenes and the slaves who copied his work for something offensive in his history, and Helvidius Priscus for verses in a farce that alluded to Domitian's divorce, to name a few.³³ In keeping with their power to make the law, these emperors subverted the senate, disregarded trials, and acted on their own. This occurred often enough to discredit the view that emperors were not much involved with such cases. Book-burning, however, was mostly ordered through *senatus consulta*.³⁴

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.29.

³⁰ Nero: Tac. *Ann.* 14.50; Domitian: Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 67.12, Suet. *Dom.* 10.4, Suet. *Dom.* 10.1.

³¹ Cass. Dio. 57.23.

³² Cass. Dio. 59.20.6, Seneca the Elder, *On the Tranquility of the Mind*, 14.4-10, Suet. *Calig.* 27.4.

³³ Tac. *Ann.* 16.14 (Anteius Rufus), Cass. Dio. 67.12 (Maternus and Pompusianus), Suet. *Dom.* 10.1 (Hermogenes), Suet. *Dom.* 10.4 (Helvidius Priscus).

³⁴ See Rohmann, "Book-Burning as Conflict Management."

The ideas of legitimacy and social order arise when considering the motive behind censorship and book-burning. To cite a well-known example, if we are to believe that Ovid's exile was strictly based on his work alone (leaving other theories aside for the moment), one can see that Ovid challenged not Augustus himself, but his order. With the perceived provocative nature of the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid directly challenged Augustus' conservative world-view, a world-view which he imposed on his subjects. Looking at censorship and book-burning through this lens aids in the understanding of the motives and implications of such acts. They were set in motion with a larger purpose in mind that extended beyond mere criticism of the emperor. The focus instead was on the direct challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the emperor/empire which itself had broader implications and consequences. Cremutius Cordus, in the eyes of his accusers, directly challenged the legitimacy of the empire by regarding Brutus and Cassius as the last of the Romans. Priscus' premature epitaph for Drusus could be looked at as an offence that was reminiscent of an oracular pronouncement rather than a direct attack on Tiberius and his children. Tiberius considered oracular pronouncements dangerous for their ability to scare or incite the public when they were about the imperial family or the fate of Rome, and on this understanding, the action against Priscus can be explained with a much broader reason than just simple criticism against the emperor.

Reactions were also at the heart of the motives behind such suppression. As noted, neither book-burning nor censorship fully destroyed ideas or written works. The focus rested on what was public, what was said openly, what was commemorated in public memory, and what was condemned and punished overtly. The private sphere was more difficult to penetrate. Since the aediles did not have the authority to collect texts from private libraries, wholly destroying books was not possible, and completely erasing someone from all thought after *damnatio*

memoriae was likewise not possible. But public displays of devotion or condemnation were powerful tools in communicating to the populace what they ought to celebrate, and what they ought to avoid. The purpose of these trials and public burnings were to communicate to the people of Rome that such thoughts and words were subversive and unacceptable. By fearing such an outcome and self-censoring (or employing double-speak), the populace did their part to lessen the probability that such cases would increase in frequency and lead to some sort of insurrection. This fear, on the other hand, could have been a more useful tool in curbing an influx of literary and verbal treason than merely removing public copies of a work that suddenly became even more famous because of its purported subversiveness.

1.4 Reactions to Censorship

Naturally, when the written word comes under scrutiny and is liable for persecution, authors resort to veiled criticism and doublespeak in the hopes of self-preservation. The first century CE author Quintilian warned against the use of rhetorical devices that hide one's true meaning too often and too obviously. Quintilian thus argued that one must evade detection, or risk inefficiency.³⁵ Given the growing emphasis on literary treason, such tactics increased in importance. Quintilian writes:

For we may speak against the tyrants in question as openly as we please without loss of effect, provided always that what we say is susceptible of a different interpretation, since it is only danger to ourselves, and not offence to them, that we have to avoid. And if the danger can be avoided by any ambiguity of expression, the speaker's cunning will meet with universal approbation.³⁶

Aside from hidden criticism, authors had the option of self-censoring, something that we are unable to fully trace. This culture of fear seems not to have fully disappeared even during the

³⁵ Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 9.2.69-70.

³⁶ Quint. *Inst.* 9.2.67-68, trans. Donald Russell (ed.), *Quintilian, The Orator's Education, Volume IV: Books 9-10* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

reigns of the so-called “good” emperors, if we are to read into Juvenal’s first satire: “*unde illa priorum scribendi quodcumque animo flagrante liberet simplicitas?*” (“Where will you find that frankness of past generations for writing whatever their blazing spirits chose?”)³⁷ But self-censorship and doublespeak were not the only reactions to the frequency in which we begin to see censorship under the empire.

