Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi

stobi_synagogue_inscription.jpg

A Roman citizen is considered “father of the synagogue” in Stobi (Macedonia) and donates rooms after conducting his life “according to Judaism.”

**Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):** Dedication

**Original Location/Place:** Synagogue of Stobi

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** National Museum of Belgrade (inv. 18/IV)

**Date:** 100 CE to 350 CE

**Physical Characteristics:** Round column, inscribed with regular and well-carver letters. The upper left corner is chipped off.

**Material:** Marble

**Measurements:** Between 225 and 248 centimetres high and 98 centimetres wide.

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Roman, Greek, Jewish

**Publications:** *IJO* I Mac1 [CIJ 1936; I.Stobi 19]

**Commentary:**

This inscription is undoubtedly one of the most important epigraphic testimonies of the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman world. As it normally happens with this kind of texts, the message and context are still very much debated – see e.g. Kloppenborg, Ascough, Harland, *Greco-Roman associations*, p. 340-345 for a recent review of the bibliography – and our commentary can only provide a descriptive approach based on the letters actually carved on the stone. Even so, this column discovered in the Macedonian city of Stobi [2] sheds light on the presence of Jews outside much better attested regions such as Asia Minor or Rome.

After the revision of the squeeze of the inscription (see above), it has been determined that the readings provided by Vuli? for the first line should be taken with caution. He proposed a dating formula which, as will be emphasised below, did not solve the highly problematic chronology of the material. The available text therefore starts with the fragmentary name of an individual that can be restored on the basis of lines 20 to 21. The nomenclature of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus is slightly unusual. While it is clear that he enjoyed Roman citizenship, such a sequence of names is normally attested in the reverse order, i.e. imitating the members of the Julio-Claudian dynasty who would have granted it. In any case, the presence of Roman citizens in Stobi is to be expected as the city was given the privileged status of *municipium* with Italian right before 69 CE (see Papazoglou, “Oppidum Stobi civium Romanorum”), and indeed other Tiberii and Claudii are attested in local inscriptions (*I.Stobi* 10, 37). The native name Polycharmus is also well attested particularly on the Greek peninsula, but not the nickname ???????/Achyrios, which is unique and does not appear to have a Semitic root.

This man had been bestowed upon the title of ‘father of the synagogue’ (?????? ??? ???????/patêr tês synagôgês) in Stobi, reminiscent of the frequent use of parental references in civic contexts of the Greek East (see Harland, “Familial Dimensions”). This resemblance is also evident in the pleonastic sequence ????????????? ????? ????????????/poleiteusamenos pasan poleiteian, which could literally be
translated as “having exercised all (his) citizenship as a citizen”. Under Roman rule cities in the eastern Mediterranean kept local citizenships (see Cyrene edicts) that could be granted to foreigners and stated epigraphically as a matter of pride (see Heller, Pont, *Patrie d’origine et Patries E?lectives*). Moreover, such *politeiai* were largely compatible with Roman citizenship as they remained on two different levels, one belonging to the native fatherland and the other superior with a series of privileges (see Blanco-Pérez, “Apameia and the Integration”). This typical vocabulary of Greek civic life is therefore twisted in our inscription because Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus is said to have held the citizenship “according to Judaism” (???? ??

???????????/kata ton ioudaismon). The last word is only epigraphically attested in an epitaph of Rome recording a woman who “lived well in Judaism” (*JWIE* II.584). On the basis of this parallel, Polycharmus’ citizenship would be a figurative reference to a life in community that followed the precepts of the Jewish religion. More difficult to determine is whether the Jews of Stobi may have constituted a distinctive civic community with the name of ??????????/politeuma, as is attested in Berenice (Cyrenaica) in the 1st century CE. In that case, Polycharmus’ *politeia* would imply his full membership to the group. However, he is not explicitly identified as a ?????????/ioudaios in our inscription as it happens with other Jews in the Diaspora. The absence of this adjective therefore does not rule out other possibilities, namely that Polycharmus may have been a proselyte or even a god-fearer with Roman and local civic citizenships, who conducted his life in line with the practices of the religious group but without ethnically belonging to it.

Either as a Jew or a gentle supporter, the action of Polycharmus recorded in the inscription came to fulfil a vow (????????/euchê). He was giving some sort of dwelling unit (????????/oikoi) – probably meaning just “rooms” – together with a banqueting facility (???????????/trikleinon) and a four-column court (???????????/tetraستóon; cf. the church of Iulius Eugenius, Bishop of Laodicea). The donation would benefit what is called “the sacred place” (? ????? ?????/ho hagios topos), almost certainly referring to the aforementioned synagogue, although it was also a denomination frequently used for Christian churches in the late antique Levant (e.g. *SEG* 8.323, *SEG* 38.1594, *IGLSyr* 21.2 6, 106). Such personal benefactions are best attested for the decoration of the grand synagogue of Sardis. In the case of Polycharmus, the fact that he covered the costs from his own pocket and not resorting to the sacred (????????/hagia) funds shows that the Jews of Stobi were sustained by autonomous financial and organisational structures which were comparable to better documented communities in the Diaspora such as Hierapolis in Asia Minor. And yet, despite the existence of these economic resources, energetic actions typical of a gentle civic context remained fundamental not only for prosperous Anatolian metropolis but also settlements in the Macedonian Balkans. The private involvement of Polycharmus is even more remarkable, as it seems that the rooms donated belonged to the ground floor of one of his houses. This aspect would be inferred from the fact that he and his heirs (?????????/klêronomoi) were to retain perpetual control

