

Parabainô: Wartime Massacres, Extreme Violence and Transgressions (Greco-Roman Antiquity and Present Times)

International Conference (Reims - June 2023)

Presentation

The PARABAINO¹ research programme was awarded a large research grant under the French National Research Agency (ANR)'s 'Genocide and Mass Violence' call (19-FGEN-0002 - <https://www.parabaino.com/>). It seeks to comprehend massacres and extreme violence through the Greek and Roman experiences, from a comparative and multidisciplinary perspective (Anthropology, Archaeology, History, Art History, Philology, Philosophy). Our aim is to study the genesis of these practices in order to include antiquity into the overall understanding of genocides and mass violence; indeed, the results to be achieved are not only intended to enrich the knowledge of Ancient societies, but also to produce an understanding which can contribute to the broader reflection on this topic. The prism of transgression selected for the programme makes it possible to bypass the pitfall inherent in any legal categorisation, thereby avoiding any form of hierarchisation and exclusion. The chosen definition of exclusion is the violation of a basic norm, the breach of a 'moral frontier' buttressing the principles which order and underpin societies.²

Ancient worlds, and especially the Greek and Roman worlds, have experienced recurring massacres (in the modern acceptance of the term), extreme violence (physical attacks, destructions, mass enslavement, deportation, etc.), as well as extermination. They have also reflected on these, narrated and represented them, thus participating in many cases in producing the memory of the event. They provide a multitude of paroxysmal figures and situations which invite us to probe questions of identity and otherness, processes of dehumanisation as well as the crises and mutations resulting from these, pointing to the sacred while also interrogating gender; furthermore, these figures and situations offer 'models' which allow us to reflect on contemporary conceptualisations and interpretations of mass violence, to explore the modalities whereby they are narrated, represented, inscribed into history, memorialised and commemorated. We aim to understand to what extent 'extreme' (which partly corresponds to the concept of 'intolerable' in French) actions and behaviours may undermine the very foundations of the societies that are faced with them; and also to analyse the ways in which societies manage to assimilate extreme violence and its effects, to redefine societal limits or indeed reaffirm some values.

Thanks to the expertise of its members, the PARABAINO programme team has built a digital database to enrich scientific research. In addition to working seminars focused on defining

¹ Parabainô is a Greek term which means literally 'to cross, go beyond', that is to say transgressing the legal and moral norms produced by human societies.

² For an initial reflection on the terms of the study, see <https://www.parabaino.com/2021/12/09/seminaire-3-parabaino-article-en-ligne-di-pimouguet-pedarros/>

methodological and epistemological choices, a study day on women and a roundtable on mass violence framed along the programme's research strands have been organised.³ A first book has been published; it is entitled *La transgression en temps de guerre, de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Wartime Transgression, from the Antiquity to the Present Day) and is structured around three themes: Norms and thresholds, Cruelty and paroxysm, Images and representations.⁴

To conclude the PARABAINO programme, we are now organising an international conference, which will take place on June 2023, 3 days, in Reims. Our aim is to return to the initial dialogue between periods and disciplines around three transversal themes, which are detailed below, with a day being allocated to each of them: identity, the sacred and gender. It has been decided to foreground a dialogue with the contemporary period, in order to align findings with the scientific themes defined by the ANR – a key aim of which was to analyse genocidal processes in the present time. The principle which has been agreed on therefore consists in alternating a presentation on antiquity with one on present times, preferably pairing off two papers for each sub-theme, thereby enriching the discussion. However, our conference will also invoke the modern period. This is due, first, to the emergence of the word 'massacre' in the field of war violence in the sixteenth century; secondly, to the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, which constitutes a reference as well as a landmark in collective reflection, and, lastly, to the debate over the law of war and peace featuring antiquity, from Las Casas to Hugo Grotius. At the end of each conference day, there will be three roundtable discussions on a specific theme and, here again, these will bring together specialists of the contemporary period and the Greco-Roman world.

Day 1 - Theme: Identity (lead: Giusto Traina)

Just as it is not possible to discuss transgression without referring to the norm, identity is intrinsically bound with the question of otherness. It is therefore essential to define in general terms the close connection between identity and the practice of extreme violence in wartime. Several questions arise from this.

For instance, how might a collective identity be recovered after a traumatic episode, such as *stasis* or a civil war, or even a fratricidal war? In patrilinear wars, slaughtering men, raping and/ or enslaving women means attacking the entire community. Indeed, extermination is used to keep one's group intact or extract those who are regarded as potential enemies.