The purpose of censorship was often rendered redundant when the act succeeded only in glorifying the victim and demonizing the perpetrator. Aside from notions of *libertas* and freedom of speech, the Romans placed an incredible importance on *memoria*. They understood that memory could live on in the absence of written material and deemed the destruction of memory especially odious.³⁸ But instead of destroying the memory of a work or author completely, instigators instead brought to them fame, sympathy, and further attention. Burning a text does not take the memory of its contents with it. As long as individuals can remember and pass information on to others, book-burning for the purpose of eradicating knowledge is unsuccessful. This is best illustrated by a quip attributed to Cassius Severus, himself later a victim of book-burning, when Labienus’ books were destroyed by a decree of the senate: “You’ll have to burn me now; I know these books by heart.”³⁹

In the *Histories* (c. 100-110 CE), Tacitus refers to the reigns of Nerva and Trajan as an age “*ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*” (“where it is permitted to feel what you wish and say what you feel”).⁴⁰ But the voices that authors like Tacitus and Suetonius lament

³⁷ Juvenal, *Satires*, 1.1.150-153. For a full discussion of these lines and an argument for self-censorship/doublespeak even in Trajan’s reign, see John Penwill, “Compulsory Freedom: Literature in Trajan’s Rome” in Han Baltussen and Peter J. Davis (eds.), *The Art of Veiled Speech: Self-Censorship from Aristophanes to Hobbes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 176-208.

³⁸ Take for example the famous case at Dyme in which Fabius Maximus inflicted the severe death penalty on an archive-burner (*Syll.* 3 684) but allowed for a trial for another insurgent who wrote laws contrary to the laws of the Romans, and Suetonius’ lament of the loss of over 3,000 bronze tablets during the Great Fire (Suet. *Vesp.* 8.5).

³⁹ Sen. *Con.* 10.8.

⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, 1.1.

were silenced are the voices of the elite. Tacitus and Suetonius provide us with the bulk of our sources on imperial censorship but both authors brought their own set of notions that shaped the way they presented these narratives. Both historians mostly consider the persecution of men of the upper classes, with the exception of religious texts, and this leaves a noticeable gap in our source material. Tacitus reacts so strongly to a case such as Cremutius Cordus' precisely because a man with a privileged place in society was prosecuted and driven to suicide for his work. Tacitus' disapproval and distaste for what he perceived as the empire's tyranny must also be considered when using his work to understand the history of censorship in the Roman Empire.

While Tacitus claims that he is neutral and writes *sine ira et studio* ("without anger or zeal") about motives he is far removed from, there is a clear bias here that one must acknowledge.⁴¹ Anti-imperial sentiments appear in his work often, perhaps the most famous being his critique of the empire in the *Agricola* (ca. 97-98 CE): "*Auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*" ("To destroy, massacre, and seize under false titles [they call] an empire; and where they make a desert [of a land], they call it peace").⁴² Living under the turbulent reign of Domitian could have contributed to these sentiments and Cremutius Cordus' case fits into this narrative. Cordus was the first to be tried with treason for a historical work. Tacitus characterizes his punishment as one that had been hitherto unheard of: "*novo ac tunc primum audito crimine*" ("A new crime that was thereupon heard for the first time").⁴³ After concluding the speech he gives to Cordus, Tacitus says in his own voice:

The [senate] ordered his books to be burned by the aediles; but copies remained, hidden and afterwards published: a fact which moves you the more to deride the folly of those who believe that by an act of despotism in the present there can be extinguished also the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30.6.

⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 4.34.2.

memory of a succeeding age. On the contrary, genius chastised grows in authority; nor have alien kings or the imitators of their cruelty effected more than to crown themselves with ignominy and their victims with renown.⁴⁴

Tacitus' distaste with the use of censorship and book-burning can be tied to his anti-imperial sentiments as well as the voice of the particular author being silenced. Tacitus' narrative frames these issues not as cases in which harmful ideas are rightfully removed from Rome, as Livy does with the Bacchanalia, but as those in which despotic emperors tyrannically silence free speech.

As Tacitus bemoans, life under Nerva and Trajan was worlds apart from life under their predecessors; the age of Nerva and Trajan was a free one in which individuals were free to say and think as they pleased. While Tacitus does not directly mention emperors that violated this freedom, his praise of it under Nerva and Trajan poses a stark contrast with the emperors that came before them and communicates Tacitus' view that this freedom did not exist under their reigns. Tacitus likewise comments on the state's inability to eradicate one's memories through censorship: "...*praesenti potentia credunt extingui posse etiam sequentis aevi memoriam ... nam contra punitis ingeniis gliscet auctoritas*" ("[The state] thinks that even the memory of the following age can be extinguished with their present power... but [Cremutius'] prestige will increase despite having been punished for his talents")⁴⁵. This sentiment was reiterated in the *Agricola*: "*memoriam quoque ipsam cum voce perdidissemus, si tam in nostra potestate esset oblivisci quam tacere*" ("We would have lost memory itself as well as our voice, had it been as easy to forget as to be quiet").⁴⁶

Ancient authors framed cases of censorship differently and reacted to them differently. We must be aware of certain biases from our sources, namely that such authors as Tacitus and

⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 4.35.1, trans. John Jackson (ed.), *Tacitus, Annals: Books 4-6, 11-12* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937).

