The Temple of Hecate and the Jewish Riot in Cyrene [1]

Hadrian orders the restoration of a temple destroyed and burned during the Jewish riot of Cyrene

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Building inscription

Original Location/Place: Temple of Hecate in Cyrene (Libya)

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): In-loc

Date: 119 CE

Physical Characteristics: The fragment is broken on the top, right, and left sides. The uninscribed space at the bottom indicates that this part was the end. The Greek letters with the name and titles of the emperor are significantly taller. All the surviving traces have been carefully and regularly carved, and there is no particular change of style between the Greek and Latin sections.

Material: Marble

Measurements: 46 centimetres in height, 30 in width, and 2.5 centimetres thick. Letters are between 6 and 2.5 centimetres tall

Language: Latin, Greek

Category: Roman, Greek


Commentary:
The surviving inscription is very fragmentary. Only two lines of the Latin section are preserved while the Greek text has a total of seven lines. All the letters correspond to the central section and, therefore, the original edition mostly consists of restorations proposed in square brackets. Epigraphists at the beginning of the 20th century are known for their bold textual proposals as a sign of language expertise and creativity. In this case, nevertheless, the restorations are not only imaginative but also justifiable on account of two factors. Firstly, the bilingual inscription contains identical texts that can be used to supplement the lost material. Secondly, this testimony follows a format found in other contemporary evidence which, as will be discussed below, is connected with a very significant event: the Jewish riot of Cyrene [2].

According to these restorations, the first lines would contain the name and titles of Hadrian, the Roman emperor adopted by Trajan as successor. The second part records his instructions certainly pertaining to the city (civitas?????) of the Cyreneans (l. 4, 10). The other preserved letters show that something had been destroyed ([dirutum], burnt (????[??????])/kek[auenos], and later reconstructed (?????????????)/apokatastasis). All these actions had been caused by a group referred to as Jewish (??????????/Ioudaikos) in line 11. The presence of these elements links directly this testimony with a fully preserved Latin inscription also found in Cyrene (AE 1928.2), which attests the destruction of the recently built Baths using the same verb participle diruta (cf. AE 1960.198). The burning is rendered as exusta and the cause as tumultus ludaicus (“Jewish riot”). This second text therefore constitutes the basis on which the original editor of our inscription proposed Latin readings that fit in the space available. The same applies to the names and titles of Hadrian that would date both documents to 119 CE (i.e. his 3rd tribunician powers). As for the translation provided in Greek, the text can also be validated by the identical terms used in another bilingual inscription (SEG 17.804) recording the destruction of another public building of Cyrene, the Caesareum, and the subsequent reconstruction ordered at the beginning of Hadrian’s reign. Even if these analogies cannot provide us with the exact name of the third wrecked place, it is logical to suggest the temple of Hecate in which our inscription was discovered; hence the proposals templum???? in lines 3 and 11. While the cult of the goddess in the city is attested since at least the 3rd century BCE (SEG 20.718), this structure belonged to the larger religious complex dedicated to Apollo and may have been built around 107 CE (SEG 9.101, see Serafini, “La dea Ecate”).

Once that the validity of this fragmentary material has been confirmed, it becomes necessary to explain the origin, context, and development of such disruptive episodes. The settlement of Jews in Cyrene is attributed to Ptolemy Lagos, who wanted to strengthen his control over eastern Libya at the end of the 4th century BCE (Flavius Josephus, Against Apion II.44). Cyrene had previously been settled by the Greeks in the mid-7th century BCE, under the guidance of the Theran Battus (Herodotus, Histories IV.150-159; Strabo, Geography XVII.21).
Taking into account the native Libyan population, Cyrene must have become a very multicultural city in the Hellenistic age, even if direct evidence attesting interaction between the different groups is not abundant (see Applebaum, *Jews and Greeks*, p. 1-63). Flavius Josephus citing Strabo reports, for example, that the Jewish migrants were in close contact with those in Egypt and formed one of the four classes of the city (*Jewish Antiquities* XIV.114-118). Indeed, in 140 BCE the Jewish population in Cyrene was significant enough to receive a copy of the letter that the Roman Senate sent to Ptolemy according to 1 Maccabees 15-23. Likewise, Agrippa also responded to a complaint of the Jewish Cyrenians concerning the money sent to the Jerusalem temple (*Jewish Antiquities* XVI.169-170). As one of the most important centres of the Diaspora, not only the capital of the region was settled but also the other five Greek cities in the region; the so-called Pentapolis. This is most evident in *Berenece* [3], where public inscriptions attest the presence of a community of Jews (or ????????/politeuma) under Augustus (*SEG* 16.931), with its own archons in 24/5 CE (*IGRR* 1024), and even a synagogue in 56 CE (*SEG* 17.823). Epitaphs of Jewish individuals have been found in other settlements such as *Teucheira* [4] until the Flavian period (see Lüderitz, *Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse*). Consequently, a fair degree of interaction and toleration of the different religious and ethnic groups of the Cyrenaica is supposed at the beginning of the Roman Empire, especially when Augustus is said to have confirmed their legal and fiscal equality (????????/isonomia, ?????????/isoteleia; Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVI.161).

