



Trajan and the 'tabula alimentaria' (CIL IX, 1455)

edr_144345.jpg



[1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Imperial edict.

Original Location/Place: Circello (Benevento), località Macchia di Reina.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Nazionale Romano-Terme di Diocleziano, Rome. Inventory number: 449.

Date: 101 CE

Physical Characteristics: Bronze tablet discovered near Circello, in the forum area of the ancient municipium of the *Ligures Baebiani*. A large, triangular shaped section is missing from the top of the tablet, as well as the top left corner and a portion of the left side. The first two lines are in the largest lettering of the tablet, followed by a further two lines of lettering of a slightly smaller scale. The majority of the text is divided up into three columns of smaller lettering.

Material: Bronze.

Measurements: Height: 122 cm

Width: 73.5 cm

Depth: 0.8 cm

Letter height: 0.6-4.5 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIL IX*, 1455

EDR[144345](#) [2]

Commentary: This bronze tablet was discovered near Circello (Benevento, Campania) in an area believed to be the forum of the ancient *municipium* of the *Ligures Baebiani*. The *municipium* had originated following the forced settlement of the *Liguri Apuani* in 180 BCE; after the region's conquest by the two consuls Marcus Vaebius Tanfilus and Publius Cornelius Caetegus, 47,000 people from Liguria were moved into the territory of Taurasia in Samnium and split into two communities south of Rome, each of which taking the name of one of the consuls that had settled them (Pliny, *Natural History* III.105). Substantial archaeological remains have been excavated at the site of Macchia, including the discovery of this inscription (for the structure and excavation of ancient Beneventum/Macchia, see Torelli, *Benevento romana*, p. 103-139). It is a vital document that records the *Institutio alimentaria*, a policy of the emperor Trajan, which was designed to offer financial subsidies to the children of poor Italian families. It was organised on a territorial basis that provided social assistance to 53 towns and *municipia* in Italy (Friggeri, *The Epigraphic Collection*, p. 112). The *alimenta* was implemented by Trajan in 99 CE, and quickly became a definitive feature of his political and social regime, which endured well into the middle of the third century CE.

Our evidence for the *alimenta* comes from several sources, including a speech made before Trajan by Pliny the Younger (*Panegyric*, 28.5). Pliny also refers to issues connected to the policies of the *alimenta* at length in his correspondence with Trajan (e.g. *Letters* VII, 18; X, 54; 55). According to the fourth century historian Aurelius Victor, the policy was initiated by Trajan's predecessor Nerva, although there is little other evidence for this in any



other source (*Epitome*, XII.4; Duncan Jones, "Purpose and Organisation," p. 123, n. 1). It is clear that even if Nerva had originated the idea for the *alimenta*, it was not a policy that came into full effect until the beginning of Trajan's reign. Although the literary evidence is sparse, more in depth detail can be found in the epigraphic record; some inscriptions survive that record the *praefecti alimentorum*, or the 'prefects of the *alimenta*', such as Titus Pomponius Bassus, who were charged with the administration of it in cities that fell under their jurisdiction. The most significant evidence, however, comes from two bronze tablets, that of the *Ligures Baebiani*, to be discussed here, and one from Veleia (Piacenza), from 103 CE (*CIL* XI, 1147; for the tablet from Veleia, see Moncao, "Velleia," p. 143-148). Both tablets provide detailed information for how the *alimenta* worked, the figures involved and the kinds of individuals that it affected. The tablet of the *Ligures Baebiani* (c. 246 lines) is more concise than that from Veleia (674 lines), but together they offer a full picture of how the *alimenta* functioned across the provincial communities of Roman Italy.

