Nomenclature and Constitutio Antoniniana in Aphrodisias

Sarcophagus_Aphrodisias_Constitutio.jpg

A funerary text inscribed on a sarcophagus of Aphrodisias records the change of nomenclature caused by the Constitutio Antoniniana.

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

**Original Location/Place:** North-East necropolis, south of Eymir in the territory of Aphrodisias.

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** Museum of Aphrodisias, Geyre (Turkey)

**Date:** 212 CE to 230 CE

**Physical Characteristics:** The text was inscribed on a fluted sarcophagus with a panel on the front.

**Material:** Marble

**Measurements:** The sarcophagus is 94 centimetres high, 212 wide, and 94 thick. Letters are 2 centimetres tall on average.

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Roman, Greek

**Publications:**


**Commentary:**

This text was inscribed on one of the many sarcophagi populating the extra-urban necropoleis of Greek cities in the high Roman imperial period. Most of the funerary messages are rather formulaic and normally escape scholarly attention, which is more focused on inscriptions evidencing highlights of civic life. On this occasion, however, this material provides us with an exceptional testimony shedding light on the impact of a major historical event that affected the provincial population under the rule of Rome: the Constitutio Antoniniana.

Soon after Caracalla obliterated his brother Geta and acceded uncontested to the throne, the sole emperor decided to issue an unprecedented piece of legislation. Through an imperial order, virtually all the peregrine inhabitants in the provinces were granted Roman citizenship. This privilege, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, had previously been enjoyed by a limited number of individuals who belonged to favoured groups such as veterans, athletes or those with enough resources to achieve a personal grant from the emperor himself (e.g. Aurelia Paulina in Perge; and Lavan, “The Spread” for some possible statistics). The motivations and nature of this change of policy have been highly debated from ancient authors to modern scholars; a controversy which cannot be solved despite having a fragmentary copy of the edict available to us (see e.g. Ando, Citizenship and Empire). A review of the issues related to the so-labelled P.Gissen 40is provided on our website. This commentary, however, is focused on the visible impact that Caracalla’s decision had on the epigraphic sources surviving to us.

As mentioned above, funerary inscriptions – excluding those adding metric verses – are rather formulaic and can contain a high degree of technicalities. Regional variations existed but there was a common point in carving text on sarcophagi, namely to identify their owners, the people entitled to be buried in them, and the sanctions that were to be enforced in case the tombs were not respected. A well-preserved site such as Aphrodisias [3], in southern Anatolia, has provided us with numerous examples of this habit of inscribing sometimes very finely decorated pieces of art (see Is?ik, Girlanden-Sarkophage and Öğ?üs?, “Rise and Fall”). Our fluted sarcophagus does not have spectacular reliefs but the Greek letters exceed the accustomed limits of the central panel and also occupy the upper and bottom moulds (see image). This length and exhaustiveness need to be connected to the
content of the text. As the first lines enunciate, the plot of land in which the sarcophagus (??????/soros) was placed had been purchased (???????/ônèsalò). The buyer also wants to state that the place was new (???????/kaina), empty (???????/kena) and without graves (?????????/anentapha); therefore licit for his funerary monument. As such, this text must be interpreted as a sort of legal document evidencing the transaction. This official character – despite the private ownership of the sarcophagus – is fundamental for understanding the comprehensive series of names recorded for those involved in the purchase. Marcus Aurelius Polychronios Charmides, the buyer, specifies that he was previously (?????????/proteron) named Polychronios, son of Tatianus III, son of Charmides. The latter sequence follows a complicated pattern of Greek nomenclature based on name and patronymic (i.e. the name of the father in genitive), which was traditionally used by the inhabitants of Aphrodisias (see Chaniotis, "Second Thoughts"). By contrast, the first sequence corresponds to the Roman model of nomenclature based on praenomen, nomen, and cognomen (see Salway, "What is in a name"). Only Roman citizens could officially use this nomenclature, so it is to be presumed that Polichronios was enfranchised soon before he purchased the plot of land for his sarcophagus. Those receiving Roman citizenship adopted as a general rule the praenomen and nomen of the granting emperor. The issue with Marcus Aurelius is that this sequence was not only borne by the homonymous Roman ruler, but also by his son Commodus, and Caracalla (Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Augustus). Consequently, Polychronios’s change of status could theoretically have taken place under any of these three reigns. The connection with Caracalla’s Constitutio Antoniniana therefore needs to be based on the occurrence of similar onomastic patterns in the names of Polychronios’ wife and the women appearing in lines 11-13. Both Aurelia Meltine and Aurelia Zosime are also referred to with their Greek nomenclatures before (?????????/proteron) obtaining Roman citizenship. Such a concentration of new Roman citizens in Aphrodisias is extremely unlikely in the late 2nd century CE. Likewise, they all adopted the name Aurelius/a that can perfectly derived from Caracalla. In other regions of Anatolia where inscriptions can more securely be dated such as north-eastern Lydia, analogous changes of nomenclature appeared as soon as 213 (TAM V 1.122; see Herrmann, “Überlegungen”), and the adoption of Marcus Aurelius instead of just Aurelius by males as a result of the Constitutio Antoniniana was particularly high in south-western Asia Minor (see Blanco-Pérez, “Nomenclature and Dating”). In fact, not only Polychronios displays this new Roman sequence of names but also the non-family related Marcus Aurelius Karpos Peritas from which he purchased the plot of land (l. 2).

