Restoration of the Temple of Liber Pater, Sabratha (IRT 55)

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Building dedication.
Original Location/Place: Unknown. Said to have been found from the East Forum Temple, Sabratha, Tripolitania.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Sabratha Museum (?)
Date: 340 CE to 350 CE
Physical Characteristics: Marble panel dedicating the rebuilding of the Temple of Liber Pater in Sabratha. Now survives only in incomplete fragments.

Material: Marble.
Measurements: Height: 100 cm
Width: 187 cm
Depth: 20 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:
IRT 55 [2]

Commentary: The above inscription commemorates the restoration of the Temple of Liber Pater in Sabratha, Tripolitania (modern Libya) in the mid 4th century CE, during the reigns of the emperors Constans and Constantius II. Given the known anti-pagan legislation that characterized much of their joint reign, this inscription is an important example of how certain pagan cults were permitted to endure due to the inextricable connection between the deity and the place that honoured them; in Sabratha, Liber Pater contributed to the city’s identity through his association with the native Punic god Shadrapha, who was worshipped there as protector and patron.

The inscription today survives in fragmentary condition, but it has been possible to reconstruct the majority of the text from the pieces that remain. The inscription records that the Temple of Liber Pater was restored, having been “ruined long ago” (aedem Liberi Patris quam antiqua ruina); the reason for its destruction is lost, but various proposals have been put forward by scholars. Early scholarship suggested that such reconstruction was necessary due to raids by the Austuriani, a tribe believed to have been based in the oases south of Tripolitania, but if they did indeed sack Sabratha or any others of the ancient Libyan cities, their attacks went unreported in the literature (Reynolds and Ward-Perkins, Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania, p. 23; Mattingly, Tripolitania, p. 180; for the Austuriani tribe, see p. 174-175). Antonio di Vita and Philip Kenrick, however, have questioned this rationale, believing that the scale of the destruction – with archaeological evidence demonstrating damage to almost every major public structure – was unlikely to have been achievable by a group of tribal raiders; they instead propose the damage to have been the result of an earthquake, perhaps in 306-310 CE, which was only now being restored (Di Vita, “Terremoti,” p. 441-465; Kenrick, Excavations at Sabratha, p. 5-6). This would perhaps make sense with the statement in lines 6-8 that one of the duoviri of Sabratha, Lucius Aemilius Caelestinus, had “responded zealously to his love of this country” (amori patriae studiose respondit), presumably in permitting the restoration, indicating the significance of the temple to Sabratha and the importance of its restoration as a civic endeavour. The temple was dedicated by the patron of the province (patronus provinciae), whose name is lost from the inscription, but Flavius Victor Calpurnius, who had preserved the temple “through his oversight” (praesidicium...Flavi Victoris Calpurni ser/vavit), has been identified by Claude Lepelley as the governor of the province, again demonstrating the high levels to which the decision about this restoration had reached (Lepelley, Les cités d’Afrique romaine, p. 374).

The Temple of Liber Pater was not new in Sabratha; it stood in the so-called East Forum of the town, and had been present since the major urban construction project began in the Augustan period. Véronique Brouquier-Reddé has identified at least five phases for its existence, with the earliest evidence pointing to the 1st century CE. The temple appears to have been damaged by an earlier earthquake in 65-70 CE, after which it was restored to the peripteral form that is still visible today. Towards the end of the Antonine period, the forum space was reorganized, during which the ground level between the temple and the forum was equalised. The restoration work that this inscription commemorates represents the fourth phase of work at the temple, dating to the mid 4th century, but there is further evidence for reconstruction after 365 CE, when another devastating earthquake is known to have hit Tripolitania,
although it appears that the temple was abandoned shortly after this work was complete (Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples and Cultes*, p. 44). Epigraphic evidence does attest to cult activity in the temple right up to the 4th century CE, with two inscriptions naming the *flamines* or priests of the cult (*IRT* 117 and 126). The cult of Liber had found enormous favour in Roman North-Africa, not least because it encompassed the attributes of a Libyan-Punic deity, Shadrapha. An inscription from nearby Lepcis Magna was dedicated to both deities (*IRT* 294), indicating the equivalence of the two gods in Tripolitanian society, which was paralleled by the syncretism between Hercules and another Punic deity, Milkashart. Several centuries before the present inscription was set up, a bronze statue had been offered to Shadrapha and Milkashart, who were identified with Liber and Hercules respectively and celebrated as the two principal patrons of Lepcis Magna (Cadotte, *La romanisation des dieux*, p. 256; 286-288). The cult of Liber was well diffused throughout Tripolitania, with different towns identifying particular attributes or epithets, as in the case of *Liber Pater* – Liber the Father – here in Sabratha. Just as the Punic god Shadrapha was characterised as a protector or guardian god, *Liber Pater* acknowledged respect and veneration for the ancient god, and underlined his authority over, generosity towards and state of trust between him and his worshippers in a form of filial relationship (Cadotte, *La romanisation des dieux*, p. 271; see p. 257-258 for the ‘protective’ origins of Shadrapha). Just as in Lepcis Magna, Liber Pater was venerated in Sabratha as the patron god of the city, with the cult reaching the peak of its popularity under the Severan emperors, who promoted their own connection with the region through the particular celebration of the Punic deities alongside those of Rome (Brouquier-Reddé, *Temples et cultes*, p. 286).

