



[Papyrus Rylands 12](#) [1]

Language English

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Typology: Papyrus

Original Location/Place:

Arsinoe, Egypt

Actual Location (Collection/Museum):

John Rylands Library, University of Manchester

Physical Characteristics:

The text of this papyrus is almost complete, despite some lacunae, and contains writing from three different scribal hands (for details, see the transcription below), including the signature (on line 11, but quite difficult to make out) of the official witnessing the sacrifice, "Aurelius Sabinus."

Date: 250 CE Jun 14th

Measurements:

22 x 12.4 cm

Language: Greek

Publications:

P.Ryl. I 12

Commentary:

In 249 CE the emperor Decius issued an edict requiring that all inhabitants of the empire sacrifice to the Roman gods. The edict itself is lost, and so our knowledge of its contents and effect comes from the sources either reacting to it, or evidencing its implementation. The present *libellus* (or "certificate/attestation"), which documents the performance of sacrifice by a certain Egyptian individual, is one such source (for a bibliography of studies of Decius's edict, see James Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 137, n. 10; some notable examples are Joachim Molthagen, *Der römische Staat*, p. 61-84, and Paul Keresztes, "The Decian Libelli"). This *libellus* is that of a woman named Aurelia Demos, from "the Quarter of Helleneum." In John Knipfling's words: "The *libellus* was both private request and official attestation, or more specifically it was a petition (?????????) of an inhabitant of the empire addressed to local authorities requesting that these countersign his declaration of pagan religious loyalty, and give written testimony of the pagan sacrifice performed by him in their presence, by adding their official attestation of loyalty and sacrifice" ("The Libelli," p. 345). The first such document was found in 1893 (see Ulrich Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie*, p. 151-153), with others soon following in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, including those which are now housed in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, from which the present example comes (for details of each find, see Knipfling, "The Libelli," p. 345-346; for an account of the acquisition of a collection of Greek papyri in 1917 by the John Rylands Library, see Roberta Mazza, "Greco-Roman Egypt at Manchester," p. 501).

All of the *libelli* (*libellus* in the singular, which means in this context a "certificate/written attestation") follow the same basic outline: an address from the petitioner to the authority overseeing the sacrifice, with the petitioner's name, any family details ("wife of...", "husband of...", "daughter of...", etc.), the town/village/area from which they come, and perhaps their occupation or any other distinguishing characteristics; an assertion of their past and continued loyalty to the gods; a formal request for certification of their loyalty; a declaration of the overseeing official that they have witnessed the petitioner sacrificing; the signature of the official, followed by the date. The certificates seem to be either written by the petitioners themselves, or perhaps a relative (as in the case of the present example, where the petitioner's husband claims to have written on behalf of his illiterate spouse). Paul Meyer argued in his edition of nineteen *libelli* from Theadelphia that professional scribes were responsible for writing the first parts of petitions (i.e. all but the declaration and signature from the overseeing official) due to the fact that the formula is extremely regular (see Meyer, *Griechische Texte*, p. 75-76), however, John Knipfling has noted that the fact that *libelli* from different areas of Egypt slightly varied in practice suggests that it is perhaps more likely that petitioners patterned their statements on publicly-displayed imperial/local edicts ("The Libelli," p. 349).



Moreover, the fact that we have in the present papyrus a case of the petitioner's husband claiming to write on her behalf suggests that in at least some cases the individuals concerned produced their own certificates. Of course, it would have been necessary for some people to have had a professional notary or other literate person write their declaration for them if they were incapable of doing so themselves.

The openings of the *libelli*, which are always addressed to the sacrificial commissioner/overseer, indicate that Decius's edict involved the creation of local commissions in towns and villages in order to supervise the sacrificial process. The present *libellus* is certified by "Aurelius Sabinus the prytanis" (a ????????/prytanis was type of magistrate), suggesting that local town magistracies were responsible for the position of commission for sacrificing. The city council likely elected the sacrifice commission, which John Knipfling argues is in accord with Decius's particular respect for the tradition of the Senate; perhaps this extended to municipal councils of Egypt ("The Libelli," p. 352). We have evidence of the existence of these sacrificial commissions being used in various places in the empire during the implementation of Decius's edict from other sources in addition to the *libelli* (e.g. Cyprian in his *Epistles* tells us of their activity in Rome, Carthage, Spain, and Alexandria).