Once the connection between this inscription and the effects of the Constitutio Antoniniana has been firmly established, some relevant notes must ensue. First, one can observe the immediate impact that Caracalla’s unprecedented decision had on the population of a city such as Aphrodisias which prided herself as free, autonomous and detached from the control of the Asian governor. Second, this text shows that some people had doubts as to whether their new names would be immediately recognisable and, for this reason, they decided to state their former denominations in order to provide certainty. This hesitation following the Constitutio Antoniniana is particularly evident in Egypt because papyri preserve more legal documents which needed unequivocal personal identifications (e.g. SB 18.13858; see Buraselis, ???? ??????, p. 108–120). Third, it is undisputable that the provincial population – regardless of their individual doubts – adopted and displayed the changes resulting by the new imperial regulation. The huge number of surviving inscriptions and papyri recording Aurelii is the best proof of this phenomenon regardless of the exact circumstances motivating Caracalla’s grant. A final point that the text from Aphrodisias allows us to explore is concerned with the continuity and transformation of local life after 212 CE. Thus, while personal names were clearly altered, the procedure recorded in the inscription mostly resembles other funerary texts predating the Constitutio Antoniniana (see Harter-Uibopuu and Wiedergut, “Kein anderer soll”). Polychronios still prepared in advance the sarcophagus both for himself, his wife and other members of the family that may come, probably hoping for a desired male descendant (?????????/arrenikon teknon). Most importantly, the preservation of the sarcophagus still relied on a fine that was to be split between the funds of the goddess Aphrodite and the imperial treasury (?????????/hieròtaton tameion). The first recipient naturally refers to the temple of the divine patroness of Aphrodisias, which had asylum status and secured a kinship relationship with the Romans. As for the second, the appearance of the emperor’s fiscus was common in the funerary inscriptions before 212 (cf. Ritti, “Iura Sepulcrorum”, p. 543), so its appearance cannot be interpreted as a direct result of the new Roman citizenship of the sarcophagus’s owner.
This inscription accordingly shows a period of transition in which some personal elements were transformed but other traditional norms continued. This lack of an absolute rupture after the **Constitutio Antoniniana** complicates the assessment of the impact that Caracalla’s decision had on the provincial population. Gradual and non-homogenous processes are always more difficult to track and, consequently, one needs to be cautious before either denying or excessively exacerbating the effects of what – theoretically – was a major historical event, which may have taken time to fully unfold. Some legal aspects such as the manumission of new Roman citizens in Macedonia needed to be regulated by the provincial governor as soon as 212 CE. By contrast, the local funerary practices of Aphrodisias were not radically altered, probably because they did not affect an imperial administration which still relied heavily on the civic structures of the Greek east, some of which still boasted about centennial traditions that a single imperial edict was not going to dissolve immediately.

**Keywords in the original language:**

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

**Thematic keywords:**

- Roman citizenship [18]
- Roman name [19]
- funerary practice [20]
- purchase [21]
- sarcophagus [22]
- descendants [23]
- wife [24]
- fines [25]
- treasury [26]
- Aphrodite [27]

**Bibliographical references:**

- Harter-Uibopuu, Kaja, Wiedergut, Karin, *"Kein anderer soll hier bestattet werden" Grabschutz im kaiserzeitlichen Milet* [32], in Grabrituale. Tod und Jenseits in Frühgeschichte und Altertum (ed. G. Thür ; Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), 147-171
- Herrmann, Peter, *Überlegungen zur Datierung der Constitutio Antoniniana* [33], Chiron 2 (1972) : 519-530
- Is?ik, Fahri, *Girlanden-Sarkophage aus Aphrodisias* [34] (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2007)
P. Giss. 40 and the Constitutio Antoniniana [40]

An edict issued by the emperor Caracalla records a universal grant of citizenship as an expression of magnificence and gratitude to the immortal gods.

Language English

- **Read more about P. Giss. 40 and the Constitutio Antoniniana** [40]

Inscription

The Roman Citizenship of Aurelia Paulina in Perge [41]

Aurelia Paulina, who was granted Roman citizenship by Commodus, dedicates a grand construction soon before the Constitutio Antoniniana.

- **Read more about The Roman Citizenship of Aurelia Paulina in Perge** [41]

Inscription

Offering slaves to the Mother of Gods in Leukopetra after the Constitutio Antoniniana [42]

A dedication of slaves in the sanctuary of the Mother of Gods in Leukopetra (Macedonia) records a new Roman citizen following the regulation of the provincial governor in 213 CE, i.e. immediately after the issue of the Constitutio Antoniniana.

- **Read more about Offering slaves to the Mother of Gods in Leukopetra after the Constitutio Antoniniana** [42]

Inscription

Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias [43]
Octavian requests the Ephesians to return a statue of Eros dedicated by his father Julius to Aphrodite in the city of Aphrodisias

- Read more about Letter of Octavian to Ephesus concerning Aphrodisias [43]

Inscription

**A Roman Curator and the Games of Aphrodisias under Commodus** [44]

A local agent sent by the Roman administration discusses the financial viability of Greek games and its impact on the city of Aphrodisias in the reign of Commodus.

- Read more about A Roman Curator and the Games of Aphrodisias under Commodus [44]

Inscription

**Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian** [45]

The free and autonomous city of Aphrodisias sets up a monument in Ephesus commemorating the grant of neokoria by Domitian

- Read more about Aphrodisias and the imperial temple of Ephesus under Domitian [45]

Inscription

**Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla** [46]

Septimius Severus and Caracalla confirm the privileged polity and laws of Aphrodisias, a city that celebrated their dynastic victories and was closely related to the empire of Rome.

- Read more about Aphrodisias, Divine Kinship and the Accession of Septimius Severus and Caracalla [46]

Relief / Sculpture

**Sebasteion from Aphrodisias (20-60 CE)** [47]

- Read more about Sebasteion from Aphrodisias (20-60 CE) [47]

Realized by:

**Aitor Blanco Pérez** [48]