

Damnatio memoriae

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Damnatio memoriae is the Latin phrase literally meaning "condemnation of memory" in the sense of a judgment that a person must not be remembered. It was a form of dishonor that could be passed by the Roman Senate upon traitors or others who brought discredit to the Roman State. The intent was to erase someone from history, a task somewhat easier in ancient times, when documentation was much sparser.

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Tondo of the Severan family, with portraits of Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, Caracalla, and Geta. Geta's face has been erased, because of the *damnatio memoriae* ordered by his brother.

Overview

Etymology



Head of young Publius Septimius Geta at Glyptothek, Munich

The sense of the expression *damnatio memoriae* and of the sanction is to cancel every trace of the person from the life of Rome, as if he had never existed, in order to preserve the honour of the city; in a city that stressed the social appearance, respectability and the pride of being a true Roman as a fundamental requirement of the citizen, it was perhaps the most severe punishment.

Practice

In Ancient Rome, the practice of *damnatio memoriae* was the condemnation of Roman elites and emperors after their deaths. If the Senate or a later emperor did not like the acts of an individual, they could have his property seized, his name erased and his statues reworked. Because there is an economic incentive to seize property and rework statues anyway, historians and archaeologists have had difficulty determining when official *damnatio memoriae* actually took place, although it seems to have been quite rare.

Historians sometimes use the phrase *de facto damnatio memoriae* when the condemnation is not official. Among those few who did suffer legal *damnatio memoriae* were Sejanus, who had conspired against emperor

Tiberius in 31, and later Livilla, who was revealed to be his accomplice. Only three emperors are known to have officially received a *damnatio memoriae*. These were Domitian whose violent death in 96 ended the Flavian Dynasty, the co-emperor Publius Septimius Geta, whose memory was publicly expunged by his co-emperor brother Caracalla after he murdered him in 211, and in 311 Maximian, who was captured by Constantine the Great and then encouraged to commit suicide.

Any truly effective *damnatio memoriae* would not be noticeable to later historians, since, by definition, it would entail the complete and total erasure of the individual in question from the historical record. However, since all political figures have allies as well as enemies, it was difficult to implement the practice completely. For instance, the Senate wanted to condemn the memory of Caligula, but Claudius prevented this. Nero was declared an enemy of the state by the Senate, but then given an enormous funeral honoring him after his death by Vitellius. While statues of some emperors were destroyed or reworked after their death, others were erected. Also, many coins with the images of the discredited person continued to circulate. A particularly large number exist with Geta's image.^[1]



Lucius Aelius Sejanus suffered *damnatio memoriae* following a failed conspiracy to overthrow emperor Tiberius in 31. His statues were destroyed and his name obliterated from all public records. The above coin from Augusta Bilbilis, originally struck to mark the consulship of Sejanus, has the words *L. Aelio Seiano* obliterated.

Similar practices in other societies

- In Ancient Greece, Herostratus set fire to the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus to become famous. To discourage such acts, the Ephesus leaders decided that his name should never be repeated again, under penalty of death. This attempt was unsuccessful, however, as illustrated by the fact that his name is still known today.
- Ancient Egyptians attached the greatest importance to the preservation of a person's name. The one who destroyed a person's name was thought somehow to have destroyed the person,^[2] and it was thought that this effect extended beyond the grave.
- The cartouches of the heretical 18th dynasty pharaoh Akhenaten were mutilated by his successors. Earlier in that same dynasty, a similar attack on Hatshepsut was carried out.^[3] However, only engravings and statuary of her as a crowned king of Egypt were attacked. Anything depicting her as a queen was left unharmed, so this was not strictly speaking *damnatio memoriae*.^[4]
- In Judaism, the curse, "May [his / her] name and memory be obliterated," (Hebrew: ימח שמו וזכרו, *yimach shmo ve-zichro*) is used.^[5]
- Despite successfully invading England in 1216,^[citation needed] being proclaimed King Louis of England in London and conquering half the country, under the terms of the treaty of Lambeth Louis is not counted as one of the Kings of England.
- Adandozan, king of Dahomey in the beginning of the nineteenth century, had imprisoned his brother Gakpe. Once the latter became king Ghezo, he took revenge by erasing the memory of Adandozan. To



A photograph of Stalin with Soviet commissar Nikolai Yezhov was retouched after Yezhov fell from favor and was executed in 1940.

this day, Adandozan is not officially considered as one of the twelve kings of Dahomey.

