



Pomponius Bassus administers the alimenta (CIL VI, 1492)

110983.jpg



[1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Honorific

Original Location/Place: House of T. Pomponius Bassus, Quirinal Hill, Rome

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Florence; Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Villa Corsini a Castello, inv. 1651.

Date: 101 CE Oct 19th

Physical Characteristics: Bronze tablet; text set within a double incised frame. Four holes in the corners indicate where it was affixed to a wall.

Material: Bronze.

Measurements: Height: 43.3 cm

Width: 35.8 cm

Letter heights: 0.6-1.3 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIL* VI, 1492

[EDR110983](#) [2]

Commentary: This bronze plaque was discovered in the house of Titus Pomponius Atticus – the great friend of Cicero - on the Quirinal Hill in Rome. The property was later inhabited by his descendants, the Pomponii Bassi. When first excavated in 1558, a number of ‘family documents and deeds’ were found inscribed on bronze tablets and attached to the wall of what was believed to have been the office, or *tablinum* (Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome*, p. 191). One of these tablets was a *Tabula patronatus* (‘patron tablet’), which recorded the establishment of a patronage relationship between Titus Pomponius Bassus and the town of Ferentinum (Frosinone, Lazio), and the institution of the imperial policy of *alimenta* (imperial subsidy) for the town. It is an important document that illustrates how personal and municipal patronage were closely intertwined, and how such relationships were used to convey ideals of civic virtue and imperial ideology (Woolf, “Food, Poverty and Patronage,” p. 218).

Titus Pomponius Bassus was an important senator and ally of the emperor Trajan. He had been suffect consul in 94 CE and imperial governor of Cappadocia from 94/96-100 CE (*PIR* 705). From 101 CE he was named as the official in charge of the distribution of the *alimenta*, the *curator rei alimentariae*; this was an important role that saw him oversee the administration of an [imperial policy set up by Trajan](#) [3] (perhaps initiated by Nerva) which offered financial subsidies to deserving Italian children across the peninsula. It was a privilege uniquely reserved for Italian communities, and served to bind the emperor closer to his subjects and emphasise their pre-eminent status. The first seven lines record the official nature of the decision that is recorded below; two of the four most important magistrates (*quattuorviri*) of the town of Ferentinum, in modern Lazio, have consulted with their Senate and reached the decision that representatives of the town should be sent to Titus Pomponius Bassus in order to request that he act as their patron (*muni/cipium nostrum recipere dignetur / patronumque se cooptari*) and that a bronze tablet recording the fact should be sent to Rome to be put up in his house (*tabula / hospitali incisa hoc*



decreto in domo / sua posita permittat). The reason for their desire to have him act as patron is given in lines 8-16: "in accordance with the emperor's generosity, was performing so well the administrative duty entrusted to him by our most generous emperor Caesar Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus" (*demandatam sibi curam ab / indulgentissimo Imp(eratore) Caesare Nerva Traiano / Augusto Germanico*). This referred to T. Pomponius Bassus' administration of the *alimenta*, and particularly his establishment of the scheme in the town of Ferentinum. Having organised the *alimenta* for the town, it is not surprising that he had developed a relationship with the town and that they sought further association with him (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage," p. 219). It is clear from the inscription that T. Pomponius Bassus's role was understood in terms of its imperial context; the 'administrative duty' that he performed was as a result of the 'generosity of the emperor' (*ab / indulgentissimo Imperatore*), who authorised the *alimenta* as an imperial *beneficium*, or benefit. The institution of the *alimenta* was, above all, useful imperial propaganda that emphasised the good qualities of the emperor, his largess towards his subjects, and his recognition of the pre-eminence of the Italian communities. This is further stated in lines 11-14 of the inscription, which describes the *alimenta* as "the duty through which Trajan has secured for ever the future of his Italy, that the whole age ought to be deservedly thankful for his administration" (*qua aeternitati Italiae / suae prospexit secundum liberalitatem eius / ita ordinare ut omnis aetas curae eius merito / gratias agere debeat futurumque*). This was an echo of the praise awarded to Trajan by Pliny the Younger in a speech that had been given a year before in 100 CE, in which Trajan's benefactions for the support of children were presented as a ensuring the demographic prosperity of the Italian stock. Pliny stated that because of Trajan's generosity, "by them the camp and by them the tribes will be completed, and they will have children one day" (*ex his castra ex his tribus replebuntur, ex his quandoque nascentu* (*Panegyric* 28.5)). Trajan's enactment of the alimentary policy is therefore seen by the provincial community at Ferentinum as one that looked to the future (*aeternitas*) of Italy specifically, not the empire as a whole.