(????????/exousia) and ownership (?????????/despoteia) of the upper chambers of the building, the tiling of which they were also in charge of repairing according to lines 29 to 33. All these architectural details, unfortunately, have not facilitated the exact identification of Polycharmus’ house in the complex archaeological context of Stobi. The city was highly urbanised in the Roman imperial period to later become the centre of an episcopal seat (see Wiseman, “Archaeology and History”). Our inscription was discovered beneath a Christian basilica built in Late Antiquity that superseded the synagogue (see Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 272-273). Stratigraphy in this area of the site is particularly difficult (see [3]). But mosaics resembling other Diaspora patterns could be recovered (Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art*, p. 221-233). Furthermore, recent excavations have unearthed more inscribed fragments and painted graffiti in which Polycharmus is also recorded as the “father (of the synagogue)” who fulfilled a vow (*IJO* I Mac3-4 and *SEG* 61.514bis).

Not only the analysis of the archaeological materials is difficult. Even more challenging is to establish the moment in which our inscription was set up (see, most recently, Habas-Rubin, “The Dedication of Polycharmos”). As mentioned above, the dating formula originally proposed for the first line should remain hypothetical and, actually, two different local eras were in use in Macedonia (see e.g. Beroia and Severus Alexander). Onomastic patterns are not very helpful too, because citizens named after Claudius and Tiberius were common throughout the entire imperial period. Likewise, the maintenance of Roman nomenclature among Jewish communities still in the 4th century is attested in Sardis, for example, and only in Late Antiquity single and indeclinable biblical names became more common (see Williams, “Semitic Name-Use”). Dating through palaeography is neither precise nor reliable, so chronology is entirely dependent on the content of the inscription. In this regard, two elements have particularly been highlighted. On the one hand, a fine of 250.000 denarii was set by Polycharmus for those who may not
respect the conditions of his donation. Such a high sum might reflect the inflation problems faced by the provincial population at the end of the 3rd century CE which led the Tetrarchs’ Edict of Prices. However, the donor could have stated such an exorbitant fine so that no one would ever dare to alter his will (cf. IJO I Mac12). On the other hand, the fine was to be paid to the patriarch (??????????/patriarchès). Again, several – and even more complex – ways of interpretation are plausible. A local official might have received this name, although scholars tend to agree that the reference is to be connected with the establishment of the Jewish patriarchy. The evidence for this supreme position is limited and sometimes contradicting. Most of the now-Jewish evidence mentioning the existence of a Jewish patriarch dates to the 4th century before the institution was abolished in 429 CE (see Jacobs, Die Institution). According to the rabbinic material, however, the position of nasi might have been functioning already between the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE (see Levine, “The Jewish Patriarch;” Appelbaum, The Dynasty). This patriarch was well connected with the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and our inscription would provide us with proof of these contacts.

In conclusion, both the dating and other important elements of the inscription are bound to remain debated unless new evidence becomes available. Nonetheless, it is still remarkable that at any stage of the high imperial period there was a Diaspora community in peripheral settlement such as Stobi which was allowed the donation of a synagogue as a sacred place. Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus belonged to this civic context typical of the Greek East and twisted the topical formulas of Hellenistic citizenship and euergetism into a religious dimension in which Jews, proselytes and sympathisers have become so difficult to identify today.

Keywords in the original language:

- ????? [4]
- ????????? [5]
- ????????? [6]
- ????????? [7]
- ??????????? [8]
- ??? [9]
- ???? [10]
- ???? [11]
- ????? [12]
- ????? [13]
- ??????? [14]
- ?????????? [15]
- ??????????? [16]
- ??????????? [17]
- ???????? [18]

Thematic keywords:

- Stobi [19]
- Macedonia [20]
- Diaspora [21]
- donation [22]
- father [23]
- Judaism [24]
- Jewish life [25]
- Jewish Law [26]
- citizenship [27]
- local citizenship [28]
- Roman citizenship [29]
- Jewish Patriarch [30]
- fines [31]
- civic life [32]
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Other sources connected with this document:

- The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias [49]
- A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis [50]
- The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis [51]
A funerary inscription sets fines to the community of Jews residing in Hierapolis (Phrygia). A copy was to be deposited in the archive of the Jews.

- Read more about The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis [51]

Inscription

**A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion** [52]

A group of Jews dedicates a vow to the salvation of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta and Iulia Domna. It belongs to a building project of controversial nature.

- Read more about A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion [52]

Inscription

**Cyrene Edicts of Augustus: I and III** [53]

Augustus sets new rules on the way Greek and Roman citizens shall chose their tribunals and juries (I). Roman citizens without immunity in the Cyrenaica shall contribute to the local liturgies (III)

- Read more about Cyrene Edicts of Augustus: I and III [53]

Inscription

**An invitation to gladiators’ games in Beroia (Macedonia) under Severus Alexander** [54]

A couple of benefactors in Macedonia produce an invitation for gladiatorial spectacles that include vows for Severus Alexander and other constituent elements of Roman power.

- Read more about An invitation to gladiators’ games in Beroia (Macedonia) under Severus Alexander [54]

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