- Marino Faliero, fifty-fifth Doge of Venice, was condemned to *damnatio memoriae* after a failed coup d'état.
- More modern examples of *damnatio memoriae* in actual practice include the removal of portraits, books, doctoring people out of pictures, and any other traces of Joseph Stalin's opponents during the Great Purge. (For example in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*.) When in 1952 the Soviet Union football team lost to Yugoslavia at the Summer Olympics, Stalin ordered that all footage of the event be destroyed.^[6] In a twist of fate, Stalin himself was edited out of some propaganda films when Nikita Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet Union, and the city of Tsaritsyn that had earlier been named Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd in 1961.
- In Argentina, it was forbidden to say "Juan Domingo Perón" after the coup that deposed him in 1955, and the media often referred to him as the "Deposed Tyrant". Additionally, hospitals and other public buildings named after him during his presidency were quickly renamed by the Liberating Revolution. Photographs and other representations of the Argentine leader were also prohibited.
- A similar fate befell jarl Hákon Sigurðarson in 10th century Norway; according to Snorri Sturluson, after his death, "So great was the enmity of the Thronhjelm people against Earl Hakon, that no man could venture to call him by any other name than "the evil earl"; and he was so called long after those days."^[7]
- In the United States, the official portraits of disgraced Maryland governors Spiro Agnew and Marvin Mandel were absent from the Maryland State House Governor's Reception Room for periods of time.^{[8][9]} In both cases this followed allegations of corruption. Mandel's portrait was restored when he was later cleared of charges. Agnew was never cleared, but his portrait was restored after arguments that no one had the right to change history.
- Memorials to Continental general Benedict Arnold at the Saratoga National Historical Park and the United States Military Academy bear neither his name nor his likeness, as a result of his treachery. For example, at the United States Military Academy the names of all the governors of this site are listed except for Arnold; in his instance only the date of his tenure, 1780, appears.
- In 2007, the Spanish Parliament passed the Ley de Memoria Histórica de España to remove the traces of the Nationalist faction in the Spanish Civil War and afterwards. Public buildings and streets named after nationalist personalities were renamed and statues of Francisco Franco and other nationalist leaders were removed.
- In 2008, two engraved bricks on the "Wall of Fame" at Liverpool's famous Cavern Club were controversially removed because they bore the names of two members of music industry who have since been disgraced by sexual scandal: singer/songwriter Gary Glitter and record producer Jonathan King. In their place, a metal plaque was installed which simply stated that the names had been removed (albeit without actually identifying the men).
- In 2007, after it was found that professional wrestler Chris Benoit had murdered both his son and his wife before taking his own life, the WWE removed all mention of Benoit from its TV broadcasts, website and subsequent DVD releases.^[10] Wrestling Observer Newsletter had a recall poll to remove him from their Hall of Fame but was under the 60% needed to do so.
- On 10 May 2012, the Canadian Forces announced that it had made a "terrible mistake" by publishing a booklet with a photograph bearing the likeness of convicted murderer and rapist Russell Williams in the background, and ordered 4,000 copies of the book destroyed. The photograph was incidental to the subject matter of the book, but the image was felt to be offensive.^[11] In 2010, the CF had also burned his uniforms and destroyed his medals.^[12]
- The names of Hosni Mubarak and his wife Suzanne were erased from all Egyptian monuments after they



Place in the series of portraits of Doges of Venice, saying "Here is the place of Marino Faliero, decapitated for his crimes"

were deposed in 2011.^[3]

- Convicted child rapist and retired assistant coach Jerry Sandusky was edited out of a mural and replaced with a blue ribbon. The famous coach Joe Paterno also had the statue of him, and the backwall to it removed, along with the record of his victories from 1998 through 2011 vacated.^[13]
- The gravestone of Jimmy Savile, and other public memorials, were removed following allegations of sexual assault.^[14]

Damnatio memoriae in fiction

Many contemporary novels and films mention a form of *damnatio memoriae*. Two early examples are the "vapourization" of "unpersons" in George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ("He did not exist; he never existed"); and the reference to the Egyptian practice in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*, in which the Pharaoh Seti orders the name of Moses be struck from every building and never mentioned by anyone.