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 4.35.

⁴⁶ Tac. *Ag.* 2.4.

Suetonius are quick to frame such acts as diabolical on the part of the emperor and his regime, but both historians only make mention of cases that involve the elite. These are the voices that are privileged and put forth as worthy of remembrance and worthy of safeguarding. Both writers were at times heavily critical of what they perceived as tyranny and it need not surprise that such acts were framed as consequences of living under a tyrannical ruler.

One's chances of being censored depended on whether one happened to irk the emperor (which was entirely dependent upon his mood) or someone close to him. As Augustus was concerned with masking his new regime under the guise of a re-instated *res publica*, which itself required a tremendous ability to cement and hold onto political power, one need not look far to conjecture that Augustus and his immediate successor had much to worry about in terms of establishing the new office of the emperor. This caution and anxiety stemmed from the need to usher in this new mode of ruling without serious opposition. Political pamphlets and literary works that expressed dissent were seen as enough of a threat to both Augustus and Tiberius, but censorship was still not consistent under either emperor. Over time, as we move further away from the establishment of the office, we begin to lose sight of censorship and book-burning in Rome. Our evidence for these practices in Rome before Christianity ends with Domitian. It is curious that we do not have evidence of this phenomenon from the reign of any of the so-called "good" emperors (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius). This might be explained by Tacitus' observation of a culture of silence and fear under Domitian's reign, and self-censorship could have prevented more cases from Domitian's reign onwards. We do, however, have evidence for censorship in Egypt under Septimius Severus and Diocletian.

Due to the nature of this evidence, it is difficult to maintain that censorship was

exclusively the trade of “bad” emperors. But it cannot be denied that we see such action almost entirely under the rule of the so-called “bad” emperors. Nevertheless, censorship cannot then be said to have been a mark of a “bad” emperor, but was instead dependent upon each individual emperor and his attitude, as well as those in his ear. Perhaps the culture of fear spread by the “bad” emperors led to self-censorship, and as a result, censorship was not required under the reigns of the “good” emperors. Writers could have more skillfully hidden their criticism, but perhaps the “good” emperors were not much concerned with such talk. By the reigns of the “good” five, the office of the emperor had long been established. An elite man deciding to withhold praise for the emperor, for instance, need not have caused much of a stir by this point.

But if we look across the Mediterranean, the evidence from Roman Egypt offers an important comparative perspective. While it appears that writers in Rome adapted to the culture of fear perpetrated by the emperors from Augustus to Domitian by making their work less susceptible to treason charges through self-censorship, the situation in Egypt differed. Our evidence for censorship goes beyond the reign of Domitian and into the reigns of Septimius Severus and Diocletian. The works that were censored were religious and alchemical texts, the likes of which were targeted during the republic and by Augustus, but dissident literature remained unharmed.

Part Two: Censorship in Roman Egypt

2.1 Book-Burning in Roman Egypt

Censorship in Rome has long been discussed but an expansion of this discussion to include Roman Egypt is long overdue. We must consider this phenomenon more broadly and within a wider historical and social framework that encompasses Rome's most well-documented province. Not only will this approach elucidate the mechanics of censorship in Egypt, it will also contribute to our understanding of Roman censorship. Part two considers what censorship looked like in Roman Egypt during the reigns of Augustus, Septimius Severus, and Diocletian, and what such evidence can say about the practice of censorship more broadly during the Roman Empire.

Our rather limited evidence for censorship in Roman Egypt focuses on the suppression of religious and alchemical texts, cases of *damnatio memoriae*, and only one instance of imperial criticism. The most notable case of censorship in Egypt prior to Roman rule is the case of Sotades in the third century BCE. The Greek poet wrote that Ptolemy II, who was the first of the Ptolemies to marry a sister, was “pushing his prick into an unholy hole” (εἰς οὐκ ὀσίην τρυμαλιῆν τὸ κέντρον ὄθει). The penalty for such a sentiment was death.⁴⁷ After the annexation

⁴⁷ Athenaeus 14.621a; [Plutarch?] *De liberis educandis*, 11a.

of Egypt and the fall of the Ptolemaic kingdom, Egypt ceased to have a head of state that operated from within Egypt itself. This could explain why we do not catch sight of anything akin to the fate of Sotades in the Roman period, but instead see a lack of interest in curbing any criticism against the emperor. This would suggest that censorship for criticism against an emperor followed the locus of political power. The sole exception to this is the fate of Cornelius Gallus, who had a special case of censorship in which criticism was the least of his offenses.

