



© F. Granacci et D. Ghirlandaio *Julius Caesar and the Crossing of the Rubicon*, Tempera painting, 1494, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, E.372-2006, On display at Longleat House, Wiltshire.

International Conference - Lyon (France), 27-28th November 2020  
École Normale Supérieure de Lyon

**Transgressing to better rule: shadows and lights of the power in Antiquity**

Organized by the junior research team TAntALE (<https://tantale.hypotheses.org/>)

**Call for papers**

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 13th March 2020

## 1. The research program TAntALE

The junior laboratory TAntALE (Transgression dans l'Antiquité: Approche des Limites et des Écarts) is a research program entirely managed by junior researchers (PhD students), which began its activities in January 2019. Its main financial support is provided by the ENS de Lyon. For the conference, we also receive significant support from the HiSoMA laboratory (Histoire et Sources des Mondes Antiques- UMR 5189), as well as from Lyon's Doctoral Schools 483 Social Sciences and 484 3LA (Littérature, Langues, Linguistique et Arts).

This project has a multidisciplinary perspective but claims a strong coherence around a historical framework: our works revolve around Antiquity and the notion of transgression. Studies on this concept focusing on different periods, especially on antiquity<sup>1</sup> are emerging, but

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<sup>1</sup> See: J.-P. Vernant et P. Vidal-Naquet, *La Grèce ancienne. 3, Rites de passage et transgressions*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1992; V. Cousseau et É. Belmas (éd.), *Jeux interdits : la transgression ludique de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Limoges, Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2016; A. Gonzales (éd.), *Penser les savoirs sociaux dans l'Antiquité: pratiques, acteurs, normes*, Besançon, Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2016; the recent conference « Marges, limites et frontières du sauvage dans l'Antiquité », 25-26th October 2007, Besançon, organized by I. Boehm et M. C. Charpentier; see also the international seminar « Inversion, détournement et transgression. Genre

they do not address transgressive phenomena in their diversity nor systematically study transgression through its different manifestations: words, deeds and practices. After two meetings where we tried first to delineate the concept of "transgression" in antiquity and then to study how transgressive figures emerge and are elevated to models or counter-models, we will analyse in April 2020 the reactions of the ancient city to transgression before finally examining, in October, its evolution and reception in modern times<sup>2</sup>. Besides, a bimonthly seminar<sup>3</sup> allows us to broaden our scope to include other fields. The conference we are organizing aims to show that transgression is not always opposed to power but can also contribute to its elaboration.

## 2. The conference

“And that is no useless folly, when a man by his private expenditures benefits not himself only but also his state” (καὶ οὐκ ἄχρηστος ἦδ’ ἡ ἄνοια, ὃς ἂν τοῖς ἰδίους τέλεσι μὴ ἑαυτὸν μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν πόλιν ὠφελῆ). Thucydides, VI, 16, 3.

Alcibiades, in his speech to the Assembly before the departure of the Sicilian expedition, defended in front of the gathered citizens, in full light, his right to command, not despite his *hubris*, condemned by Nicias, but thanks to her. This transgression of the limits which define the city paradoxically justifies his claims to power. While it is considered, at first sight, as a dissenting behaviour that seeks to undermine any form of authority, transgression can also be studied as a tool used by the powerful for their own interests. And Alcibiades is not the only one to assert his power in this way: the tyrant, both the historical figure and the paradigm on which the political thinkers of the classical Greek world (Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle) have reflected, makes of the violation of norms the driving force which leads his life (both private and public) and constantly relies on it to legitimate his power<sup>4</sup>. Abuse and violence are its expected manifestations. During the tyranny of the Thirty, the "tyrants" maintain their power through violence and multiple forms of transgression: among them figures Critias, "the most greedy, violent and murderous"<sup>5</sup>. The tyrant is a stereotypical figure in Greek and Roman literature, in rhetorical and moral traditions, in historiography and in drama: he has topical vices that lean towards disorder, excess and abuse<sup>6</sup>. The transgressive man of power can thus head-on oppose the rules of a pre-existing system, disrupting a political organization, or bring its logic to its extreme point. In this context, we can wonder about the nature of the relationship of the *imperatores*, endowed with extraordinary powers at the end of the Republic, with the political norm of their time: do they bring the functioning of traditional aristocratic culture,

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et pratiques socio-politiques dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine », organised by S. Boehringer et V. Sebillotte Cuchet, 6-8th June 2013, Épineuil (France).

<sup>2</sup> 1st meeting: « Définir la transgression : des sciences sociales aux sciences de l'Antiquité », 27th May 2019, ENS de Lyon, <https://tantale.hypotheses.org/789>.

2nd: « Rebelles, révoltés, innovateurs : figures antiques de la Transgression », 22th November 2019, MOM, Lyon, <https://tantale.hypotheses.org/813>.