According to Flavius Josephus too, at the very end of the *Jewish War* (VII.437-455), this status quo was disrupted “when the madness of the Sicarii, like a disease, attacked the cities around Cyrene.” A man called Jonathan enticed the less well-off promising “signs and apparitions” in 73 CE and killed 3000 of the wealthy Jews in the city. There is no other source for this episode but, if true, it must have created resentments with both the gentle communities of the region and the Roman administration. This process also needs to be connected with the punitive measures against the Jews (e.g. the *Fiscus Judaicus* which struck not only Judea but also the Diaspora following the final victory of Titus (see Goodman, “Diaspora Reactions”). This new context in Cyrene and the Roman Empire is regarded as the most important factor leading to the extraordinary events recorded in our inscription (see Smallwood, *The Jews*, p. 331-388).

The Jewish riots under Trajan are one of the most unclear episodes in the history between Rome and the Jews. Contemporary literary witnesses are almost non-existent and the later sources are sometimes contradictory. Even the exact chronology of the events is not completely secure, with Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* beginning in 115 CE but other materials – particularly the Egyptian papyri – indicating the spring of 116 CE (see Pucci Ben Zeev, *Diaspora Judaism*, p. 145-156). What should remain undoubted is that it spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean when Trajan was completing his victorious Parthian conquest. In the case of Cyrene, the main source besides Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* IV.2.1-5) is the Byzantine compilation of Cassius Dio (*Roman History*, LXVIII.32.1-3 [5]) prepared by Xiphilinos. They both report that the Jews of Libya followed a leader (Andreas or Lucua), and the Bithynian historian adds that they attacked both Greeks and Romans “eating the flesh of their victims, making belts of their entrails, anointing themselves with their blood and wearing their skins for clothing.” Even if not as graphic, the *Historia Augusta* (*Hadrian* 5.2) and Artemidorus (*Onirocritica* IV.24) record violent clashes in the region and our inscription confirms that such seditious incidents were not just historical fiction. From all these accounts, the reference to the attacks as *tumultus* in Latin and, most likely, ???????/thorybos in Greek can be better understood. The best indication of the severe consequences of these riots on the city of Cyrene is the fact that public monuments needed profound restorations at the beginning of Hadrian’s reign, as the archaeological evidence may indicate as well (Applebaum, *Jews and Greeks*, p. 269-285). The Baths were certainly a central space of civic interaction and the burning of the Caesareum and the temple of Hecate – the latter perhaps completed for just a decade, see above – may have been interpreted as attacks by the Jews against pagan religion. In Alexandria, for example, Appian (*Civil Wars* II.70) also talks of the devastation of the *Nemeseion*. Consequently, this Jewish movement should not only be attributed to the frequent frictions with the Greeks particularly well attested in Alexandria still in 115 CE (e.g. *CPJ* II.157, 435), but rather to a global phenomenon which modern scholarship has not yet been able to pin down.