Cornelius Gallus, Egypt's first prefect, eventually incurred Augustus' disfavor and was removed from his post. Cassius Dio relates that Gallus began to gossip about Augustus, erect statues of himself across Egypt, and relate his own achievements in inscribed lists on pyramids. Valerius Largus accused Gallus of treason and Augustus neutered his power in Egypt. After being barred from living in any Roman province by the emperor, others brought even more charges against Gallus, and the senate voted to exile the ex-prefect and deprive him of his estate. Gallus committed suicide before these decisions went into effect.⁴⁸ It is unsurprising that Augustus acted against Gallus, not only given the anxiety surrounding the preservation of this new political system, but also due to the wariness always afforded to Egypt. Denied to senators without imperial permission, Egypt could function as a useful base from which to usurp the province and rule from it against Rome. Mark Antony proved as much. Not only did Gallus attack the emperor himself (and by extension his legitimacy, reputation, and authority), he likewise abused his position as prefect by glorifying his own achievements in Egypt as if he were its ruler rather than its keeper. It is under this context that we must consider Gallus' fate given that his role as prefect posed more of a threat to Augustus than mere gossip. After Gallus, we lose sight of punishments for speaking ill of an emperor in Egypt.

⁴⁸ Cass. Dio. 53.23.

2.2 Septimius Severus and Diocletian

In 200 CE, Septimius Severus ordered the removal of texts that contained anything “illicit” (απόρρητον) from Egyptian sanctuaries.⁴⁹ While this is incredibly vague and we cannot be sure of the contents of these books (and thereby, what was targeted), this order is reminiscent of the attack on the books of Numa. Certain oracular texts from Roman Egypt akin to the Oracle of the Potter from the Ptolemaic period expressed discontent with the empire. Among these texts is P. Oxy. 31 2554 (third century CE), copied onto the verso of a work of literature. The text consists of five fragments and foresees war, famine, and other misfortunes in store for the rich. One such section of the text predicts Septimius Severus’ death. As Harker notes, such a prediction would have incurred the displeasure of Roman authorities, but Harker does not elaborate on why such a dangerous text was not censored.⁵⁰ These types of texts could have evaded the notice of Roman authorities, but as we shall see below with the *Acta Alexandrinorum*, such a feat would have been difficult with more widely disseminated texts. What is clear, however, is that this prophetic text emerges after Severus’ order to the sanctuaries, but its lack of suppression points to the limits of censorship in Egypt. Whether it be that censorship was not widespread due to the inability of Roman authorities to fully police and monitor such sentiments, or that criticism against an emperor was not seen as horribly troubling, censorship in Egypt nonetheless operated within these limits, which no longer encompassed imperial criticism. After Augustus and Gallus, no such case for criticism against an emperor is seen in our available documentation, whether in the papyrological, historical, or epigraphic record.

A rescript of Diocletian from 302 CE, preserved in the *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et*

⁴⁹ Cass. Dio. 76.13.2.

⁵⁰ Andrew Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt: The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 124.

Romanarum (a work of comparative law), targeted Manichaean texts. Prominent Manichaeans were burned alive with their scriptures at his order:

As regards the Manichaeans ... who, in opposition to the older creeds, set up new and unheard-of sects, purposing in their wickedness to cast out the doctrines vouchsafed for us by divine favor in olden times, we have heard that they have but recently advanced or sprung forth, like strange and monstrous portents, from their native homes among the Persians – a nation hostile to us – and have settled in this part of the world, where they are perpetrating many evil deeds ... in the process of time, they will endeavor, as if their usual practice, to infect the innocent, orderly and tranquil Roman people, as well as the whole of our empire, with the damnable customs and perverse laws of the Persians... We order that the authors and leaders of these sects be subjected to severe punishment, and, together with their abominable writings, burnt in the flames.⁵¹

The primary concern here appears to be the purported Persian origin of the faith. Diocletian was wrong to assume such an origin, but the implications are clear nonetheless.⁵² The “Persian” faith brings with it Persian customs that would lead to “many evil deeds” at the hands of a land “hostile” to Rome. This faith is deemed harmful to the good order and tranquility of the Roman people and the empire as a whole, and its scriptures are thereby targeted for destruction. Diocletian’s motives here are religious, political, and cultural. He likewise ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures in 303.⁵³ We have seen this sort of religious censorship in Rome with the Bacchanalia and Augustus’ order against oracular pronouncements (which he exercised in his capacity as pontifex maximus rather than princeps).

Alchemy took a hit when Diocletian ordered the destruction of alchemical texts some time between 290 and 298 “so that the Egyptians would no longer have wealth from such a technique, nor would their surfeit of money in the future embolden them against the Romans.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Iain Gardner and Samuel N.C. Lieu (eds.), *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117-118; trans. Hyamson (*Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* xv, 3, 1913), revised by Lieu.

⁵² On the origins of the faith, see Peter Brown, “The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 59.1/2 (1969): 92-103.

⁵³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 8.2.4.

⁵⁴ *Suda*, s.v. Διοκλητιανός. The emperor also banished mathematicians (*Codex Justinianus*, 9.18.2).