The *alimenta* was designed to offer subsidies to children of poor Italian families. In order to raise the capital necessary, mortgage loans were offered by the state to individual landowners, with interest charged on the repayments, which was used to pay the subsidies. Richard Duncan-Jones's 1964 article established the procedure by which the *alimenta* was set up in Italian provincial towns and concluded that the method of mortgage-loans used by Trajan to raise the funds required to offer the subsidies was undoubtedly the most cost effective approach ("Purpose and Organisation," p. 126-128). He proposed that the first step was for the Roman senate to establish how many beneficiaries could reasonably be supported in each town; applications for support were likely then invited, at which point the amount of annual support was calculated. This latter step was complicated somewhat by the different rates of benefit that existed, which depended on sex and social status; the tablet from Veleia listed these four rates as 16 or 12 sesterces per month for boys and 12 or 10 sesterces for girls, with the higher rates offered to those of freeborn status (*CIL* XI, 1147). The treasury then allocated a sum twenty times that required each year, and divided it up amongst the local landowners according to the value of their land. As the examples given here from the tablet of the *Ligures Baebiani*, the landowners received a loan of c. 8% of the value of their land, on which they were then required to make monthly payments with added interest of c. 5%, from which the subsidies were taken (Duncan-Jones, "Purpose and Organisation," p. 126; Garnsey, "Trajan's Alimenta," p. 367). The model for this arrangement appears to have been the privately endowed foundations that already existed across Italy, through which members of the aristocracy supported local communities (e.g. *CIL* XI, 1602: a private subsidy which offered support to the inhabitants of *Florentia* (Florence) during the Flavian period). Using loans against land was already, then, a known means for securing regular revenue, which Trajan developed and exploited on a wider scale. It was an ingenious move that permitted him to act with largesse without putting the state under undue pressure. The funds required to make the loans were much less than that which might be required to set up a perpetual foundation, particularly if Richard Duncan-Jones calculations were correct; he noted that in order to form a foundation at the interest rate of 5% per year, 20 years worth of income had to be made available at once (Duncan-Jones, "Purpose and Organisation," p. 128). Although the loans might appear to have been motivated also at freeing landowners from debt and encouraging them to increase production, it is possible that the loans were compulsory, and that the interest on them may have been perpetual (Friggeri, *Epigraphic Collection*, p. 112. For discussion of whether or not the loans were compulsory, see Duncan-Jones, "Purpose and Organisation," p. 129 n. 34; p. 135-137; Garnsey, "Trajan's Alimenta," p. 367-381).

There has been much discussion in the scholarship as to the purpose of the *alimenta* scheme, and what motivated its establishment. Richard Duncan Jones has argued that the main purpose of the *alimenta* was to increase the birth rate in Italy, and especially the number of freeborn men, which would help to secure the eternity of Roman *imperium* ("Purpose and Organisation," p. 123-146; Bennett, *Trajan*, p. 83). Others have suggested that there was an agrarian policy in mind, conceived to finance less wealthy or struggling landowners throughout the peninsula (Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, p. 369; Bourne, "Roman Alimentary Program," p. 57). John Patterson suggested that the distribution of *alimenta* schemes across Italy was determined by the "existence or absence of rural poverty in certain areas," against which Greg Woolf has convincingly argued; he noted – in partial agreement with Paul Veyne – that it was extremely unusual for the poor to be singled out for special treatment by the Roman imperial administration. Distributions of food and money were more typically aimed at groups of higher status who were deemed "worthy" of the privilege (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage," p. 210-211). Although some of the recipients of the *alimenta* may well have been of lower status, it is more likely that they were arbitrarily selected as representatives of the citizen body, and not deliberately singled out as needy beneficiaries (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage," p. 211).

Greg Woolf instead prefers to understand the *alimenta* as a potential indication of the growth of urban civic values and institutions in rural Italy, particularly if we consider how and where the *alimenta* was instituted (Woolf, "Food, Poverty and Patronage" p. 199-202, *contra* Patterson "Crisis", p. 129). Under Trajan (and potentially Nerva too), the idea of a private loan foundation was reconstituted as an imperial program that was restricted to Italy,



representing therefore a “critical point in the development of the relationship between the emperors and Italy” (Woolf, “Food, Poverty and Patronage” p. 220). As the opening statement of the tablet of the *Ligures Baebiani* stated, the *alimenta* was offered *ex indulgentia* (“by the indulgence/largesse”) of the emperor, who acted as provider and patron to the community at which it was directed. In this respect, the *alimenta* was a key example of the generosity of the emperor, and used ideologically to demonstrate his ‘good’ qualities. Trajan is described in the introductory passage of both surviving tablets from Beneventum and Veleia as ‘the best and greatest *princeps*’ (*Optimus Maximusque princeps*), evoking the most important god of the Roman pantheon by association. The epithet followed the military and dynastic titles that established Trajan’s legitimacy, whilst also elevating his generosity to that of the supreme deity of Rome. The fact that Trajan’s *indulgentia* was given as the reason for the *alimenta* cast him in the guise of the ‘parent’ of Italy’s children, in whose welfare and posterity he was deeply invested. This generosity was further recorded on coins minted by Trajan, in which he is depicted distributing bread to children, or with a goddess variously interpreted as Italia or Abundantia (e.g. [Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children \(103-111 CE\)](#) [3]).