At any rate, the severity of the challenge is shown by the Roman response to these – initially – local issues. Legionary deployment is attested in both Judea, Cyprus, and Egypt (see Pucci Ben Zeev, *Diaspora Judaism*, p. 176-185, 222-224), and the establishment of a colony of military veterans in the Cyrenaica under Trajan seems to be connected with such measures of control and punishment. The orders of Hadrian to restore the destroyed
buildings would indicate the imperial effort to reward a Greek city that was key in the provincial organisation of eastern Africa (see Boatwright, Hadrian, p. 173-184; Walker, “Hadrian and the Renewal”). The roads around Cyrenaica were diligently repaired (SEG 9.25; AE 1951.208), and the emperor continued to favour the capital of the Libyan Pentapolis when he praised the Aegean and Dorian pedigree (????????/eugeneia SEG 28.1566, l. 16) of citizens who were allowed to send representatives to the commonly of Greeks or Panhellenion (see Reynolds, “Hadrian, Antoninus Pius;” and Spawforth, “The World of the Panhellenion,” p. 96-100). Despite all these efforts to return to normality in the aftermath, the memory of the Jewish attacks was still present under Marcus Aurelius when the restoration of more attacked spaces such as the temple of Zeus continued. With this persistent stigma, it should not surprise that the epigraphic and literary visibility of the Jews in the Cyrenaica was not recovered until Late Antiquity (see Kerkeslager, “Jews in Egypt and Cyrenaica,” p. 63).

Keywords in the original language:

- Caesar [6]
- Hadrianus [7]
- Cyrenensis [8]
- dirutum [9]
- ????????? [10]
- ?????????? [11]
- ???? [12]
- ???????? [13]
- ?????????? [14]
- ?????????????? [15]

Thematic keywords:

- Jews [16]
- Trajan [17]
- Hadrian [18]
- Jewish revolt [19]
- riot [20]
- Cyrene [21]
- pagan religion [22]
- temple [23]
- Hecate [24]
- Diaspora [25]
- Roman hegemony [26]
- Roman power [27]

Bibliographical references:  Applebaum, Simon, Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene [28] (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 28; Leiden: Brill, 1979)
Kerkeslager, Allen, Jews in Egypt and Cyrenaica 66-c. 235 CE [29], in Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume 4: The Late Roman Period (ed. Steven T. Katz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53-68
Serafini, Nicola, La dea Ecate a Cirene fra storia, culto e iconografia (con un catalogo degli hekataia editi e di tre inediti) [30], in Cirene ‘Atene d’Africa’: attività delle missioni archeologiche internazionali a Cirene e in Cirenaica (ed. M. Luni ; Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2006), 107-126
Lüderitz, Gert, Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaika [31] (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1983)
Reynolds, Joyce M., Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and the Cyrenaican Cities [32], The Journal of Roman Studies 68 (1978) : 111-121
Alexander, a man of Semitic origin, has to restore the doors of a temple taken away by the Romans when they retreated from Dura Europos.

- Read more about Roman Soldiers and a Local Temple in Dura Europos [37]

Colonisation of Cyrene and the Jewish Riots under Trajan [38]

A Roman commander from Attaleia in Pamphylia is honoured for services that included the colonisation of Cyrene after Trajan.

- Read more about Colonisation of Cyrene and the Jewish Riots under Trajan [38]

The Temple of Zeus in Cyrene under Marcus Aurelius [39]

Under Marcus Aurelius, Cyrene was still restoring religious spaces damaged in the Jewish riots at the end of Trajan’s reign. The new construction is a vow for the fortune, victory, and everlasting preservation of the imperial family, the Senate and the Roman people.

- Read more about The Temple of Zeus in Cyrene under Marcus Aurelius [39]

The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis [40]

A funerary inscription sets fines to the community of Jews residing in Hierapolis (Phrygia). A copy was to be deposited in the archive of the Jews.

- Read more about The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis [40]

A god-fearer called Aurelius Hermogenes donates a menorah to the synagogue of Sardis in response to...
of providence.

- Read more about A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis [41]

Inscription

**Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi** [42]

A Roman citizen is considered “father of the synagogue” in Stobi (Macedonia) and donates rooms after conducting his life “according to Judaism.”

- Read more about Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi [42]

Inscription

**The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias** [43]

Subscription list of an organised group of Jews in Aphrodisias (Asia Minor) including proselytes and god-fearers.

- Read more about The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias [43]

Inscription

**Epitaph for a soldier who fought the Jewish Revolt in Cyprus (AE 1992, 1689)** [44]

- Read more about Epitaph for a soldier who fought the Jewish Revolt in Cyprus (AE 1992, 1689) [44]

Inscription

**Dedication for the rebuilding of the Basilica of Cyrene (AE 1974, 672)** [45]

- Read more about Dedication for the rebuilding of the Basilica of Cyrene (AE 1974, 672) [45]

Text

**Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3** [5]

The Diaspora Revolt

- Read more about Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3 [5]

**Realized by:**

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