

METHODS AND TOOLS OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION ON A DAILY BASIS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD - FROM AGORA TO ACTA DIURNA

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Abstract

Together with the development of civilization in world history, the need to disseminate information individually as well as collectively had progressively increased. Accordingly, each civilization tried to find a newer, faster and more efficient way of recording and transmitting information. The most important steps in this regard were taken in the ancient world. Antiquity had come a long way from sharing a piece of information on the Agora to developing an idea of writing news stories on a daily basis. Public meetings and trials on the Agora, as well as performances at special dramatic festivals, drew fairly large audiences.

In the ancient world, various signaling mechanisms and the system of messengers were also used quite effectively to convey information, but the principle of disseminating everyday recorded information, reminiscent of modern media, played an important role in informing the public, preceded by the Annals and the Fasti in particular.

The Annals conveyed the important events of the year, taken place in Rome, in a current-affairs style. The same practice of recording the information was also applied by the historians of the Ancient Near East, but the Romans are credited for coining the term “annals” to the very style of dispatching the historical events.

The Fasti, on the other hand, were a kind of calendar and marked chronological or diachronic records of material, all kinds of interesting information from both religious or secular life.

As we have already mentioned, the most effective means of rapid and mass dissemination of written information was the Acta Diurna, introduced by Julius Caesar in 59 BC, the very first year of his consulship. It was fundamentally different from the Annals and the Fasti. The Fasti were more of a calendar nature, the Annals conveyed only important information, while the Acta Diurna contained relatively insignificant news as well.

Based on the arguments suggested in the current paper, we came to the conclusion that the idea of today’s newspaper was formed in antiquity, developed and implemented in the form of daily written news, which formed the basis of the epoch-making aspiration for freedom of speech. Accordingly, it can be assumed that in the paper, for the first time in classical philology, we have illustrated the way of logical development that ultimately led the ancient world to moving from the Agora type of democratic sharing of information to the practice of creating and disseminating daily news.

Keywords: Information Dissemination, Agora, Annals, Fasti, Acta Diurna.

Introduction

Throughout the world history, special attention had always been paid to obtaining, recording and disseminating information. The fate of each war, victory or defeat, the development of the economy and commerce, the introduction and implementation of innovations, the rise or fall of culture; in essence, the progress, stagnation or regression of entire peoples and the civilizations depended on it. This was well understood by the developed society and therefore, in the footsteps of the technical means at their disposal, they tried to find a quicker and more effective way of transmitting information both individually or collectively, orally or in writing. In this regard, quite important steps were taken in the ancient world, which unfolded a variety of means of disseminating information, from the Agora up to the Acta Diurna.

The aim of the present paper is to explore the extent to which the ancient world had advanced in terms of disseminating and gaining access to daily information. It is widely believed that the idea of a daily newspaper and its establishment first occurred in France in 1609. In contrast, we will try our best to illustrate that this very idea was already quite successfully implemented in ancient Rome, and that the daily actum diurnum contained information of a nature that is characteristic to the news we know today.

In our research, we have employed a complex method known in classical philology based on the multiplex use of philological, historical, culturological and archaeological data. While in the study of Homer's epic we mainly use the method of philological and historical analysis, in the case of Acta diurna, on the other hand, we mainly rely on the results of cultural and archaeological research data.

1. The Agora

Homer, the first Greek poet to come down to us, perfectly illustrates the ways of conveying information during the Trojan War, utilized by the Achaeans and Trojans. As he points out, the Agora played a special role in performing this function.

The term “ἀγορή” is widely mentioned by Homer. Its etymology is related to the verb “ἀγείρω” translated as an “assembly”. However, the verb pattern also suggests similarities with the pre-Greek linguistic world.²³⁹ There is speculation that the term may be a derivative of the verb “ἀγοράομαι”, meaning “I speak in public”. Homer extensively uses almost all the basic derivatives containing this root: “ἀγοράομαι” - “I speak in public”, “ἀγορεύω” - “I speak at a meeting”, “ἀγορητής” - “speaker”, “orator”, and “ἀγορητύς” - “oratory”. This, in turn, indicates that, according to Homer, the Agora and all related concepts were already gaining a foothold in Greek public life. The above-mentioned term is not confirmed in Mycenaean sources and the exemplification of its function, as we have mentioned, must have started from the epic of Homer.