Naturally, alchemical recipes were then concealed in what seemed like harmless papyri. Zosimos, for example, took care to utilize double meanings in his work, and pseudo-Democritus hid alchemical recipes in papyri, akin to the advice of Quintilian in the first century CE.⁵⁵ The *Suda* likewise reveals that “due to the Egyptians’ revolting behavior [during the 297-298 revolt] Diocletian treated them harshly and murderously.”⁵⁶ If Diocletian desired a weak, poor Egypt to prevent further insurrection, this instance of censorship is reminiscent of such acts in Rome. As discussed above, censorship and book-burning in Rome were dependent upon the mood of individual emperors and those close to them, and it was Diocletian’s paranoia that factored into his decision against the alchemical texts, as well as his interest in maintaining empire-wide stability. While ideas, hope, discontent, and hatred are powerful sentiments that can lead to revolt, it appears that Diocletian felt funds were a greater threat to his hold on Egypt, rather than mere works of literature.

Along with the threat of insurrection, the Crisis of the Third Century (235-284 CE) surely had a role of its own in the emperor’s decision against alchemical texts. Diocletian’s suppression of these texts may also have been meant to prevent the Egyptians from striking gold or silver coins as these texts would have provided the recipes for obtaining such metals. In an effort to curb the inflation and debasement issues he inherited, Diocletian’s reforms beginning in 294 CE sought to bring stability to the monetary system by standardizing coinage. These reforms eventually reached Egypt by 296 and prevented the production of coins in the provinces, thereby ending Egypt’s closed currency system.⁵⁷ One can see how removing alchemical texts was meant to prevent Egyptians from striking coins with conflicting percentages of metal that could further

⁵⁵ Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 23.

⁵⁶ *Suda*, s.v. χημεία.

⁵⁷ Principe, 22; Roger S. Bagnall and Gilles Bransbourg, “The Constantian Monetary Revolution,” *ISAW Papers* 14 (2009): 15; David Potter, *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2009), 38.

harm the empire's economy. Diocletian's motives with this case were for the well-being of the empire as a whole, both economic and cautionary.

Neither of Diocletian's acts of censorship consisted of any written criticism against him, but instead dealt with religious and alchemical texts that he felt were a threat to the empire's safety: one would bring a foreign faith into the empire, and the other would provide funds for insurrection and disrupt the monetary policy meant to revive the economy. Diocletian's reign was not free from conflict in the provinces and one wonders why our evidence is silent about provincial disloyalty. It is possible that the Egyptians self-censored as the Romans learned to do when operating under a tyrannical ruler, but it appears that what was considered dangerous merely changed over time. We eventually lose sight of charges of literary treason in Rome and have no such case from Roman Egypt. The focus in Egypt rather appears to be on broader issues that could potentially lead to problems for the empire rather than mere criticism against an emperor. While an attack against an emperor can also be taken as an attack against the social order (and by extension, the legitimacy of the empire), this could have been a less pressing concern for later emperors who did not share Augustus and Tiberius' anxieties about legitimacy. The office of the emperor was more secure in the third century CE than in the early years of the Principate and this had an effect on what was considered dangerous later in the empire. And as the empire grew exponentially, maintaining that social order (as well as the *pax Romana*) empire-wide was naturally of a greater concern than personal attacks against the emperor. Such criticism did not have the power to convert Romans to undesirable faiths or finance any kind of insurrection.

Where certain texts were circulated also factored into their risk of censorship. Diocletian suppressed alchemical texts in Egypt but did not extend this mandate to Rome itself. As far as we

know, this order did not extend to any other province, but was instead specific for Egypt to prevent insurrection and possibly punish the Egyptians for rebelliousness. Whereas Rome itself enjoying lucrative profits would not have been an issue that would have required any kind of suppression of alchemical texts, Diocletian felt the opposite was true for the province that had been a cause of concern since its very annexation.

Septimius Severus' removal of certain texts from Egyptian sanctuaries and Diocletian's suppression of alchemical and religious texts demonstrates that an emperor's distaste with certain texts applied well beyond Rome. The evidence from Egypt continues the story where the evidence from Rome leaves off by giving a glimpse into censorship and book-burning in the reigns of two emperors who did not censor anything in Rome. The Egyptian evidence provide a look into the practice of censorship in the provinces and reveal that what was considered harmful to Roman authorities changed over time. Criticism against the emperor was no longer punished by Roman authorities, but the threat of certain religions remained as censorship focused on issues with broader social, political, cultural, and economic consequences.

2.3 *Damnatio Memoriae*

The alteration of inscriptions bear witness to *damnatio memoriae* in Egypt. On a dedication to Zeus inscribed on stone (54-68 CE), the final two lines which mention Nero and his titlature in the dating formula have been erased.⁵⁸ As the works discussed in part one were deemed harmful and otherwise unsuitable, so too were victims of *damnatio memoriae* considered harmful and odious, so much so that their very recollection had to be curbed in the same way that the recollection of certain lines of literature had to be suppressed. It was not merely words or

⁵⁸ O. Ber. II 118.

verses that the Romans felt were worthy of destruction if harmful, but individuals and their very recollection as well. These inscriptions, it is important to note, were visible to the public, thereby making them susceptible to erasure.