The Senate of Ferentinum understood their relationship with T. Pomponius Bassus in light of the *alimenta*; his establishment of it in their town created a link with the imperial administration that could be contextualised by a continuing relationship of patronage with him. The inscription recorded, therefore, revealed a multilayered network that honoured Pomponius Bassus as the patron of the town, who acted on behalf of the supreme patron, the emperor, but it also served to honour the local municipal aristocrats who are named in the text. The roles of the *decuriones*, magistrates, witnesses and ambassadors (*legati*) are all attested in the inscription, indicating that they too acted in service to the community; their *beneficia* to Ferentinum, in the form of public office, was being honoured too (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage" p. 219). Greg Woolf has suggested that the notion of patronage and service may have also played a part in ensuring that the *alimenta* was instituted in the town to begin with; this connection with the imperial centre at Rome, and the establishment with an important representative may have been an incentive that helped to secure the support and participation of local landowners, without whom the scheme could not have worked (Patterson, "Crisis," p. 129-132). However, it should be noted that although the creation of a patronage network connected to the emperor may have appeared an attractive improvement in the status of Ferentinum, the involvement of the imperial administration likely disrupted any existing patronage schemes and private acts of support. The situation had to be carefully balanced and managed in order to ensure that the imposition of loans upon these landowners did not result in unnecessary conflict with the emperor (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage," p. 220).

The inscription states that the decision of the town to ask T. Pomponius Bassus to act as their patron should be inscribed on a bronze tablet and set up in his house in Rome; although this was not a contract enforceable by law, it was nonetheless a public statement of the relationship that would be visible to all – friends, clients, superiors – who visited his home. Although the text is known from its setting in Rome, there was most likely a second copy of the inscription in Ferentinum which advertised the relationship, or his name will have been added to the municipal album which recorded all those who held public office in the town (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage," p. 218). The relationship between town and centre was therefore advertised positively in both places; the status of Ferentinum was elevated by its connection to Pomponius Bassus and the emperor, which was visible in the capital itself in the form of the inscription. The emperor and his representative were also celebrated for their generosity and successful administration in the provincial town. It was a mutually beneficial exchange.

The role of *curator rei alimentariae* is also worthy of note. By the second century CE, the patron-client relationship between a powerful individual and a local community was almost irrelevant; decision making came from the centre and the emperor was the final judge of what policies to enact in the different parts of the empire. However, as in the case of T. Pomponius Bassus and Ferentinum here, the emperors allowed the relationship of patron to client community to continue in such a way that it had no direct political significance. The administration of the *alimenta* was a necessary and likely difficult job, but its exaction had little direct effect on the operation of the empire as a whole. However, the patron would be honoured to be chosen by the emperor – it was a further



acknowledgement of service and loyalty – and the client might expect (as clearly stated here) the influence of their patron to benefit them. Most significantly, the role and its benefits were only possible due to the generosity of the emperor; although the inscription is indicative of the densely multi-layered networks of patronage and communication that existed across the empire by 101 CE, there was no doubt whose authority lay at the centre of them.