Economic crisis has often been cited as the motivation for Nerva and Trajan’s interest in instituting the *alimenta*, but there may be other reasons. Greg Woolf has suggested that the policy enacted by Trajan may have been in response to changes in the “condition of Italy...the gradual changes in the political balance of the empire” (“Food, Poverty and Patronage,” p. 226). The particular concern may have been that native Italians were at risk of being replaced – both quantitatively and in terms of importance – by provincials. Trajan was sensitive to this, requiring that candidates for senatorial office invest one third of their capital in Italian land (Pliny, *Letters*, VI.19), and the *alimenta* may be an extension of a similar sensitivity, or even an extension of the *frumentatio* – the corn distribution – that was reserved as a privilege to the inhabitants of the capital city (Woolf, “Food, Poverty and Patronage,” p. 205). In this respect, the *alimenta* was set up “as a means of symbolically binding the emperor and Italy closer together at a time when there was anxiety that they were drifting apart” (Woolf, “Food, Poverty and Patronage,” p. 226-7). The fact that Trajan was not himself Italian may also have played into this anxiety. More generally speaking though, the *alimenta* was another way by which the emperor could extend largesse to the different communities he governed; although the giving of gifts was a crucial feature of imperial rule, it did not follow a standardised nor regular program but was rather enacted according to the different communities and situations with which the emperor came into contact. As Greg Woolf has stated, “*Beneficia* were valuable precisely because they were not entitlements but were marks of imperial favour” (“Food, Poverty and Patronage,” p. 228). The institution of the *alimenta* was Trajan’s means of engaging with rural Italian communities who may have felt underprivileged compared with the rapid growth and development of the provincial municipalities over the course of the previous century; the fact that it continued well into the third century is proof of how successful a political and social measure it actually was.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Traianus](#) [4]
- [obligo](#) [5]
- [praedium](#) [6]
- [emptus](#) [7]
- [Ligures Baebiani](#) [8]
- [puer](#) [9]
- [puella](#) [10]
- [indulgentia](#) [11]
- [aestimatus](#) [12]
- [sestertius](#) [13]
- [fundus](#) [14]
- [pagus](#) [15]

Thematic keywords:

- [alimenta](#) [16]
- [subsistence](#) [17]
- [poverty](#) [18]
- [Italy](#) [19]
- [agriculture](#) [20]



- [imperial finance](#) [21]
- [Trajan](#) [22]
- [Nerva](#) [23]
- [farm](#) [24]
- [mortgage](#) [25]
- [loan](#) [26]
- [land](#) [27]
- [imperial generosity](#) [28]
- [imperial indulgence](#) [29]
- [imperial patronage](#) [30]
- [patron](#) [31]
- [benefactor](#) [32]

Bibliographical references: Bennett, Julian, [Trajan: Optimus Princeps](#) [33] (Roman Imperial Biographies; London: Routledge, 2000)

Bourne, Frank C., [The Roman Alimentary Program and Italian Agriculture](#) [34], Transactions of the American Philological Association (1990) : 47-75

Cao, Irene, [Alimenta: il racconto delle fonti](#) [35] (Padova: Il poligrafo, 2010)

Duncan-Jones, Richard, ["The Purpose and Organisation of the Alimenta"](#) [36], Papers of the British School at Rome 32/1 (1964) : 123-146

Duncan-Jones, Richard P., [The Economy of the Roman Empire: Quantitative Studies](#) [37] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

Friggeri, Rosanna, [The Epigraphic Collection of the Museo Nazionale Romano at the Baths of Diocletian](#) [38] (Roma: Electa, 2001)

Garnsey, Peter, [Trajan's Alimenta: Some Problems](#) [39], Historia 17,3 (1968) : 367-381

Monaco, Giorgio, [Velleia. Scavi e Problemi](#) [40], Rivista di Studi Liguri (1951) : 143-148