Papyri from Roman Egypt likewise provide evidence for *damnatio memoriae* in the province, perhaps most famously through the case of the emperor Geta. At the order of his brother Caracalla, Geta was executed in 211 CE and subsequently suffered *damnatio memoriae*. This attempted erasure is seen through the papyri in which Geta's name is crossed out and the well-known Severan Tondo (199 CE), a panel painting in which Geta's face is erased from the family portrait.⁵⁹ By the nature of the document's date, it appears that the names of Macrinus and Diadumenianus were crossed out with a darker ink on a fragment of a petition to a *strategos* (nome governor) from August 7, 218 CE, a few weeks before we begin to see Elagabalus in the dating formulae of papyri from the Arsinoite nome.⁶⁰ A third century CE application to a *strategos* concerning the registration of a house makes mention of Decius' fate, albeit more mildly than the previous example. The name Decius is not used in the dating protocol, but the emperor is instead merely called Messius.⁶¹

Leaving off, covering, or not using an emperor's titlature properly all constitute a form of censorship. Not only are these acts consequences and manifestations of *damnatio memoriae*, they likewise contribute to the censorship of public memory given that the names of these emperors are meant to be on such documents and inscriptions for dating purposes. This is a

⁵⁹ See Paul Mertens, "La damnatio memoriae de Gèta dans les papyrus" in *Hommages à Léon Herrmann* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1960), 541-552.

⁶⁰ SB 18 13151; Rosario Pintaudi, "Frammento di un documento con la damnatio memoriae di Macrinus e Diadumenianus (P. Cair. J.E. 87697)," *Aegyptus* 67.1/2 (1987): 95-98. Also see P.J. Sijpesteijn, "Macrinus' Damnatio Memoriae und die Papyri," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 13 (1974): 219-227.

⁶¹ P. Oxy. 64. 4438.

deliberate suppression of the memory of the targeted emperor through public texts.⁶² What one chose to do with personal copies of documents that still attested to a disgraced emperor could not have been policed in the same way that the aediles could not fully eradicate condemned books from private homes in Rome. *Damnatio memoriae*, then, was a form of censorship that was mostly confined to the public sphere. Akin to book-burning and other forms of censorship, the purpose of *damnatio memoriae* rested with the need to make a public example of victims and simultaneously warn the populace against intolerable behavior.

2.4 The Case of the *Acta Alexandrinorum*

The *Acta Alexandrinorum*, or the *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, are a curious mix of both literary and documentary papyri (sub-literary) that relate the minutes of court proceedings and the pleas of Alexandrian Greeks to their Roman emperors. These stories take place in the reigns of most of the emperors from Augustus to Caracalla and papyrological and archaeological evidence point to the wide circulation of the *Acta*. Found in Fayum villages like Karanis and Tebtunis as well as cities like Oxyrhynchus and Panopolis, the *Acta* enjoyed a wide readership from both villagers and urbanites of ranging socio-economic statuses.⁶³ Harker has argued that this rather impressive geographic range suggests that the *Acta* would have been read wherever people were literate.⁶⁴ Most of our papyri in general hail from places like Oxyrhynchus and the

⁶² Sending a petition to a government official would have put one's document in state hands and in a public archive. Notarizing a private transaction and depositing it into a public archive would likewise put one's document in state hands.

⁶³ One such reader was Socrates, a tax collector in Karanis during the second century CE, who owned quite a few works of Greek literature, including some Menander and possibly a copy of the *Iliad* that was found in a neighboring house. Sempronia Gamella, the mother of Socrates' three children, lived in this house. For more on this archive, see Mohamed G. El-Maghrabi and Cornelia Römer, *Texts from the Archive of Socrates, the Tax Collector, and Other Contexts at Karanis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). For more on the readers of the *Acta* and their socio-economic status, see Jane Rowlandson and Andrew Harker, "Roman Alexandria from the Perspective of the Papyri" in A. Hirst and M. Silk (eds.), *Alexandria, Real and Imagined* (London: Routledge, 2017), 79-111.

⁶⁴ Harker, 2.

Fayum, which makes it difficult to trace the circulation of the texts in Alexandria, a region without the extremely dry conditions and lack of settlement that are crucial to the preservation of papyri. But given their popularity throughout the rest of Egypt, we can assume that the *Acta* were widely read in Alexandria as well. The *Acta* chronicle the deaths of Alexandrian Greek nobles by (usually) presenting the official minutes of their trials in the imperial court. The stories see Alexandrians travel to Rome where they clash with the reigning emperor who has allied with an enemy of the Alexandrians, usually the Jews. The Alexandrians defy the emperor and these stories typically conclude with the sentencing of execution for some of the Alexandrians who recall the similar heroic deaths of Alexandrians before them.