Homer mentions “ἀγορή” thirty-eight times in his *Iliad* and twenty-eight times in his *Odyssey*. The Agora is multifunctional in the epic by Homer. It can be a place to discuss urgent issues, debate over strategic plans or litigate. Most importantly, the Agora implies the ability to express an opinion and freedom of speech.

The *Iliad* opens with the following episode: the Achaean priest is angry with Agamemnon and asks Apollo to punish the Achaeans. The god hears his request and causes trouble for the Achaean army. The arrows of Apollo keep annihilating the warriors for nine days. On the tenth day, Agamemnon orders the army to assemble at the Agora to come to a common agreement of what can be done to get out of the situation: “Atreides ordered his messengers, the loud ones, to summon the curly Achaeans to the Agora”.²⁴⁰ The

²³⁹ For review, compare Robert S. P. Beekes, Lucien van Beek, “Ethymological Dictionary of Greek”. Vol.I, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2010, p.14.

²⁴⁰ The *Iliad* by Homer, II, 50-51.

Achaean, in their turn, also gather quickly: “a stream of people from tents and ships was marching along the shore to Agora...”²⁴¹ At the meeting, soothsayer Calchas delivers a speech to the public, underpinning the main motif of the poem - the anger of Achilles.

The essence of the Agora and its function are most perfectly described by the *Iliad* on the shield of Achilles. The shield depicts the scene of a trial, taking place on the Agora of the city to determine the fate of the offender for the crime committed. The scene of the trial involves all the attributes, including the messengers, regulating the proceedings; the judges sitting on the hewn stones around the Agora listening to the arguments of the accused and the accuser. Then each of them removes the wand from the messenger and announces the verdict of their own. The judge who presents the fairest ruling will be rewarded with two talents, being a pretty high salary.

In the Book 16 of the *Iliad*, Homer cites the furious Zeus over the people for their allegedly unjust ruling made on the Agora.²⁴²

As it can be seen, the Agora functioned in compliance to the following scheme of the transmitter “Aedes”, being a politician or an ordinary warrior and the receiver, or the people. The goal of public awareness manifests itself in all directions, such as in the field of politics, civil affairs or communication. The Agora is turning into a gathering place, allowing people to exchange their ideas. It is a kind of communication center, a fast way of receiving and disseminating information, almost in the same manner as the media functions today. This was exactly the place, where people came to get information, or to pass it on to someone else. Solon (c. 640 - c. 560 BCE), a poet and a politician, addresses his fellow citizens in an elegiac style, saying: “I myself came from Salamis as a messenger, and instead of uttering a word on Agora, I dedicate a song to you”.

If we consider the different contexts of “ἀγορά/ ἀγορή”, mentioned in different forms in the Homeric epic, it can be said that this is a kind of space available for people to gather for important public debates on urgent issues. The poleis also possessed Agoras, including the Trojan and Achaean military camps.

The Agora is a gathering place for people to speak in public. The purpose of the information transmitter is publicity, intending to get as many people as possible to reach the spoken word and cover the disseminated information as much as possible.

With Homer, the Agora is represented in both the Achaean camp and Troy. Pulidamas advises Hector to bring troops into the city and spend the night on the Agora.²⁴³

In the Homeric epic, the Agora, allowing information to be disseminated, viewpoints to be exchanged, public opinion to be formed, and law to be enforced, offers clear signs of civilization. When Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about his own journey, describing the country of the Cyclops as emphasizing their savagery, he says that they have neither agoras nor laws: “the ones who have neither an agora nor a council”.²⁴⁴

Following Homer, the Agora became one of the main features of Greek culture, which later developed into the Roman Forum. The Roman Forum established itself as the center of daily life. Various important events were held here, such as speakers delivering their speeches, elections, trials, and gladiatorial contests as well. It was exactly on the Forum where the monuments to prominent figures of the empire and important state buildings were erected.

