The Orcistus dossier (CIL III, 352) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Imperial letter (?)
Original Location/Place: Orcistus, Asia Minor (Doganay, Turkey).
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Now destroyed. Fragments survive in the Afyonkarahisar Archaeological Museum, Afyonkarahisar, Turkey.
Date: 331 CE
Physical Characteristics: Stone pillar, now largely destroyed, with mouldings above and below. The Latin inscription is inscribed on three sides: panel 1 on the front of the pillar, panel 2 on the right and panel 3 on the left.
Material: Stone (?)
Measurements: Width: 64 (base) – 49 cm
Height: 158 cm
Depth: 38 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: CIL III, 352
MAMA VII, 305

Commentary: The Orcistus dossier is a group of four related texts that were inscribed on three sides of a stone pillar, which was set up in the small town of Orcistus, in the mountainous region between Phrygia and Galatia in Asia Minor (modern Ortakoy, Turkey). Although Orcistus was a small and insignificant place, the inscribed pillar contains two petitions and the emperor Constantine’s favourable responses to them; they are an important example of late imperial resolution of injustices in the provinces, as well as demonstrating the importance of the cities of the empire, their maintenance, and welfare in Constantine’s political agenda.

Although the pillar now survives only in a few fragments, it was once a large and impressive monument that advertised the importance of Constantine’s replies to Orcistus’s complaints, and by extension the good relationship enjoyed between the town and the imperial court. The pillar was originally inscribed with four separate texts, which were found on three sides; the right side of the pillar, Panel 2, contained the first petition (Document 3), which was submitted to Constantine between early November 324 and May 326 CE (for discussion of the debate surrounding these dates, see. Van Dam, The Roman Revolution of Constantine, p. 368-372. The ‘document’ numbers given here follow his scheme, p. 152-153). The front of the pillar was inscribed with Constantine’s decision, or adnotatio, about this petition (Document 1), which appears at the top of the front panel, with his discussion of it in a letter to one Ablabius, the vicarius (“vicar”) of the region, who would then in turn convey the decision to Orcistus (Document 2). On the left side of the pillar was inscribed the fourth text, a further reply from Constantine (Document 4), dated June 30th 331 CE, to what must have been a second petition from Orcistus reiterating the same complaints, but which was not also inscribed on the pillar.

Only part of the first petition, document 3, was added to the right side of the panel; it contains the official greetings to the emperor and a few lines, before it comes to an end abruptly and mid-sentence at the bottom of the pillar, meaning that we must turn to Constantine’s response in order to piece together the issue about which they were complaining. The general issue of the petition was that Orcistus had once held the status of a city, but it had been reduced to that of a town, and as a result was being unfairly treated by its neighbouring city Nacolea; Orcistus requested that they be reinstated as a city, in part because of the civic attributes of the place, but also because of its strategic location and religious practices. The most detail for this can be found in document 2, the letter to Ablabius that followed Constantine’s official response or adnotatio; the letter begins with the affirmation that the emperor has awarded the civic status requested in the petition: “already now a town and city” (panel 1, lines 9-10: iam nunc oppidi et / civitatis). Following this is a brief statement (lines 13-16) on the importance of cities in the empire, and the desire of the emperor “either to found new cities or to civilize ancient cities or to revive lifeless cities” (urbes vel no/vas condere vel longaevas erudire vel in/termortuas reparare); this was a key facet of Constantine’s politics, which sought to encourage applications for the imperial house’s generosity and munificence towards their welfare. This idea was promoted in other inscriptions, such as the rescript to the Italian town of Hispellum, which had sought, and won, permission for the construction of a new shrine and to rename the town after the gens Flavia, as well as in literary texts celebrating Constantine, such as in the panegyrics of Nazareth (Pan. Lat. 4[10].38.4). As Noel Lenski has stated, this “was not mere rhetoric, but represented the
emperor and his subjects uniting around a common discourse of civic promotion” (Constantine and the Cities, p. 98). Constantine’s letter to Ablabius then goes on to list the attributes for which Orcistus deserves its reinstatement as a city; it was formerly “ornamented each year with the symbols of magistrates and that it was celebrated for its decurions and filled with a population of citizens” (spatii prioris aetatis oppidi splendore floru/isse ut et annuis magistratum fascibus orna/ret esse et populo / civium plenum), indicating a large and thriving population that already understood the principles of self-government that city status involved. The location of the city at a point where many roads converged together (lines 21-23) was also highlighted as advantageous, and the general appearance and facilities of the town were also noted and praised: “public and private baths, a forum decorated with statues of former emperors, a population of inhabitants so numerous that the seats there are easily filled, and in addition a large number of water mills on account of the torrents of passing streams” (lines 24-31). Orcistus was clearly well-equipped with the means by which to support a thriving population – a road that facilitated trade and communication, as well as a good water supply – and also looked like a Roman city, with features such as public baths and statues of the emperors and imperial court that were “rhetorically reconstructed in accordance with idealised norms that prevailed across the empire” (Lenski, Constantine and the Cities, p. 99. For discussion of the architectural features mentioned here, see Van Dam, Roman Revolution of Constantine, p.157-158).