Patterson, John R., [Crisis: what crisis? Rural change and urban development in imperial Appennine Italy](#) [41], Papers of the British School at Rome 55 (1987) : 115-146

Torelli, Marina, [Benevento romana](#) [42] (Roma: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2000)

Veyne, Paul, ["La table des Ligures Baebiani et l'institution alimentaire de Trajan \(Premier article\)"](#) [43], Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire 69 (1957) : 81-135

Veyne, Paul, ["La table des Ligures Baebiani et l'institution alimentaire de Trajan \(Deuxième article\)"](#) [44], Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire 70 (1958) : 177-241

Warmington, Brian H., Miller, S.J., [Inscriptions of the Roman Empire AD 14-117](#) [45] (London: London Association of Classical Teachers, 1996)

Wolf, Greg, [Food, Poverty and Patronage. The Significance of the Epigraphy of the Roman Alimentary Schemes in Early Imperial Italy](#) [46], Papers of the British School at Rome 58 (1990) : 197-228

Other sources connected with this document: Numismatic item

[Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children \(103-111 CE\) \[47\]](#)

- [Read more about Aureus depicting the head of Trajan and the same extending his hand to children \(103-111 CE\) \[47\]](#)

Inscription

[Pomponius Bassus administers the alimenta \(CIL VI, 1492\) \[48\]](#)

- [Read more about Pomponius Bassus administers the alimenta \(CIL VI, 1492\) \[48\]](#)

Realized by:

[Caroline Barron](#) [49]



Source URL: <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/trajan-and-%E2%80%99tabula-alimentaria%E2%80%99-cil-ix-1455>

Links

- [1] http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/edr_144345.jpg?itok=o08tqr7
- [2] http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=EDR144345&fo_antik=&fo_modern=&Bibliografia%5B%5D=&Testo=&boolTesto=AND&Testo2=&bool=AND&ordinamento=id_nr&javasi=javascriptsi&se_foto=tutte&lang=it
- [3] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/aureus-depicting-head-trajan-and-same-extending-his-hand-children-103-111-ce>
- [4] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/traianus>
- [5] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/obligo>
- [6] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/praedium>
- [7] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/emptus>
- [8] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/ligures-baebiani>
- [9] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/puer>
- [10] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/puella>
- [11] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/indulgentia>
- [12] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/aestimatus>
- [13] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/sestertius>
- [14] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/fundus>
- [15] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pagus>
- [16] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/alimenta>
- [17] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/subsistence>
- [18] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/poverty>
- [19] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/italy>
- [20] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/agriculture>
- [21] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-finance>
- [22] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/trajan>
- [23] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/nerva>
- [24] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/farm>
- [25] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/mortgage>
- [26] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/loan>
- [27] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/land>
- [28] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-generosity>
- [29] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-indulgence>
- [30] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-patronage>
- [31] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/patron>
- [32] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/benefactor>
- [33] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/trajan-optimus-princeps>
- [34] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/roman-alimentary-program-and-italian-agriculture>
- [35] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/alimenta-il-racconto-delle-fonti>
- [36] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%99C-purpose-and-organisation-alimenta%E2%80%99D>
- [37] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/economy-roman-empire-quantitative-studies>
- [38] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/epigraphic-collection-museo-nazionale-romano-baths-diocletian>
- [39] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/trajan%E2%80%99s-alimenta-some-problems>
- [40] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/velleia-scavi-e-problemi>
- [41] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/crisis-what-crisis-rural-change-and-urban-development-imperial-apennine-italy>



[42] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/benevento-romana>

[43] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%99Cla-table-des-ligures-baebiani-et-l%E2%80%99institution-alimentaire-de-trajan-premier-article%E2%80%9D>

[44] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%99Cla-table-des-ligures-baebiani-et-l%E2%80%99institution-alimentaire-de-trajan-deuxi%C3%A8me-article%E2%80%9D>

[45] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/inscriptions-roman-empire-ad-14-117>

[46] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/food-poverty-and-patronage-significance-epigraphy-roman-alimentary-schemes-early-imperial-italy>

[47] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/aureus-depicting-head-trajan-and-same-extending-his-hand-children-103-111-ce>

[48] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/pomponius-bassus-administers-alimenta-cil-vi-1492>

[49] <http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/caroline-barron>