²⁴¹ Ibid. II, 91-93.

²⁴² Ibid. XVI, 387.

²⁴³ Ibid. XVIII, 274.

²⁴⁴ The *Odyssey* by Homer, IX, 112.

Over time, the Agora was becoming more and more universal, where citizens of the polis could get information on different issues of public concern. In addition, a very important function was assigned to different types of messengers, who brought oral or written information from one place to another.

2. Other means of disseminating information in ancient Greece

The information was also widely disseminated at public meetings and trials with the active participation of the population of the polis. Also, the dramatic festivals should be mentioned separately, being one of the unique and universal ways of transmitting information.

Importantly, in the societies of the ancient era, the method of transmitting information over long distances through various signaling techniques was quite common. For example, we can cite the tragedy “Agamemnon”, a component of the Aeschylus trilogy, which begins with the monologue by the guard. He tells us that for a year now he has been patiently waiting for a sign that will release him this drudgery. The guard must see the inbound ship and the lighted torch from the roof of the Atride, which will be a sign of the fall of Troy. And here, after a year of waiting, he sees the fire and his joy knows no bounds:

“My call will penetrate to Agamemnon’s wife
so that roused from her bed in the house with all speed
she may raise the fair song of rejoicing to greet
this beacon, if, in fact, Troy has been taken at last,
as this signal blaze must clearly proclaim”.²⁴⁵

Different ways of transmitting information were used in the Hellenistic era, when Alexander the Great’s expeditions made the Hellenistic world stretch across the huge territory, and this task became not only more important but also more difficult to accomplish.

3. Means of disseminating information in Ancient Rome

New needs for the dissemination of information arose in ancient Rome, where the need for daily information of the population came to light especially in the Republican era and then in the Principate era, following the emergence of the Roman Empire. In this regard, the decision of Julius Caesar to establish a principle of daily information, reminiscent of modern everyday non-electronic media, was very important. The *Acta Diurna*, founded by Caesar, was preceded by several important forms of information dissemination.

3.1. The Annals

Several means of written public information about the events in Rome were formed. Among them were the Annals that offered a timeline style of important events of the year. This principle of recording the information was still known to the ancient world before Herodotus, and to some extent it was also applied by the historians of the Ancient Near East, but the Romans are credited for coining the term “annals” to the very style of dispatching the historical events. “Annus” translates from Latin as a “year” and the “Annals” means the collection of annual records of events or news. A classic example of this genre is the *Annals* by Tacitus. It covers the events related to the life of the city, district or country. This name still retains its meaning and is often used to denote periodicals in various fields.

²⁴⁵ The Oresteia of Aeschylus - Agamemnon, pp. 26-30.

Annual reports in Rome were compiled under the name of *Annales* by Quintus Fabius Pictor (second half of the 3rd century BC), Quintus Ennius (2nd century BC), Gaius Licinius Macer Calvus (1st century BC), Valerius Antias (1st century BC), Quintus Claudius Quadrigarius (1st century BC), Aulus Cremutius Cordus (1st century AD) and Virius Nicomachus Flavianus (334 - 394 AD).

The “*Annals*” by Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. 53 - 116 BC) were created after his own “history”, detailing the period of Roman History of 69-96 AD. The “*Annals*” consisted of 16 or 18 Books, out of which only the Books I-IV, the beginning of the Book V, the Book VI without the beginning and the Books XI-XVI with gaps came down to us. It reflects the period from the death of Augustus from 14 AD to 66 AD. Possibly, the narration was in progress even before 68 AD.