The local importance of the cult was likely the reason for which the emperors, Constans and Constantius II, permitted the restoration of the temple. Although their father Constantine had recognised the value of continuing to support the worship of pagan cults across the empire, and the necessity of appealing to issues of local significance in order to guarantee loyalty (see for example the rescript to Hispellum in which he permitted the construction of a new shrine for the imperial cult), the reign of his sons has been noted by historians as one that was legislatively more punitive towards pagan cult activity. Laws given in the *Codex Theodosianus* and which date to the 350s CE, prescribed the death penalty for those who celebrated pagan sacrifices or worshipped statues (16.10.2; 16.10.6), and temples were ordered to be shut across the empire (16.10.4). It was also during Constantius’s visit to Rome in 357 CE that the Altar of Victory was removed from the Senate House, sparking one of the most well-known and debated instances of pagan-Christian rhetoric from the period (see Symmachus, *Relatio III.8* [3]). More recently, however, historians have argued against a rigorous anti-pagan policy, with Michele Salzmann taking the view that many of these laws were valid only for particular regions, and Hartmut Leppin doubting that they would be directed against public and private victims, placing them rather in the context of the Emperor’s efforts to create a unified church (Salzmann, *On Roman Time*, p. 205-209; Leppin, *Constantius II*, p. 456-480). However, although the imperial religious policy of these years cannot consistently and inexorably be said to oppose pagan religion, the restoration of the Temple of Liber Pater in Sabratha does stand out as a somewhat unique act in which the two Christian emperors were involved; their representative in Tripolitania, Flavius Victor Calpurnius, apparently gave the order to preserve the temple, with some of the funding for the project perhaps coming from the imperial court itself (Niquet, “Die Inschrift des Liber Pater-Tempels in Sabratha,” p. 262). It is possible that Constans and Constantius II were following the example of their father Constantine, who had recognised the utility of successful cities and civic infrastructure as an ideology in itself; cities that were maintained to high standard and which were allowed a degree of autonomy in their governance generated competitive power networks that were bolstered by contact with and favour from the emperor. Although the restoration of basilicas, *curiae* and public baths was more common under Constantine and his sons, the renovation of an important temple was a way of showing Sabratha the benevolence and generosity of the reigning duo, whilst also encouraging civic order and pride (see Leone, *Changing townscape in North Africa*, p. 82-96 for discussion of the kinds of structures that were regularly restored). The significance of Liber Pater to the Tripolitanian community was also a motivating factor; whatever the changes in religious practice that were taking place across the empire and within the imperial court, the emperors could not deny the association between place and local deity; Liber Pater, syncretised with the Punic god Shadrapha, both represented and protected Sabratha, as a tangible patron but also in the context of collective identity. In his Roman and Punic form, Liber Pater/Shadrapha appealed to all sides of Sabrathan culture and social interaction, linking the provincial community to Rome in a way that meant something to both. By permitting – or rather, not forbidding – the restoration of the Temple of Liber Pater, Constans and Constantius appealed to Sabratha on a local level, demonstrating their respect for local tradition and practice whilst also advertising their altruism; if further limitations on pagan cult activity were to follow later, then this restoration might be understood as a strategic act aimed at drawing support for the imperial court.

Keywords in the original language:
Thematic keywords:

- Sabratha [14]
- temple [15]
- Liber Pater [16]
- Shadrapa [17]
- Tripolitania [18]
- dedication [19]
- earthquake [20]
- raid [21]
- local religion [22]
- piety [23]
- pagan religion [24]
- Christianity [25]
- civic identity [26]
- imperial benevolence [27]

Bibliographical references:

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- Reynolds, Joyce Marie, Ward-Perkins, John Bryan, *The Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* [38] (Rome: British School at Rome, 1952)

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

**The Hispellum rescript (CIL XI, 5265)** [40]
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