Defending or stigmatising an identity, or even remaking it can occur in external warfare. In some cases, these can be planned and coordinated operations: one of the most noteworthy examples was the massacre of tens of thousands of Italians in the city-states of the Asia province, under the command of Mithridate VI, in 88 B.C. Tacitus's description of the campaigns in Germania in 14 A.D. may also be cited, in particular in reference to the practice of scorched earth (*Annals*, I, 51, 1): 'Neither age nor sex inspired pity: places sacred and profane were razed indifferently to the ground [...] The troops escaped without a wound: they had been cutting down men half-asleep, unarmed or dispersed.' For the Ancients, massacres

³ The presentation of these academic events and some online texts and videos are available at :
<https://www.parabaino.com/evenements/>

⁴ See the detailed presentation of the book, with abstracts of the articles at:
<https://www.parabaino.com/publications/la-transgression-en-temps-de-guerre/>

occurring during war were not legally punishable, but some practices did shock, such as bodily attacks, relentless attacks and cruelty. These are carried out precisely because the enemy is perceived as an ‘other’ – a perception which can go as far as looking for the somatic marks of differences in the body of the other. In other situations, massacres are sometimes perpetrated against individuals and groups who are recognised as the enemies of the order and, consequently, as potential massacrers (such is the moral of Euripides’s *Bacchae*). The victims are sometimes accused of conducting the massacre themselves, as with the 186 B.C. Bacchanalia; in order to stop the penetration of a religion perceived as foreign, citizens were killed for allegedly carrying out internal massacres (*intestinae caedes*). All these practices also interrogate contemporary warfare.

The victim’s **dehumanisation** also requires attention. In the Middle East, while mutilations could function as a deterrent (thus with piles of skulls), a sort of accounting of the massacre and/ or mutilation was also under way. The same principle of proscription also prevailed in Republican Rome, where the victim’s head was produced for identification. There could be other reasons too: in the East, cutting off the hand of an illustrious victim, in addition to his head, amounted to neutralising his power. This was the case of Cyrus the Young at Cunaxa, but also of Crassus, soon after the defeat of Carrhae. The ‘Orientalist’ Marc Anthony inflicted the same procedure on Cicero, although this was not understood by the Roman authors. Attacks on bodies have also been observed since the Second World War – but what are their meanings? An important aspect, which has not been explored from a transversal perspective, involves **animalising** the enemy, and portraying him as a hunting prey. Among ‘manhunt’ interpretations, a thesis on the Aegean world in the Hellenistic period has just been defended by R. Saou. One might also cite the sarcophagus of a dignitary from Achaemenid Troad from the 4th century B.C. – most likely a satrap – where the defunct is represented in the act of killing an enemy and hunting a boar, as if these were the same activities. The techniques of horsemen from the Asian and Berber steppes, akin to those used by nomadic shepherds to gather herds, are illustrative of this animalisation of the enemy, discernible through the ages – for instance in the case of the Nazi brigade ‘Black hunters’ studied by Ch. Ingrao, or the genocide in Rwanda, where one can detect a connection between the ways of stopping the Tutsi from running by cutting their Achilles heel, and the act of bringing oxen to the ground before killing them. Operational modes of extermination are therefore connected with the question of identity. It will be important to reflect on philosophical aspects, for instance in the well-known passage from Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* (X, 40) : ‘A spider is proud when it has caught a fly, and another when he has caught a poor hare, and another when he has taken a little fish in a net, and another when he has taken wild boars, and another when he has taken bears, and another when he has taken Sarmatians. Are not these robbers, if thou examinest their opinions?’

Since antiquity, there have been interrogations over the legal and moral aspects justifying wartime massacres and extreme violence. The question of identity has also been at the heart of **legal and religious debates since the beginning of the modern period**, elaborating again on the Roman conception of *bellum iustum*, transforming the connotation of ‘legitimate war’ on the basis of a discussion of the causes for war and peace, towards a new legal regulation of international relations and treaties. For instance, is it lawful to massacre the civilian population who have doggedly resisted the siege of a fortress or a city? The reception of ancient testimonies over modern legal doctrines requires exploration: for instance, a passage from Cicero’s *De officiis* examined by Hugo Grotius in his treaty *De iure belli ac pacis*, seems to justify clemency – although it is probably a critique of the violent excesses of the

Gallic Wars. Gracius seems to be discussing the massacres of Spanish *tercios* in the Netherlands, as Cervantes did in his play on the Siege of Numantia (133 B.C.) – where, moreover, the ancestors of the Spaniards bore the brunt of the conquest. The only path to redemption for those who had been under siege and defeated was to separate the *nocentes* from the *innocentes*, that is to say innocent prisoners such as children, the elderly and women, except when they stopped being *innocentes* (for instance when women fought, thus losing their connotation as the weaker sex).

Day 2 - Theme: The Sacred (lead: Ninon Grangé)

The profanation of places, attacks on bodies, the destruction of cultures, obliteration of peoples and cities, massacres and extreme violence can also be understood as an **attack on the sacred**, even if the latter carries a broad and vague definition when it comes to war. While the sacred can be understood in opposition to the profane in classical theological, legal, anthropological and philosophical literature, massacres force us to look beyond this basic opposition. Through the ages, the notion of the sacred, besides, has not necessarily been linked to religion and cultural practices. It is **the crossing of the boundaries which identifies both transgression and profanation, which characterise extreme violence**. The sacred, as well as profanation, therefore take on a meaning which is either literal (with massacres in places of worship, for instance), or derived (such as building or moving a mass grave). Moreover, massacres and extreme violence invite us to rethink the **difference between transgression and desecration**. The religious dimension is then much broader: *homo sacer*, sacrifice, the symbolism of the temple as a refuge, impurity, disorder are themes which must be revisited in the light of the analysis of massacre and in connection with the notion of transgression.