In order to clarify the type of information the *Annals* were focused on, we will cite two fragments of completely different content from the Book 16 of the *Annals* by Tacitus. The first of the quotations presented here conveys such details of the personal life of Nero, one of the central figures of Rome at the time, that we may even doubt their authenticity. It can be said that this section of the *Annals* is the predecessor of the so-called “yellow journalism”. And, the second quote tells us about seemingly less important news from one of the provinces of the empire. However, in both cases the historian tells the story with the same rigor and diligence, and describes each of them in the smallest detail in plain but impressive language:

14.1.1: “In the years of the consulship of Gaius Vipstanus and Gaius Fontius, Nero no longer postponed his long-planned crime, as the long period of his tenure as an emperor gave him courage, and the flames of his love towards Poppaea only grew stronger day by day. Poppaea did not believe that Nero would divorce Octavia and marry her while Agrippina was alive. The woman filled him with frequent rebukes and sometimes even cursed him, calling him a “puppet dependent on the orders of others, who was neither the lord of the empire nor himself. Why has my wedding been delayed? Perhaps neither my status nor my grandparents, with their victories are adequate to please you. Maybe, my sincerity is troublesome. No! You are afraid that as a wife, I will expose the wickedness of the fathers at every meeting, and how angry the nation is with the pride and greed of your mother! But, if Agrippina fails to get used to a daughter-in-law who will not be her son’s enemy, then let me keep my marriage with Otho. I would rather go to any corner of the earth where I hear the emperor’s folly than watch him engulfed with threats”. Nero offered no resistance to such and similar attacks, intensified by tears and the passionate art of love. “All men wish to overthrow the mother’s power, but no man could have imagined that hatred of the son could lead to the murder of the mother”.²⁴⁶

14.27.1: “In the same year, Laodicea, one of the most famous cities in Asia, was destroyed by an earthquake, but was rebuilt on its own, without our help. In Italy, the ancient city of Puteol received the rights and title of colony from Nero. The veterans were called to Tarentum and Antium, but still failed to stop the process of depopulation of the region. Most returned to the provinces where they had served many years. And, since they had no habit of getting married and starting a family, the houses they left behind were childless and heirless. A great amount of time has passed since the whole legions, including tribunes, centurions and privates in their hundreds were sent in such a manner that with their unanimity and camaraderie a small community was formed. The settlers were now strangers among the strangers: men from completely different units; without a commander; indifferent to each other; it is as if they were not soldiers, but people gathered in one place to form a group and not a settlement”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ The *Annals* by Tacitus, Book 14.1.1.

²⁴⁷ The *Annals* by Tacitus, Book 14.27.1.

3.2. The Fasti

The Fasti were also published in ancient Rome, which was, in fact, a kind of calendar. The Fasti included certain periodical-type of information about holidays, religious rituals, historical news, or astrological events. It also covered the activities of officials, priests and others. It can be said that the Fasti spread all sorts of interesting information in religious or secular life.

“Fasti” is etymologically derived from the Latin word “Fas”, translated as “acceptable”, “permissible”, or “what is permissible”. To put it more precisely, this is what is legitimate in the eyes of the gods.

Compiling such a calendar was the responsibility of the priests and was done annually on a monthly basis, accommodating the lists of priests and civil servants.

The so-called “Fasti triumphales”, or the calendar recording of Rome’s triumphant victories, from Romulus onwards until the moment of the formation of the Fasti, are noteworthy. Information on major constructions and infrastructure projects was also posted there.

The Fasti were so popular that they even began a poetic elaboration of the Roman holiday calendar, and thus, a new literary form of the same name emerged. The *Fasti* by Ovidius Naso offers astronomical, mythological and etiological information on a monthly basis by mixing some interesting stories.²⁴⁸