Keywords in the original language:

- [ius](#) [4]
- [senatus](#) [5]
- [curia](#) [6]
- [Titus Pomponius Bassus](#) [7]
- [vir clarissimus](#) [8]
- [cura](#) [9]
- [indulgentia](#) [10]
- [Traianus](#) [11]
- [aeternitas](#) [12]
- [Italia](#) [13]
- [liberalitas](#) [14]
- [aetas](#) [15]
- [gratia](#) [16]
- [virtus](#) [17]
- [vir](#) [18]
- [auxilium](#) [19]
- [municipium](#) [20]

Thematic keywords:

- [imperial patronage](#) [21]
- [Trajan](#) [22]
- [Pomponius Bassus](#) [23]
- [Ferentinum](#) [24]
- [imperial generosity](#) [25]
- [alimenta](#) [26]
- [patron](#) [27]
- [community](#) [28]
- [client](#) [29]
- [benefit](#) [30]

Bibliographical references: Bennett, Julian, [Trajan: Optimus Princeps](#) [31] (Roman Imperial Biographies; London: Routledge, 2000)

Coarelli, Filippo, [Collis. Il Quirinale e il Viminale nell'antichità](#) [32] (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2014)

Duncan-Jones, Richard, ["The Purpose and Organisation of the Alimenta"](#) [33], Papers of the British School at Rome 32/1 (1964) : 123-146

Lanciani, Rodolfo, [Pagan and Christian Rome](#) [34] (Boston; New York, 1892)

Patterson, John R., [Crisis: what crisis? Rural change and urban development in imperial Appennine Italy](#) [35], Papers of the British School at Rome 55 (1987) : 115-146

Warmington, Brian H., Miller, S.J., [Inscriptions of the Roman Empire AD 14-117](#) [36] (London: London Association of Classical Teachers, 1996)

Woolf, Greg, [Food, Poverty and Patronage. The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy](#) [37], Papers of the British School at Rome 58 (1990) : 197-228

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Trajan and the 'tabula alimentaria' \(CIL IX, 1455\) \[38\]](#)



- [Read more about Trajan and the 'tabula alimentaria' \(CIL IX, 1455\)](#) [38]

Numismatic item

[Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children \(103-111 CE\)](#) [39]

- [Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children \(103-111 CE\)](#) [39]

Realized by:

[Caroline Barron](#) [40]



Source URL: <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/pomponius-bassus-administers-alimenta-cil-vi-1492>

Links

- [1] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/110983.jpg?itok=cQVgBz-H>
- [2] http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=EDR110983&fo_antik=&fo_modern=&Bibliografia%5B%5D=&Testo=&boolTesto=AND&Testo2=&bool=AND&ordinamento=id_nr&javasi=javascripts&se_foto=tutte&lang=it
- [3] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/trajan-and-%E2%80%99tabula-alimentaria%E2%80%99-cil-ix-1455>
- [4] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/ius>
- [5] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/senatus>
- [6] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/curia>
- [7] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/titus-pomponius-bassus>
- [8] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/vir-clarissimus>
- [9] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/cura>
- [10] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/indulgentia>
- [11] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/traianus>
- [12] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/aeternitas>
- [13] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/italia>
- [14] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/liberalitas>
- [15] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/aetas>
- [16] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/gratia>
- [17] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/virtus>
- [18] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/vir>
- [19] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/auxilium>
- [20] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/municipium>
- [21] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-patronage>
- [22] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/trajan>
- [23] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/pomponius-bassus>
- [24] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/ferentinum>
- [25] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-generosity>
- [26] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/alimenta>
- [27] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/patron>



- [28] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/community>
- [29] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/client>
- [30] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/benefit>
- [31] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/trajan-optimus-princeps>
- [32] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/collis-il-quirinale-e-il-viminale-nellantichit%C3%A0>
- [33] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%9Cpurpose-and-organisation-alimenta%E2%80%9D>
- [34] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/pagan-and-christian-rome>
- [35] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/crisis-what-crisis-rural-change-and-urban-development-imperial-apennine-italy>
- [36] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/inscriptions-roman-empire-ad-14-117>
- [37] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/food-poverty-and-patronage-significance-epigraphy-roman-alimentary-schemes-early-imperial-italy>
- [38] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/trajan-and-%E2%80%98tabula-alimentaria%E2%80%99-cil-ix-1455>
- [39] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/aureus-depicting-head-trajan-and-same-extending-his-hand-children-103-111-ce>
- [40] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/caroline-barron>