3rd: « La cité à l'épreuve de la transgression », April 2020

4th: « Le devenir de la transgression, étude des réceptions », autumn 2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://tantale.hypotheses.org/category/seminaire>.

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus, 5.92: Socles about the tyranny : « it is the most unfair and bloody thing among men ». See: P. Payen, « Écriture, tyrannies et pouvoir tyrannique. Emprunts et polémiques chez Hérodote », *Pallas. Revue d'études antiques*, n° 81, 2009, p. 101-118.

<sup>5</sup> Xenophon, *Mem.*, I, 2, 12.

<sup>6</sup> See: J. R. Dunkle, « The Rhetorical Tyrant in Roman Historiography : Sallust, Livy and Tacitus », *The Classical World*, vol. 65, n° 1, 1971, p. 12-20.

based on competition among the members of the great families<sup>7</sup>, to its paroxysm? From this point of view, can we consider that pushing the logic of a system to its extreme, to the point of considerably transforming its norms, is a transgression?

For the conference, we wish to address the transgression in its strongest sense, following thus the new interrogations of the social sciences<sup>8</sup>. The strong axiological connotation of the term would suggest that transgressing is not only crossing the limits of what is permissible, but also those of what is tolerable. By its excessiveness, the transgression would then stand as proof to the price that society attributes to what the limit protects, it would reveal what goes deep into the moral heart of society, or at least into the moral heart of its main groups, and it would serve as a reminder of the norms of abjectness. But while building and revealing these boundaries, transgression can also displace them. Its effects go far beyond the act considered as transgressive, in that they open to multiple temporalities and constitute powerful revealing factors<sup>9</sup>. What is the place of transgression in the construction of political power, when it comes from those who do not have to challenge the established order but who, in order to maintain it and preserve their authority, must paradoxically use transgression, sometimes stage it?

This transgressive power can be identified with that of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, in the sense that it can found self-legislation which is imposed by the very strength of the one who refuses the norms he is not the origin of<sup>10</sup>. It constitutes a proclamation, by the one who transgresses, of his ability to affirm himself, to show his superiority over men or even gods<sup>11</sup>. Far from the claims of legitimacy by birth or virtue as we find them in ancient political theories, the one who aspires to govern can show his power of transgression to impress his fellow citizens and thus situate himself in a beyond-politics place<sup>12</sup>. Behind the luminous sphere of the *res gestae* and heroic deeds, hidden in the dark backstage of political life, lies the deviant nature of the man or woman who, in order to govern, can only transgress to perpetuate his or her power. Greek and Roman political life is a matter of shadows and lights: it is thus up to us to focus on the dark side of power. We will study the latter's propensity to condemn and delegitimize the transgressive behaviour of others in the name of the collective authority, while preserving its own authority by using this same transgression. In other words, what happens when, in order to rule better, the ruling power uses transgression and does not hesitate to make it the basis of political power and prestige, by bringing it to light?

This fundamental ambiguity of the transgression, defined both as deviant behaviour condemned legally and morally but also modality of the exercise of power, raises many questions that should guide us for the conference. How can we explain the relationship between transgression and legitimation of power? How does transgression become a tool of domination

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<sup>7</sup> On prestige and competition between elites in Rome, see: R. Baudry et F. Hurllet (ed.), *Le prestige à Rome à la fin de la République et au début du Principat*, Paris, Éditions de Boccard, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> These aspects were the object of the inaugural speech of our first meeting presented by Cédric Passard. See also: M. Hastings, L. Nicolas et C. Passard (éd.), *Paradoxes de la transgression*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> On the state of exception, the temporary suspension of legality, which is not reduced to a state of pure anomy, but is the transgressive backdrop against which new standards can be set, see: G. Agamben, *État d'exception*, J. Gayraud (transl.), Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche speaks of a "new aristocracy, unheard of, based on the most rigorous self-regulation in which the will of despotic philosophers and tyrant-artists will prevail for millennia". *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, 1885-1887, 2 [57], KSA 12, 87/88, autumn 1885-autumn 1886). See: G. Merlio, *Lectures d'une œuvre. Also sprach Zarathustra*. Paris, Éditions du temps, 2000 and M. Kauffmann et R. Wintermeyer (ed.), *Figures de la singularité*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> One can think of the deification equated in Lucan with impiety: *Civil War*, VII, 455-459. See also P. Chaudhuri, *The war with God: theomachy in Roman imperial poetry*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> See: C. Schmitt, *Théologie Politique*, J.-L. Schlegel (transl.), Paris, Gallimard, 1988,

in the public space? The transgression should be studied in the world of those who, although producing the law and ensuring the reign of norm, are the first to shake this moral framework through their practice of power. In other words, the hidden face of politics shows the crucial role of transgression in Greek and Roman antiquity and it is this role that we would like to question here.