It was a fragment of the Fasti found in Ostia in 1958 that informs us about the visit of Pharasmanes II of Iberia (Pharasmanes the Valiant or the Brave, according to the Georgian tradition) and his family as honorary guests of Caesar Antoninus Pius in Rome, which is also confirmed by Roman historians.²⁴⁹ According to the narration of Cassius Dio, unlike the previous rulers of Rome, the policy of Caesar Antoninus Pius²⁵⁰ was much more successful in relation to Iberia, about which the historian tells us in great detail. Pharasmanes II accepted the invitation of Caesar and arrived in Rome with a large entourage, including his wife and son. As Cassius points out, this must have been the result of Rome’s concessive policy towards Iberia’s territorial claims. In Rome, before Pharasmanes II, Caesar recognized the new, expanded borders of Iberia. The Iberian king was also allowed to offer sacrifices at the Capitol, which was a great honor to the guest. A statue of the equestrian Pharasmanes II was even erected in Rome.²⁵¹ The significance of this visit is highlighted by a fragment of the Fasti found in Ostia, which mentions the visit of Pharasmanes II, his wife, and son to the empire at the top of the important stories that took place in Rome.²⁵²

There were also Fasti consulares, containing the lists of consuls and official chronicles and the events that occurred during their consular period. This type of Fasti was discovered in the 16th century on Capitol Hill and was called “Fasti capitolini”.

Some of the Fasti indicated different types of days. The Dies fasti covered everyday public and state affairs. As it turned out, attention was paid to the so-called “lucky and unlucky days”. There were days when the affairs could be resolved successfully, for example, Dies comitielis, which marked assembly days, while the Dies nefasti were considered unsuccessful days. Following 304 BC, these Fasti were published by

²⁴⁸ P. Ovidius Naso, “Ovid’s Fasti”, Ed. By Sir James George Frazer. London; Cambridge, MA. William Heinemann Ltd.; Harvard University Press. 1933.

²⁴⁹ For more on Pharasmanes II’s visit to Rome, see 11. “Iberia”, Encyclopedia “Caucasus Anticus”, Ed. Rismag Gordeziani, Vol. II, Logos, 2016, 212.

²⁵⁰ Antoninus Pius, Roman emperor 138-161 AD.

²⁵¹ C. Dio, “Roman History”, Loeb Classical Library edition, 1925, vol. VIII, Epistome of book LXIX, 15, 3.

²⁵² H. Nesselhauf, “Ein neu es Fragment der Fasten von Ostia”, Athenaeum 16, 1958, 219-28.

Gnaeus Flavius BC, who also made them public, unlike the period when they were only available to patricians.

The official chronicles of Rome called the “Fasti Magistrales”, were particularly oriented on the emperors and magistrates, the days set in their honor, and the feasts and ceremonies dedicated to them. This type of Fasti was called “Magni” to distinguish it from the usual calendar of “Fasti Diurni”, or daily news.

Thus, the Fasti began to be used to mark annals and historical records. The records of the early stages of the Fasti gave impetus to the establishment of historical texts, which were first formed in the fashion of chronological annals, and later influenced the development of Roman historiography.

3.3. Acta Diurna

Acta Diurna, introduced by Julius Caesar, was probably the most influential in terms of rapid and mass dissemination of information, founded in the first year of his consulship in 59 AD. The Acta Diurna was fundamentally different from the Annals. The Annals told us only important information, while the Acta Diurna also contained relatively insignificant news. Unfortunately, the exact pieces have not reached us, but based on other sources, it can be said that the stories of prominent statesmen were recorded there, together with ones about the emperors and members of his entire family during the imperial times. The Acta diurna published orders of the emperor, decrees of the government, decisions of the senate, and even an argument which was allowed to be made public. The daily news also informed the public about the progress and outcome of trials. It told about the chronicles and interesting events of Roman life, including the facts of construction, reconstruction or demolition of important buildings, natural disasters, fires and even the urban rumors.

The novelty introduced by Julius Caesar gained great popularity in Rome. Daily news was also called “Acta diurnal”, “Acta urbana”, “Acta populi”, “Acta publica”. It was published in Rome, but they were also read in the provinces and in the army. The most important political, legal and, in general, interesting news were written in these publications. It was written on plates made of different materials. It could have been stone, metal or wood. The plates were presented in public places such as the Roman Forum.

In order to form an opinion on the content of information disseminated through the Acta diurna, or the effectiveness of the media outlet of the time, ancient sources quite successfully hint at the existed mechanism to disseminate the Acta diurna, as well as the level of its demand in society.