The edict was issued shortly after Decius became emperor, and was apparently a formal edict issued directly to the public (see Cyprian, *Epistles* 55.9.2, where the term *edicta* is used, and his *On the Lapsed* 27, which uses *edictum*). Fergus Millar argues that the fact that the *libelli* have almost identical wording suggests that the edict was posted in public, and petitioners followed its specific requirements when wording their certificates proving their compliance (*The Emperor in the Roman World*, p. 255-256). Our other evidence for the edict comes from the letters of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who wrote while in hiding during the "persecution" resulting from the edict, Eusebius's quotations from Dionysus, bishop of Alexandria's letters, describing his narrow escape, and the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, an account of a martyr from Smyrna, although the reliability of this latter source is highly dubious; the thirteenth *Sibylline Oracle* also refers to Decius's rule, and alludes to a persecution of Christians during this time. Our sources come from across the empire, but the problems with them are obvious – with the exception of the *libelli*, they are all Christian responses, which portray a perceived view of Decius's intentions, and/or present polemical accounts of the events.

Regardless, as James Rives has well argued, Decius's apparent requirement of this level of individual participation in state cult was something different from previous practice of Roman religion ("The Decree of Decius"). Until this point, the state had not imposed religious practice on the inhabitants of the empire in such a manner, which made explicit the need for individual *active* observance, more than simply participating in religious festivals, feasts, and any private devotions one might perform. According to Rives, the decree was "a highly innovative and important step towards a radical restructuring of religious organization in the Roman world," which saw a shift from the "local to the universal" in terms of cultic practice ("The Decree of Decius," p. 135). Scholars continue to debate the precise motivations for Decius's edict. Older generations of interpreters believed that the edict was a specific response to Christianity, seeking to weed out Christians by forcing them to sacrifice to pagan gods and then punishing those who refused (for this view, see John Knipfling, "The Libelli," p. 357; and for one of the influential suggestions of this argument, Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, p. 121). However, the discovery of the *libelli* has strongly mitigated against this argument, as they contain the names and descriptions of persons who are clearly not Christian (names such as Isis and Horion, along with descriptions of certain individuals being priestesses etc. indicate that some were almost definitely pagan). In fact, there are only one or two examples among the papyri which scholars have argued might bear the names of Christian petitioners (for instance, the names Theodore, Dioscorus, and Thecla – the name of the famous female companion of the apostle Paul in the legendary *Acts of Paul and Thecla* – appear, which were often employed by Christians; see John Knipfling, "The Libelli," p. 358-360).

Allen Brent argues that Decius's intentions were "deeply religious," and rooted in his understanding of the political and economic problems the empire was facing in the third century as being symptomatic of a broader "cosmological, metaphysical decline" from the golden age that Rome had once enjoyed; the world, in a constant cycle of renewal, was currently in an "iron age" (*Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, p. 189-190, and chapter three in general for a detailed discussion). For Brent, Decius's legislation sought a sacramental cure for this, which built on the universal citizenship granted by Caracalla. Now that almost all members of the empire were its citizens, Brent argues that Decius called upon them to partake in a mass thanksgiving for his accession to the throne (in a similar way to previous acts of *supplicatio*), and an "apotropaic rite banishing the forces of metaphysical chaos and to re-establish the *pax deorum*, in a returning *saeculum aureum*". The scale of the decline and "social imperial order" required that every single individual needed to be seen to be actively engaging in the effort to regain the *pax deorum* (*Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, p. 177-181, 190-191).



It is natural that the Christian sources frame the events resulting from Decian's edict present it as a "persecution," as not only would it have felt this way to those diehard believers who were punished for refusing to comply, but as with other instances where Christians were executed by Rome, the example of these steadfast believers provided excellent propaganda material for Christian authors seeking to promote Christianity's integrity and legitimacy. As John Knipfling has stated, the nomenclature of the *libelli* we possess "[show] that Decius' original edict...had been framed in general terms, with the command that all inhabitants whether Christian or pagan, citizen or non-citizen, male or female, major or minor, should sacrifice to the gods, a command which served as a model for two later edicts of the persecution of Diocletian, namely, the fourth edict of the year 304 and the fifth of the winter of 305-306" ("The Libelli," p. 362). However, James Rives argues that Jews were likely exempt from the edict, as if they were required to sacrifice then we would expect there to be some trace of this recorded, and there is not. The Jerusalem Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 5:3, 44d, states that the Jews were exempted from Diocletian's fourth edict of 304 CE, which required public sacrifice, and so Rives suggests that the same was true of Decius's edict ("The Decree of Decius," p. 138, n. 16). Rather than the edict being a measure which specifically targeted Christians, James Rives agrees with the likes of Géza Alföldy, who argues that it fits into a broader third-century picture of seeing the traditional gods as the answer to Rome's problems (Géza Alföldy, "Die Krise des Imperium Romanum"; James Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 142). Indeed, there is some epigraphic evidence which suggests that Decius was interested in religious reform, but this assumption is weakened by the fact that this was not advertised on his coinage as one would expect (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 143). Whatever his reasons for issuing the edict, Decius asked of the empire's population something quite different to that which had previously been required from their religious practice. The issuing of a *supplicatio* by the Senate (public thanksgiving, acts of prayer etc.), when the temples of the city were opened and the people were called to offer wine or incense, was not unheard of; in the time of Augustus *supplicatio* was incorporated into the imperial cult ([Res Gestae IX.2](#) [2]). However, whereas in this latter example the intention was to pray for Augustus's health, scholars have been unable to isolate something so specific in the case of Decius's edict, and the enforcement of sacrifice as a legal requirement was not something ordinarily done.

