

A Fragment of an Imperial Letter in a Collection of Religious Objects

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Introduction

Life always has surprises in store. In a private collection (Fedor K., Budapest) of religious objects and devotional items, the authors came across a small fragment of a bronze sheet with an engraved text on one side. Because one edge is bent, the collector considered it the lid of a box in which relics or other objects of religious significance had originally been kept. He based his interpretation on the word *sacra*, which he could read within the very fragmentary text. A closer look, however, immediately taught us that his ideas were untenable. For in that line not only *sacra* can be read, but SACRARVM LITTERA. Together with the observation that line 1 has D • N • IMP, it was clear that this was not a medieval or modern Christian text, but an older document from the Roman era.


The bronze fragment

The almost rectangular fragment measures 5.8 x 6 cm and is about 0.4 cm thick. It is broken on three sides. The original rim is preserved at the top. It is enhanced with a 0.5 cm wide ledge. In addition, there is the remnant of a fastening nail in the area of the ledge. The right side is evenly curved upwards. Seven lines of engraved letters have survived. These are 0.4-0.6 cm high. No line is highlighted, neither by the size of the lettering nor by the care of the engraving. Special marks include word separators in the form of dots and, in the first line, an upper stroke that emphasises the abbreviation D • N. The following text can be read:

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- - -]NTI • D • N • IMP [- - -
- - -] III • KAL • IAN [- - -
- - -]M SACRARVM • LITTERA[- - -
- - -]+ • CVM INTER CETER+[- - -
- - -]VLP MARTINE • KA+I+[- - -
- - -]+T • INDVLGENTIA++[- - -
- - -]+V++++++[- - -

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Fig 1) The bronze tablet

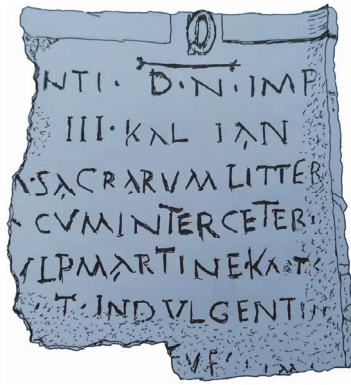


Fig 2) The drawing of the bronze tablet

In principle, it can be stated that the publication of the text on a probably larger bronze tablet - as indicated by its thickness - is a first hint that it should have been a document of some importance. Bronze sheets are often used for inscriptions, e.g. in the form of small *tabulae ansatae* attached to votive offerings or in the form of two-panel citizenship certificates for veterans from auxiliary units, the so-called Roman military diplomas. Apart from these, however, it is the use of bronze in public documents that stands out. And it is such a document that we are dealing with here. For although the preserved text is very limited, it nevertheless contains some key words that at least allow a conclusion to be drawn about the character of the document. Aside from the reference to a ruler in line 1, it is above all line 3 that contains the decisive clue: here the *terminus technicus* of the published document is mentioned: *exemplu]m sacrarum • littera[rum*.

Commentary

Line 1 begins with the letters NTI followed by the beginning of an imperial titulature. While the latter is quite clear, NTI urges us to further considerations. The reconstruction of a name makes no sense at that place; if we would assume the name of another ruler, we would expect DD NN or DDD NNN in front of the first name, and surely not D N in front of each name.¹ Hence, the sequence NTI more probably should be interpreted as the end of an adjective or participle in the dative case. Two 4th century inscriptions illustrate possible reconstructions: CIL 6, 36954 (= ILS 726) from Rome starts: *felicitem publicam clementia et virtute cumulanti, d(omino) n(ostro) Fl(avio) Iul(io) Constanti ...*; and CIL 9, 1117 (= ILS 734) from the ancient town of Aeclanum reads: *orbem terrae Romano nomini subiuganti, domini nostro Fl(avio) Constantio ...*. Maybe a comparable phrase could have been used here. Without any doubt, the name of the emperor should be also reconstructed in the dative case. In consequence, the whole bronze document was dedicated to the emperor.

D • N is marked by an upper bar as an abbreviation.² It is followed by the abbreviated *praenomen imperatoris*. The emperor's individual name is unfortunately lost.

As Z. Zlatuška already noted decades ago, *dominus noster* is documented as an imperial title in inscriptions since Hadrian. At the beginning its use was still sporadic, but it increased at the

¹ See e.g. ILS 712-714, 737, 760-761 for the use of DD NN and ILS 715 and Rothenhöfer 2020 for DDD NNN.

² See Cagnat 1964, 405-406 for an upper bar as indicator of an abbreviation: „cette coutume devint surtout fréquente à partir du IIe siècle.“

beginning of the 3rd century.³ The sequence D N IMP is encountered mainly in the 3rd and 4th centuries, for example at the beginning of the 3rd century in two inscriptions from the province Africa proconsularis which name Septimius Severus,⁴ or in an inscription from Baida in Numidia, which mentions Constantius around the middle of the 4th century.⁵

In line 2, there are remnants of a dating, naming the 30th December of an unknown year. The latter should have been given most likely in the form of a consular dating; unfortunately, it is completely lost.