According to Suetonius, Julius Caesar “was the first to order the compilation and publication of the daily reports of both the Senate and the people’s assemblies”.²⁵³

Cicero writes in his letters to Atticus to be in possession of the Acta urbana of March 7, presumably found to be interesting by him.²⁵⁴

In the *Satyricon* by Petronius, the daily news chronicle is referred to as “Acta Urbis”. In one of the episodes, the clerk enters and, as the author notes, “kind of tells the story of the city”, saying that at a particular point in that time, thirty boys and forty girls were born; five hundred thousand modii of wheat were stored in the barn from the threshing floor; 500 bulls were placed under a yoke; also, the slave Mithridates was crucified for disrespectful reference of Gaius; on the same day, ten million sestertii were returned to the treasury, not knowing what to do with. The clerk finally adds that a fire broke out in Pompeius’s bar. It seems that such

²⁵³ Divus Julius by Suetonius, 20,1.

²⁵⁴ Letters to Atticus by Cicero, VI, 2.

diverse, completely different information could be found in the city news. It covered almost everything, starting from the birth rate and the treasury income to agricultural resources and important daily events.²⁵⁵

Tacitus mentions “Acta diurna” or “Acta urbana” three times in different contexts in his *Annals*. First, he mentions that the Greek-language writers of Roman history referred him as “τὰ ὑπομνήματα”, “τὰ δημόσια ὑπομνήματα”, “τὰ δημόσια γράμματα”, and “τὰ κοινὰ ὑπομνήματα”.

Tacitus tells us that Tiberius and Augustus did not appear in public at the Germania’s burial. They either thought that by expressing sorrow in front of everyone they would diminish their own majesty, or they were just afraid that their hypocrisy would be noticed by so many eyes drawn at them. Tacitus notes that he failed to find any information neither with historians nor in daily news that the Germania’s mother took part in the burial ritual, while all other relatives, not to mention Agrippina, Drusus and Claudius, were mentioned by name.²⁵⁶ It is clear from this passage in the *Annals* that the historian had hoped to find such detailed information about famous people in the actas, or the daily news being similar to today’s yellow press.

In another section of the text, Tacitus already specifically indicates what the difference was between the annals and the daily news. He says that the period of consulship of Nero and Lucius Piso was not full of remarkable news: “It is well known that the majesty of the Roman people is so revered to include only the most important news in the Annals and all the rest to be covered by the news of Rome”.²⁵⁷

For the third time, the historian recalls the news in the context that “it was read with special interest in the provinces or in the army to understand what Trazevs had done“. This quote already proves that the actas were widely used in geographical terms as well accessibility to all social groupings; they were sent to distant provinces and were read by everyone, including ordinary soldiers as well.²⁵⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be assumed that in terms of methods and tools for the dissemination of written information, the ancient world came quite a long time before it moved from the principle of sharing some information on the Agora to the idea of the Acta diurna, a kind of daily media. Such phenomenon is based on the longing for free expression and dissemination of information characteristic to the antiquity.

Memorizing, processing and transmitting information had become one of the basic principles of identity for man of antiquity. Virtually all genres of literature, including historiography, epics, rhetoric, philosophy, etc. served this purpose.

We can conclude that the desire for gaining information and the development of political life experienced by antiquity, from the Minoan-Mycenaean period to the Roman Empire, naturally led the society to such a more effective method of daily written information as the Acta diurna, a widely available daily medium. Significant relations with it are made first by the culture²⁵⁹ of newspaper publications in France from the beginning of the 17th century to current media. Thus, it can be said that for the first time in classical philology we have tried to show the way of logical development that led the ancient world from the Agora - the means of democratic dissemination of information - to the practice of creating daily news.

²⁵⁵ The Satyricon by Petronius, 53c.

²⁵⁶ The Annals by Tacitus, III, 3.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. XIII, 31.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. XVI, 22.

²⁵⁹ The first newspaper ever was published in France, specifically in Strasbourg in 1609.

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