Whether one finds that the texts posit a negative view toward all non-Greeks akin to Harker, it cannot be denied that the texts are riddled with anti-Roman sentiments. Despite these sentiments and the sympathy that is asked for the Alexandrians, there is no evidence to suggest that texts were suppressed. None of the featured emperors took action against the texts, nor did those who were not mentioned. It is evident that the texts enjoyed freedom of movement and readership as they were composed, copied, and circulated from the Augustan period down to the third century CE. The important question here is why the texts were not censored despite their very evident anti-imperial stance. What made the *Acta* impenetrable for so long? One possible explanation could be that the Romans were just unaware of the texts. It is possible that the texts escaped the notice of the emperors in a way that the religious and alchemical texts suppressed by Septimius Severus and Diocletian in later years did not. There is no evidence to support the claim that the *Acta* were read by men who resented Roman rule. The *Acta* instead appear among other works of literature and were sometimes kept by men who had much to gain from Roman administration. Harker suggests that by reading such texts that glorify Alexandrian Greeks, the

Acta were used as a “vehicle for socially ambitious Egyptians to lay a claim on a Greek identity which subsequently allowed them to gain status and prominence in their local communities.”⁶⁵

While the *Acta* were not kept secret, it is possible that Roman authorities were nonetheless unaware of them somehow. But I am inclined to believe that the Romans were indeed aware of the literature given their popularity and that the texts avoided a fiery fate because of the lack of a single author to set a public example.

As Howley has pointed out, executions were more common than book-burning in Rome.⁶⁶ Corporal punishment could have been considered more effective in curbing unsavory literature given the bodily risk. Silencing an author by burning his work was not completely effective, but silencing an author by inflicting corporal punishment effectively ended the author’s purported dissident speech or written work. Be that as it may, both punishments made a bold statement and communicated to the populace the dangers of expressing opinions or ideas deemed harmful by the state. But without an author to suffer such a fate and communicate such a threatening message, these purposes were rendered ineffective. If we approach the survival of the *Acta* through this lens, we can begin to understand why such dissident literature avoided the flames.

While we cannot argue that the texts were uncensored because the Romans were uninterested in the opinions of provincials, we can wonder if the Romans were merely unsure of how to proceed given the nature of the *Acta*. Without a set author to set the blame upon, censorship and book-burning could become difficult because an example could not be made without a guilty party. The true purpose behind censorship and book-burning was to make an

⁶⁵ Harker, 119.

⁶⁶ Joseph A. Howley, “Book-Burning and the Uses of Writing in Ancient Rome: Destructive Practice Between Literature and Document,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 107 (2017): 219; Suet. *Calig.* 27.4, Suet. *Dom.* 10.1, Tac. *Agr.* 2.1, Scaurus, etc.

example of victims and communicate what was acceptable and what was not. Without a victim to pinpoint and punish, the Romans would have been unable to set an example and prevent further texts in the formula of the *Acta*. Whether the Romans did not have anyone to attach to the works or were simply unaware of them, the *Acta* nonetheless escaped persecution. Banning the texts would have been difficult beyond ensuring the markets were not selling them. Just as the aediles in Rome did not inspect homes for banned works, we can imagine that such a measure would not have been taken in Egypt either to insure the end of the *Acta*. The Greek counterpart of the aediles, the *agoranomoi*, for example, had their hands full with their notarial duties.⁶⁷ This suggests that just as fully eradicating unsavory texts was not possible in Rome, so too would it have been impossible in Egypt.

The Egyptian evidence we have seen so far concerns itself with religious and alchemical texts that were deemed harmful by emperors and a case of literary texts that clearly expressed dissent. Interestingly enough, it is the final source that was not censored, the source that communicates disapproval and distaste with the emperors. This makes for an interesting parallel with Rome in the same period as the *Acta* (from the reigns of Augustus to Caracalla) where we see the censorship of literature and suggestions of self-censorship in the hopes of self-preservation. The *Acta* make clear that acts of written dissidence would not have been punished in Egypt, and thereby we cannot assume that a lack of cases of literary censorship in Roman Egypt can be explained by the lack of written criticism. Not only do the texts openly criticize emperors, they were also rather popular and amassed quite a readership. Older stories were rewritten and new ones were written all the way into the Severan period, until we lose site of the

⁶⁷ The *agoranomoi* (“market controllers”) are considered the Greek counterparts of the aediles. These officials supervised the marketplace in Greek cities but had an added task in Egypt, that of notarizing documents. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to suggest that the *agoranomoi* in any Greek city dealt with such destruction.

Acta after the third century CE.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the emperors targeted in these texts chose not to act, and least of all Septimius Severus, whose reign saw an increase in the popularity of the texts⁶⁹ and who proved that he was not averse to censoring the written word. And, as argued above, a possible explanation for a lack of action against criticism in Egypt could have been the geographic location of the emperor. Egypt's ruler no longer ruled from Egypt itself and censorship against criticism could have followed the seat of political power until we reach the end of the Flavian dynasty when concerns shifted.