With the transgression of the law, the collapse of social bonds, attacks on bodies, and the transgression of boundaries arises the question of the porosity between the inside and the outside. The crossing of the moral and physical boundary modifies, in relation to the state of war, the form and content of the enemy's designation and, conversely, self-representation. **The question of the massacre's representation and invisibilisation is the second key theme in this approach.** An **interplay of complex representations** surges forth with the phenomenon of transgressing several laws and norms. The narratives known to us from texts must therefore be supplemented by also analysing images, whether missing, fragmentary or horrifying. Thus begins a **reflection not only on witnessing and speaking out, but also on what is visible, showable and ostensible**, feeding into the understanding of the sacred in massacres as a nodal point of the dialectics between showing and silencing, understood as political phenomena. In this sense, travelling back and forth between antiquity and the contemporary world is very enlightening.

The lack of visual documentation is a reminder of the absence of words in antiquity and evidently stems from some policies and strategies (for instance, ancient discourse veering towards heroisation is echoed by the moving of mass graves in the former Yugoslavia). However, this explanation is not satisfying, in a world which is largely dedicated to and full of images. Knowing that our perception of the massacre must start – but not entirely so – from the experience of genocides in the twentieth century, we must interrogate both the 'missing image' (Rithy Panh), single images or *hapax* (Didi-Huberman) and images of excess. It is therefore necessary to compare the contemporary lack of images with what happened in antiquity, and to ask whether we are facing the same void, and therefore the same – conscious

or unconscious – politics of silencing and hiding. In this sense, **the production of images is intended to probe the boundaries which are integrated into missing and single images, and images of excess.** Indeed, a tangible effort on the part of actors and artists to make the unspeakable visible has begun. Is it then possible to speak of a dialectics between exhibition and silencing? Does resistance through art point to a reinjection of the sacred into violence? Is it a reappropriation or a re-spatialisation of the sacred following the greatest profanation? Are we witnessing the invention of new forms of sanctuary creation?

Day 3 - Theme: Gender (lead: Jérôme Wilgaux)

Humanities and social science research on violence now devote extensive attention to **its gendered dimensions**, with respect to their actors, victims or witnesses; the modalities whereby this violence is enacted (whether exceptional or structural); its symbolical treatment (with a frequent opposition between virilised conquerors and feminised victims); or still the reactions which they trigger. Such investigations invite us to confront norms and practices, paying attention to the most concrete elements revealed by our primary material (actions, means of action, behaviours...) as well as to the feelings and moral judgments which accompany them, as well as to the social and cultural categorisations and hierarchical orderings (men/ women; free individuals/ slaves; young/ old; civilians/ fighters...) which this violence reveals – these are as many elements that the vocabulary being used highlights more or less aptly, given the stereotypical nature of many formulations.

While ancient sources mention fewer women than men in violent contexts, **mothers, wives and citizens' daughters** (as well as the women born into royal dynasties) are nonetheless far more present than all of the non-citizens (foreigners, slaves...), whose fates during conflicts usually remain untold. Is this the case too in more contemporary periods? The social and statutory dimensions are fundamental, here; as some studies have already underlined several times, the hierarchical ordering of the acts which are perpetrated is based first and foremost on the victims and their statuses, rather than on the nature of the actual acts: **cruelty is denounced all the more vigorously when the acts in question affect women (or children)**, whose assigned role is to ensure the reproduction of a political community. The association of women, in particular, with the most violent episodes in conflicts, either internal or external, emphasises their crucial role within communities, especially when their preservation is at stake. **Violence, bodies, sexuality, reproduction...** are therefore even more interconnected in narratives dramatising **paroxysmal episodes**, since masculine domination can be presented there in a highly erotised manner. Moreover, more generally, individual as well as collective dominations materialise above all through the appropriation and enslavement of bodies. The violence inflicted therefore goes along with the victims' disaffiliation and statutory loss – or even their dehumanisation.

It is indeed **through violence that relationships, identities, statuses and communities are redefined** – extreme violence (which is all the more present as identity-based and statutory divisions are reinforced) which results in producing difference – radical difference – and 'naturalising' such difference (by resorting to cruelty, inscribed into the bodies). Any exclusion thus entails physical violence, and in this context men and women have to face these experiences of brutality and suffering just like citizens do.

In the context of **polyphonic approaches** (relying for instance on survivors' testimonies, tragedies and poetry, historical or biographical narratives, funeral inscriptions, pictorial representations, essays...), the denunciation of the violence inflicted on women and excesses perpetrated against entire communities, the way in which the victims can speak out, act to demand justice, or even carry out their revenge, underline again the concrete and symbolic

role played by women as **the incarnations and protectors of community identities, of honour and social order** – as well as **their ability to become invested in processes of reparation, as restorers of pacified social bonds.**

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