Line 3 leaves no doubt about the character of the document. SACRARVM LITTERA can easily be supplemented to the genitive *sacrarum litterarum*, and the rest of an M at the beginning of the line belongs without doubt to *exemplum*. The whole term is found repeatedly in similar documents such as e.g. from Mintaz in Asia or from Komárom in Pannonia superior.⁶

In all cases, the copies of an imperial letter had a certain significance for the recipient(s) and were probably made accessible on durable material in public space. This was a way of publicly demonstrating a closeness to the emperor or his devotion to the recipient. After naming the type of document - *exemplum sacrarum litterarum* - it must be assumed that the original text of the imperial letter was reproduced in the following lines, probably starting with a *salutatio*.⁷

cum in line 4 marks the beginning of a new clause as it starts after a separation dot. It should have introduced the concrete facts, as was the case, for example, in the aforementioned imperial letter from Komárom: *Exempl(um) sacra(rum) litterarum. Have Dalmati carissime nobis. Cum in omnibus pro devotione ac laboribus suis militum nostrorum commodi(i)s adque utilitatibus semper consultum esse cupiamus in hoc etiam dispositionum nostrarum provisione ei{u}sdem militibus nostris consulendum esse credidimus Dalmati carissime ...*⁸ Due to the mutilation of the text, however, these facts remain in the dark.

Line 5 provides us with parts of a personal name: VLP MARTINE refers to an Ulpius Martinus. Since the name appears in the vocative case, Ulpius Martinus should be the recipient of the letter. After this name, KA can be clearly read. From the next character only a part of the upper right bow can be seen: it was either a B, P, or R. Then follows an I which is mutilated at its upper end by a horizontal stroke. Of the three possible reconstructions KABI-, KAPI-, and KARI-, only the last makes sense as it can be easily restored to *karissime* (= *carissime*). This is how the recipient of the letter was called. Comparative examples can be found in imperial letters e.g. from

³ Zlatuška 1961, 149.

⁴ IRT 410 = AE 1947, 50 und IRT 411 = AE 1950, 169. The dating period proposed by Abascal – Abad Casal 2010, 216 (no. 7) for a fragment from Minateda is too short: „El uso de la forma D(omin-) n(ost-) imp(erator-) sugiera una datación para el epígrafe original entre finales del siglo III y finales del IV.“

⁵ CIL 8, 22538.

⁶ Mintaz: AE 1977, 807. – Komárom: FIRA I 93 and AE 2015, 1096. Cf. also Diz.Epigr. III.2 (1961), 2189 s.v. *exemplum*.

⁷ No statements can be made here about the accuracy of the copy. Cf. on this complex of topics the remarks made by Eich 2009.

⁸ Komárom: FIRA I 93 and AE 2015, 1096. – For instance, cf. the imperial document from Munigua (Baetica): ... *salutem dicit IIIvir(is) et decurionibus Muniguens(ium). Cum ideo appelaverit{is} ne pecuniam ...* . AE 1962, 288 and AE 1972, 257.

Komárom/Brigetio (AD 311): *Have Dalmati carissime nobis*;⁹ from Ortaköy in Asia (AD 331): *Have Abiavi carissime nobis*;¹⁰ twice from Ephesus in Asia (AD 370-371): *Eutropi carissime nobis*, and (AD 372-378): *Feste carissime nobis*.¹¹ It can be also found much earlier in letters of emperor Trajan to the governor of Pontus et Bithynia, C. Plinius Secundus: *mi Secunde carissime*.¹² It can be ruled out that the name belonged to the greeting phrase as we are no more at the beginning of the document. Similar to the text in the above-mentioned copy of the *sacra littera* from Komárom, the recipient was at least twice mentioned. And a further clue can be drawn: As the recipient of a *sacra littera*, Ulpus Martinus should have been a person of some importance, presumably of a higher rank within the imperial administration. As far as we can see it is the first mention of that person. An equation with one of the hitherto known Ulpii Martini can be largely ruled out: most of them were soldiers or veterans.¹³

indulgentia in line 6, in turn, fits perfectly into the sphere of imperial epistles.¹⁴ Unfortunately, a further text reconstruction is not possible in this line.

Of all lines, line 7 is the worst preserved. Only the letter V can be read with certainty. The rest are remnants of letters that can no longer be determined.

The transcription with additions reads:

- - -]NTI • d(omino) • n(ostro) • imp(eratori) [- - -
 - - -] III • kal(endas) • Ian(uarias) [- - -
 - - - exemplum]m sacrarum • littera[rum. Have Ulpi Martine karissime nobis. - - -
 - - -]+ • Cum inter ceter+[- - -
 - - -]Ulp(i) Martine • karış[sime nobis - - -
 - - -]+T • indulgentia ++[- - -
 - - -]+V+++++[- - -

The original tablet had already been intentionally crushed in antiquity, surely in order to remelt the material, a common phenomenon in that epoch.¹⁵ It is important to bear in mind that bronze

⁹ FIRA I 93.