Constantine’s letter to Ablabius ends with a discussion of the final complaint made by the inhabitants of Orcistus, namely that they were suffering from the poor treatment they received from the neighbouring city of Nacolea (lines 33-42); this was a large and impressive city, which had many smaller villages as its dependents. The exact origins of the dispute between Orcistus and Nacolea cannot now be known, but it is likely that following Diocletian’s reorganisation of Phrygia, in which the territory was split into two provinces, Orcistus had somehow fallen in status and become one of these dependencies, which had resulted in a loss of privileges “through the plundering of the more powerful” (lines 37-40: ut depraedativa potiorum omnia sua commoda utilit/i vi res deperdant; see Van Dam, The Roman Revolution of Constantine, p. 159-60, esp. n. 17). Particular attention has been paid to lines 40-42 of Constantine’s letter to Ablabius, as it appears to suggest a religious motivation for granting the city status. It states that: “added to all these [misfortunes] is this culminating [characteristic], as it were, that all are said to reside there as supporters of the most holy religion” (quibus omnibus quasi / quidam cumulus accedit quod omnes / ibidem sectatores sanctissimae religio/onis habitate dicantur). Numerous scholars have interpreted this line as an indication that Orcistus was a Christian city, and that part of the problem with Nacolea was some form of punitive treatment because the larger city remained pagan, which Constantine sought to remedy by rewarding the smaller Christian city. André Chastagnol in fact proposed that the town had lost its status under Maximinus Daia or Licinius, who objected to the extent of its Christian practice (“Remarques à propos de l’inscription constantinienne d’Orcistus (Phrygie),” p. 399-402). Raymond Van Dam however, in an argument disputed by Noel Lenski, suggested that – like the supposed reference to sacrifice in the Hispellum inscription – the “most holy religion” was presented here in terms too vague to refer specifically to Christianity; even if such a term were used in the original petition, it may have been deliberately employed to mask a lingering devotion to paganism without having to explicitly say so (The Roman Revolution of Constantine, p. 176-183). Lenski conversely noted that the petition was sent shortly after Constantine had defeated Licinius “in a battle tinged with pro-Christian politics,” and that sanctissima religio (“most holy religion”) was a term used by Constantine himself in a letter preserved as Appendix 3 of Optatus and on four occasions in Eusebius’s Greek translations of his letters (Life of Constantine III.17.2; IV.9.1; History of the Church X.5.22; X.6.1). Sanctissima lex was also used to describe Christianity in a letter of 314 and a law of 326 CE, suggesting that this was “a thoroughly Constantinian construction that clearly referred to Christianity, as the Orcistans must have known,” and in reference to which they wrote accordingly (Lenski, Constantine and the cities, p. 100-101).

Whatever the religion of Orcistus actually was, this cannot have been the motivating factor behind Constantine’s grant of permission to the town to raise its status to that of a self-governing city; just as in the case of the proposed shrine to the imperial house in Hispellum, Constantine was more concerned with preserving and supporting the city as a civic institution than involving himself in their religious affairs. Following the massive expansion and centralisation of the late Roman government, the advancement of cities became a top priority, with the success of individual urban centres providing the frame around which the empire could build its networks of power (Lenski, Constantine and the cities, p. 88). Thriving cities with established bodies of self-government were vehicles of peace, contributing financially – in the form of regular taxation – and physically, through the contribution of labour towards the maintenance of the imperial road and water systems, to the empire as a whole (Lenski, Constantine and the cities, p. 93). It was in Constantine’s interests to acquiesce to the request of a city that was so keen to place itself at the forefront of this imperial system, highlighting the means by which it already identified itself with larger polities of the empire and clearly eager to operate on a similar municipal scale.

Constantine’s adnotatio (document 1), which was inscribed along this long, detailed letter on the front of the pillar.
emphasised the special relationship that had been established between the emperor and the town as a result of the petition; it confirmed the special privileges that he had bestowed on them, which were reiterated in the inscription on the left side of the panel (panel 3, document 4), in response to a second petition some years later. In this second response, Constantine again reiterated the significance of his concern for the inhabitants of Orcistus, referring back to the special favour of his original adnotatio as examples of indulgentia three times, in lines 10, 15-16 and 27. The term demonstrated Constantine’s particular concern for the welfare and fair treatment of the Orcistans, which he himself was willing to personally guarantee, going so far as to openly chastise “the wrongdoing of the people of Nacolea that has endured beyond the benefits of our indulgence” (Na/colensium iniuriam ultra in/dulgentiae nostrae beneficia / perdurantem prae/renti re/scribione removemus); the importance of this fact to Orcistus can be seen from their inscription of his adnotatio on the most visible and prominent part of the pillar, on the front and at the top, completely out of chronological sequence with the text below it and on the right side (panel 2), but in the most important and discernible position (Lenski, Constantine and the Cities, p. 101). Although a small entity, Orcistus had entered into dialogue with the emperor in a process of petition and response that not only generated a favourable outcome for them, but which also established a personal relationship with the figure of the emperor; at a time when these small cities were being subsumed by the increasingly centralised and bureaucratic administration of the late empire, the citizens of Orcistus had seized upon the opportunity to revive the traditional behaviour of provincial capitals and cultural centres in its invitation to the emperor to demonstrate his generosity and sense of justice.

Keywords in the original language:

- littera [2]
- oppidum [3]
- vicarius [4]
- Ablabius [5]
- Constantinus [6]
- diligentia [7]
- Orcistus [8]
- civitas [9]
- urbs [10]
- condo [11]
- aetas [12]
- magistratus [13]
- civis [14]
- vetus [15]
- pietas [16]
- indulgentia [17]
- iniuria [18]
- petitionus [19]
- pecunia [20]

Thematic keywords:

- Constantine [21]
- Orcistus [22]
- Nacolea [23]
- Phrygia [24]
- pillar [25]
- province [26]
- Roman legal system [27]
- Roman justice [28]
- imperial justice [29]
- city [30]
- civic life [31]
- self-government [32]
- Christianity [33]
Bibliographical references:

- Lenski, Noel, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* [37] (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016)
- Van Dam, Raymond, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* [38] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

**The Hispellum rescript (CIL XI, 5265)** [39]

- Read more about *The Hispellum rescript (CIL XI, 5265)* [39]

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Links

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