More recent authors who have used *damnatio memoriae* as a plot device include Milan Kundera in his 1979 novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, R.A. Salvatore in the 1990 novel *Homeland*, Lois Lowry in her 1993 novel *The Giver* (a version in which the damned name is never given to any new baby ever again), and Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson in their 1999 *Prelude to Dune* trilogy. Another occurrence of this plot device is prevalent in the fantasy novel *Prince of the Blood* by Raymond E. Feist.

The device has also appeared in the American television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as the Klingon practice of discommendation; as a threat in Ancient Greek and Persian culture in Frank Miller's 1998 comic book series *300* and its 2007 film adaptation; and in the 2004 role playing game *Vampire the Requiem*.

In Star Wars: The Old Republic, the Kaggath is a duel between two Sith lords, the loser of which could be sentenced to a kind of *damnatio memoriae*.

In Fallout New Vegas the Roman-style faction "Caesar's Legion" will declare the player in damnation memoriae if they commit major crimes against them.

See also

- Denazification
- Censorship of images in the Soviet Union
- Forced disappearance
- Herostratus
- Iconoclasm
- List of Roman emperors to be condemned
- List of tombs of antipopes
- Memory hole
- Nonperson
- Persona non grata
- Proscription
- Shunning
- Yimach shemo

Notes

1. ^ Geta: The One Who Died (<http://dougsmith.ancients.info/geta.html>)
2. ^ "Egyptian Religion", E.A Wallis Budge", Arkana 1987 edition, ISBN 0-14-019017-1
3. ^ *a b* "Erasing the Face of History" (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/15bond.html?_r=1) . *New York Times*. May 14, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/opinion/15bond.html?_r=1. Retrieved May 15, 2011.
4. ^ Peter F. Dorman, "The Proscription of Hapshepsut", from *Hapshepsut: From Queen To Pharaoh*, ed. Catherine H. Roehrig, Metropolitan Museum of Art (NY), pp. 267–69
5. ^ Rosenberg, Bernhard H.; Chaim Z. Rozwaski (1999). *Contemplating the Holocaust*. Jason Aronson, Inc. p. 1. ISBN 0-7657-6111-4. "There is an old dictum and hallowed custom that when speaking of the enemies of the Jewish people or of a wicked person, one says immediately after mentioning their names, *Yimach Shmo V'zichro*—may his name and memory be blotted out."
6. ^ "How do you punish a football team?" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/europe/10402967.stm>) . BBC News. June 24, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/europe/10402967.stm>. Retrieved January 9, 2012.
7. ^ "Varð hér svá mikill máttur af fjándskap, þeim er Prændir gerðu til Hákonar jarls, at engi maðr mátti nefna hann annan veg en jarl hinn illa; var þetta kall haft lengi síðan." Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 56 (http://lind.no/nor/index.asp?lang=&emne=&vis=s_i_olav_tryggvason2) .
8. ^ Governor Glendening's Press Conference on the opening of the Exhibit of Governors' Portraits in the Governor's Reception Room (<http://www.msa.md.gov/msa/stagser/s1259/121/7044/html/7044.html>) Maryland State House, Annapolis, April 13, 1995
9. ^ Mandel portrait hung in State House (<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/politics/bal-portrait101493,0,134817.story>) Baltimore Sun, October 14, 1993
10. ^ WWE: Chris Benoit Tragedy Illustrates WWE's Power and Lack of Accountability (<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/652870-wwe-chris-benoit-tragedy-illustrates-wwes-power-and-lack-of-accountability>) , *Bleacher Report*; April 2, 2011. Accessed September 17, 2011.
11. ^ [1] (<http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/TopStories/20120509/russell-williams-photo-recall-120509/>)
12. ^ Montreal Gazette, Military burns William's uniforms (<http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/Military+burns+Williams+uniforms/3859351/story.html>) , November 20, 2010
13. ^ Greg McCune (November 9, 2011). "Scorned Penn State coach painted out of campus mural" (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/09/us-crime-coach-mural-idUSTRE7A88AF20111109>) . Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/09/us-crime-coach-mural-idUSTRE7A88AF20111109>. Retrieved November 10, 2011.
14. ^ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-19893373>

External links

- Livius.org: Damnatio memoriae (http://www.livius.org/da-dd/damnatio/damnatio_memoriae.html)
- "The Commissar Vanishes" (http://www.newseum.org/berlinwall/commissar_vanishes/vanishes.htm) – Yezhov airbrushed out of a picture with Joseph Stalin
- Pope Alexander VI and his mistress. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6909589.stm>)

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