¹⁰ CIL 3, 352 = 7000.

¹¹ FIRA I 108 (= IK 11 – 1, 42) and AE 1906, 30b (= IK 11 – 1, 43).

¹² Plin. ep. 10.16, 10.20 and 10.36.

¹³ For instance: AE 1955, 238 from Nicopolis in Egypt, AD 157 (*centuria Ulpi Martini*); CIL 3, 14507 from Kostolac/Viminacium, AD 195 (M. Ulp. Martinus, strator); CIL 3, 1676 (AD 225) and 8244 (AD 222-235) from Nis/Naissus, (M. Ulp. Martinus, strator cos.); CIL 3, 14356,2 from Carnuntum (Ulp. Martinus candidatus dom. n.). – Unclear: CIL 3, 5307 from Slovenska Bistrica (Ulp. Martinus); RIB 3016 from London-Southwark (Ulp.? Martinus); AE 1960, 356 from Gârliciu near Histria (Ulp. Martinus). – No soldier: CIL 6, 9074 (Ulp. Martinus, Aug. lib. ex tabul.).

¹⁴ ThLL VII,1, 1246-1250 s.v. *indulgentia*, esp. 1247. Diz.Epigr. IV.1 (1962), 50 s.v. *indulgentia*. Cf. e.g. Dig. 1.4.3 (Iavolenus): *Beneficium imperatoris, quod a divina scilicet eius indulgentia profiscitur*.

¹⁵ See e.g. Caballos Rufino – Rodríguez Gutiérrez – Brassous 2018 on a group of small bronze fragments found during excavations in Baelo/Bolonia in Spain or Stylow – Melero 2013 on fragments from Arahah.

fragments prepared for remelting could also travel longer distances, so that a place of discovery does not necessarily indicate the place where the document was originally presented to the public.

Unfortunately, the place of discovery remains unknown, as it is an old find. The current owner received the object as a gift from his uncle's collection in the 1990s, and the latter had bought it in the Soviet era at a market in the northern Black Sea region.

If we take the information on the region of discovery seriously, then the fragment is of significance, although both the emperor and the topic of the imperial decision remain in the dark. On the one hand, because it generally increases the number of documents of Rome's representatives in the eastern part of the empire;¹⁶ on the other hand, because it represents a Latin-language document from a region at the edge of the Roman Empire that is clearly more influenced by Greek culture than by Latin.

Copies of state documents engraved on stone are known e.g. both from Histria and Tyras, two cities in Moesia inferior. All documents are about the confirmation of privileges like tax exemptions enjoyed by Histria and Tyras.¹⁷ Furthermore, a bilingual Greek-Latin stone inscription of Roman officials is known from Sevastopol on the Crimea which is dated to the end of the 2nd or first half of the 3rd century.¹⁸ Even if it cannot totally be ruled out that the fragment presented here could originate from a more distant Black Sea region, we have to take into consideration that in the Northern Black Sea region such important documents could have also been published on bronze tablets.

¹⁶ On the publication of state documents in the eastern part of the Imperium Romanum, cf. the general remarks made by Haensch 2009.

¹⁷ Istria: IScM I.67 and 68. – Tyras: IOSPE³ I.12; cf. *ibid.* 14.

¹⁸ IOSPE³ III.107.

Abbreviations

AE	L'Année Épigraphique
CIL	Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
Diz.Epigr.	Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romane
FIRA	S. Riccobono, Fontes Iuris Romani AnteIustiniani, Florence 1941.
IOSPE ³	Inscriptiones Antiquae Orae Septentrionalis Ponti Euxini Graecae et Latinae (online 3 rd edition)
ILS	Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae
IScM	Inscriptiones Scythiae Minoris Graecae at Latinae
IRT	Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania
ThLL	Thesaurus Linguae Latinae

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Bir Dini Nesnelere Koleksiyonundaki Bir İmparator Mektubu Parçası

Özet

Bu makale Budapeşte’de F. K. Koleksiyonu’nda yer alan ve henüz yayımlanmamış olan küçük bir bronz tablet parçasını tanıtmaktadır. Tablet muhtemelen Karadeniz Bölgesi’nden bir imparatorluk mektubu nüshasını taşımaktadır. Ne imparatorun adı ne de bir tarih korunmasına rağmen, epigrafik özellikler İ. S. 3.-4. yüzyıllar içerisindeki bir tarihe işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bronz tablet, imparator mektubu, *exemplum sacrarum litterarum*, Roma, Karadeniz Bölgesi.

A Fragment of an Imperial Letter in a Collection of Religious Objects

Abstract

The article introduces a hitherto unpublished small fragment of a bronze tablet in the Collection Fedor K., Budapest. It is inscribed with the copy of an imperial letter (*exemplum sacrarum litterarum*) presumably from the Black Sea region. Although neither the name of the emperor nor a date is preserved, epigraphic elements point to a dating in the 3rd-4th century.

Keywords: Bronze tablet, imperial letter, *exemplum sacrarum litterarum*, Rome, Black Sea region.