A lack of censored literature in Egypt was not due to a lack of dissident literature, but to a lack in action. The preservation and popularity of the *Acta* show that emperors could and would ignore written criticism against them from Egypt. The four examples I have used (the texts in the sanctuaries, the alchemical texts, the *Acta*, and the *damnatio memoriae* of emperors) suggest that censorship in Roman Egypt depended on the risk of the text (or memory) itself. Censorship practices, namely that of suppressing some texts and not others, suggest that by the third century CE, certain ideas and practices were considered more dangerous than criticism against the emperor because they had the potential to affect the empire as a whole. While the religious and alchemical texts had the power to introduce or popularize certain practices deemed unfavorable by the Romans, and the memory of certain emperors polluted the *memoria publica* with the recollection of certain odious acts, the *Acta* were never successful in seriously damaging the emperor's hold on Egypt. It then appears that the discontent from Egypt was not seen as a serious threat in the way that certain religious and alchemic texts could prove to be. This need not surprise given the anxiety in Rome about certain religious practices, namely that of the

⁶⁸ Harker, 2.

⁶⁹ Most of our surviving copies were duplicated in the Severan period: Harker, 131.

Druids and the Jews, both of which were suppressed under the Julio-Claudians.⁷⁰ The “invasion” of certain faiths was more of an issue than “author-less” texts only circulated among the Egyptians that could not harm the social order of the empire with foreign practices and ideas. The Romans would likewise not have been successful in pinpointing a single author to punish for the *Acta*, rendering the purposes of censorship ineffective.

2.5 Conclusion

The new political order ushered in by Augustus was responsible for the frequency in which we see cases of censorship after the republic. With an emperor suddenly in Rome, it became necessary to protect this new office and its legitimacy. With Julius Caesar’s assassination and the well-known Roman hate for kings, Augustus and his immediate successors had the enormous task of preserving this new political order and strengthening any fragility. Naturally, maintaining political power through the office of the emperor became a priority. It was under this political climate that Augustus made spoken and written criticism treasonous in an effort to safeguard this new position and prevent any serious opposition. While our evidence for censorship during the republic is rather meager, the phenomenon can be seen during the empire under the reign of almost every emperor from Augustus to Domitian. A changing phenomenon that encompassed both written and spoken work, censorship played an important role in power politics in Rome and set the stage for subsequent cases of suppression.

The control of the written or spoken word in Rome was not uniform, systematic, or consistent. Charges of literary treason did not come from the same source each time (either an emperor or the senate) and one’s risk of being censored depended on how one’s contemporaries

⁷⁰ On the suppression of the Druids, see Plin. *HN*. 30.4 and Suet. *Claud.* 25. On the suppression of the Jews under Tiberius, see Suet. *Tib.* 36.

interpreted such literature. The aediles were charged with burning books but they were not the custodians of acceptable sentiments. In other words, there was no office or institution that oversaw and policed all published or unpublished work, or all public or private speech. Everything rested on the political and historical context in which an author wrote or spoke, as well as how his contemporaries interpreted his words. Cremutius Cordus' fate illustrates all such points: His play did not irk Augustus or any of his contemporaries, but it happened to incur the wrath of Sejanus under Tiberius' reign, who was not involved in Cordus' indictment.

When looking to censorship more broadly, one can see a wide-spread practice that encompasses the suppression of ideas in a way that Tacitus does not highlight, such as the suppression of religious texts or oracular pronouncements. In turn, the Egyptian evidence even further broadens our understanding of censorship in the Roman Empire. This comparative approach and broader investigation reveals that censorship and book-burning was a wide-spread practice that likewise burdened the provinces. An attack on the emperor or the empire, a fast-spreading foreign faith, or the recollection of disgraced individuals all possessed the power to destabilize the social order. To curb this, the state attempted to manipulate and shape ideas by making known what is permissible and what is not. This was done through public displays of censorship and book-burning. This manipulation can be explained by a desire to uphold the social order and prevent any speech, written or spoken, that could potentially harm the empire more broadly. The evidence from Egypt supports this view as our documentation considers issues with empire-wide ramifications if left unchecked (an ambitious prefect, a spreading faith, purported amassed riches, and harmful memories) rather than treason trials for attacking an emperor.

What Roman officials considered dangerous and in need of censoring changed over time.

As the actions of Septimius Severus and Diocletian suggest, censorship eventually focused only on broader social and political purposes, and criticism against the emperor was no longer seen as pertinent. After the Flavians, as the legitimacy of the emperor and the empire came into question less, we lose sight of punishments for criticism hurled at emperors. Maintaining empire-wide social order (which included preventing insurrection and suppressing foreign faiths) became more of a priority than literary treason. What remained constant, however, was the perceived threat of foreign faiths. This was looked on with an unfavorable eye from the days of the republic and persisted throughout the empire, all the way down to the Christian persecutions. After criticism against the emperor ceased to be dealt with, we see that the focus of censorship continued to remain on religion but also began to include other matters capable of disrupting the social order.

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