It seems that the edict required one to sacrifice, taste the sacrificial meat, and swear that they had always sacrificed to the gods (Cyprian, *Epistles* 31.7.1 speaks of "accursed food" defiling the lips of those who chose to sacrifice in Rome). However, the precise procedures for dealing with those who refused are unclear – it seems that punishments included exile, loss of property, torture, and death, and were not issued by the local magistrates themselves, but passed over to higher authorities, such as governors (*Martyrdom of Pionius* 19-20; Cyprian, *Epistles* 22.1.1 and 39.2.1 state that Decius himself actually presided over the trial of a Christian refuser; see also 38.1.2; 56.1; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.41.18, 21, 23). Robin Lane Fox has suggested that it would have been administratively impossible for certificates such as the present example to be issued to everyone in the empire, and that the examples that we have from the summer of 250 CE represent a later feature, or simply something done locally (*Pagans and Christians*, p. 455). However, the certificates are mentioned by Cyprian as existing in Rome, Egypt, and Carthage. According to Cyprian, *Epistles* 55.3, 13-14, 17, 20; 30.3 some Christians managed to obtain a *libellus* without actually performing the required sacrifice. These were termed as the *libellatici*, and were distinguished from the *sacrificati*, which referred to Christians who simply chose to perform the sacrifice.

In an attempt to prove that large-scale issuing of certificates was possible, James Rives compares them to documents found at Oxyrhynchus submitted for a census, in addition to tax receipts, and argues that in such a context of bureaucracy, the issuing of *libelli* to everyone would not have been unfeasible; he imagines that the officials of a region would receive notice of the edict, arrange the overseers for the sacrifice, decide upon a date by which the local population had to complete the sacrifice, and then issue certificates as proof ("The Decree of Decius," p. 149; see also Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier, *Demography of Roman Egypt*, p. 1-30). Similarly, Kate Cooper argues that once Decius had decided upon the need for a universal sacrifice, it was merely a "short step" to recording it through the "newly prominent mechanisms of the municipal registries, whose work had greatly expanded after the extension of universal citizenship" ("Private Power," p. 340). The requirement for adherence to the state cult seemed to exploit the granting of extensive citizenship in 212 CE by Caracalla. All but one of the petitioners from the *libelli* we possess (who have distinctive Egyptian names for the most part) contain the *gentilicium* (a name indicating one's family/clan) "Aurelius" or "Aurelia," which indicates that they owed their citizenship to M. Aurelius Antoninus Caracalla's edict (known as the *Constitutio Antoniniana*) – all newly enfranchised citizens shared this name (see Brent Salway, "What's in a Name?" p. 133-136; James Knipfling, "The Libelli," p. 358).

In summary, *libelli* such as the example given here are fascinating witnesses of an attempt by the Roman emperor to reassess and remedy the empire's relationship with the gods in a time of crisis. As citizens of the empire,



Christians like everyone else (except for the Jews) were expected to participate in the universal sacrifice, and it seems that while Christians were certainly not the initial main targets of Decius's edict (although the degree to which the growing movement might have been viewed as contributing to religious instability continues to be debated by scholars), Christian authors such as Cyprian viewed it as a direct affront.

An image of the papyrus can be found here:

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Keywords in the original language:

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- [???](#) [5]
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- [??????????](#) [9]

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Decius](#) [10]
- [persecution](#) [11]
- [sacrifice](#) [12]
- [Roman religion](#) [13]
- [Roman citizenship](#) [14]
- [Roman emperor](#) [15]
- [Caracalla](#) [16]
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- [libation](#) [18]
- [edict](#) [19]
- [Golden Age](#) [20]
- [Pax Romana](#) [21]
- [pax deorum](#) [22]

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