Nevertheless, if we consider the context of the reception of this transgressive practice, we must recognize that the transgressor must be persuasive when in front of the community on which they impose this modality of power. The *charism* then becomes a fundamental issue, a notion that reveals the inherent tensions of a transgressive practice of power that must rely, in one way or another, on the support of the governed<sup>13</sup>. The transgressive act, through its emotional power, can contribute to renewing charismatic authority<sup>14</sup>. And it will be all the stronger because it targets the leaders of society, constantly weakening social, moral or religious norms. Power can also rely on other transgressive figures to assert itself: a leader can claim the transgressions of his predecessor to establish his own power, as do, for example, the *imperatores* at the end of the Republic. In this respect, the figure of Cleopatra is paradigmatic as shown in the representations made of her in Rome: woman, oriental, wife of her brother and lover of the *imperatores*, defying Roman social norms, she is presented by her opponents as the terrifying inversion of the *virtus* advertised by Augustus.

The transgression must therefore also be assessed in this perspective: does it come from the person who commits it knowingly or from the person who comments on it to reinforce or discredit the transgressive authority? What effects does it have, and how does the perpetrator of the transgression participate in the very definition of his act? It is the question of the socio-political position of the transgressor that arises: the value attributed to the transgressive act depends on who commits it. What then happens when it is committed by a *subaltern*: does the transgression give him the same power as when it is committed by a depositary of authority<sup>15</sup>? How then does status influence the very definition of the transgressive act?

This questioning is visible in the ancient sources that will have to be analysed in a new light: when Thrasymachus affirms in Plato's Republic that justice consists in the domination of the strongest, he legitimizes the type of authority we are talking about<sup>16</sup>. When tyrants, Hellenistic kings, or imperialists are fantasized, even envied, for their power that allows them to satisfy their passions, their transgressions participate in the construction of their authority, while risking undermining it at every moment.

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<sup>13</sup> See: V. Azoulay, « Le charisme wébérien à l'épreuve du monde grec », dans V. Bernadou et al. (ed.), *Que faire du charisme ? Retours sur une notion de Max Weber*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014, p. 169-188.

<sup>14</sup> See: P. Cournarie, *La bonne mesure du charisme. Les rois antigonides et leurs sujets à l'époque hellénistique*, Thèse de doctorat en histoire ancienne, Bordeaux et Paris, Université Bordeaux Montaigne, 2019, p. 9-29.

<sup>15</sup> See how C. Courrier analyses the plebe's actions in *La plèbe de Rome et sa culture (fin du IIe siècle av. J.-C. - fin du Ier siècle ap. J.-C.)*, Rome, École française de Rome, 2014,

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Republic*, I, 338c.

Open to the whole of the ancient Mediterranean world, this conference is intended to be transdisciplinary. Several approaches can be considered: communications are expected to propose a reflection on forms of power or transgressive acts and to set out their characteristics, as well as their links with the society in which these powers and acts emerge. All types of transgressions can be addressed: social, political, philosophical, religious, literary, linguistic, etc. Documentary sources may be textual, epigraphic, iconographic or historical. It may be decided to study the question along one of the proposed lines:

**1. To hide or to show the transgression.**

- Does the transgressing sovereign or sovereign group use their transgression to publicly establish their power or is the transgression hidden?
- What choices are made by the transgressor to get the most out of his actions?

**2. To claim the transgression in order to affirm or deny a power: the transgressive ethos.**

- In the discourse, is the transgression part of a strategy of legitimation or is it confined?
- Can we identify a transgressive, extraordinary ethos? How is the speech built? What vocabulary used? Is power redefined by transgression?
- Can we discern a "rhetoric of transgression"?
- What are the literary, discursive, artistic means used to represent the transgression?
- How is the memory of transgressive power figures constructed?

**3. The charisma of the appalling.**

- What effects does the transgressive act produce, and within what timeframes? How does the leader manage to renew his authority through transgressive acts without a certain routine taking place?
- Does the violence of transgressive acts contribute to the construction of authority figures?
- From this point of view, we will also question the meaning given to transgression: is it a frontal opposition to the political and social system or an ultimate consequence of it?

**4. Transgression from above and below.**

- What are the conditions that make it possible to seize the transgression to assert one's own power?
- Can "those of below" still reclaim a form of visibility and seize power by transgressing norms?

We invite abstracts of contributions (either in English or French) of no more than 300 words for 30 minutes papers followed by a time of discussion, to be submitted by 13th March 2020 to the organizing committee ([colloquetantale@gmail.com](mailto:colloquetantale@gmail.com)). They must include a title, a brief presentation of the sources, the name of the author and their affiliation as well a short academic C.V. in a separate file.

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