Trilingual inscription of Cornelius Gallus (CIL III, 14147)

Dedication of Cornelius Gallus (CIL III, 14147)

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Honorific
Original Location/Place: Philae, Egypt
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Egyptian Museum, Cairo
Date: 29 BCE

Physical Characteristics: Granite stele containing an honorific text in three scripts. The stele has a rounded pediment, which contains relief of a winged sun with two uraei (rearing cobras) above a rider on horseback, whose arm is raising a shield. Three vertical columns of hieroglyphic text are placed either side of the rider, with a further three inscriptions immediately beneath. The first, and largest portion of text, is in hieroglyphs, then Latin, with Greek at the bottom of the stele.

Material: Aswan Granite
Measurements: Height: 165 cm
Width: 116 cm
Depth: 35 cm

Language: Latin, Greek

Category: Roman

Publications: CIL III, 14147 (ILS 8995 = IGPhilae. II 128)

Commentary: This inscription records the achievements of Caius Cornelius Gallus (c. 70 – 26 BCE), a poet, friend of Vergil, military general and the first prefect of Egypt under Octavian. It is an important text, which reveals a further perspective on the victory at Actium and the way this victory was communicated to different audiences. The inscription’s text manages to commemorate Octavian, and also the official – Gallus – acting on his behalf. The granite stele contains three inscriptions: the largest portion of text is in Egyptian hieroglyphs, immediately beneath the relief that dominates the pediment of the stone; beneath this is Latin, followed by Greek at the bottom. Although all three inscriptions record similar achievements, they are not exact copies of each other; the Greek follows the Latin closely, with some variations, but the hieroglyphic text is somewhat different, focusing on the external threats to Egypt and a cultic association with the First Cataract gods at Philae, where the stone was found. These three inscriptions demonstrate the complexity of communication and intended audiences in Egypt, and the dependency of the meaning of ‘victory’ upon the author and audience (Cornwell, Pax terra marique, p. 126).

Following his success at Actium and the subsequent deaths of Anthony and Cleopatra, Octavian took control of Egypt as a new Roman province. Unlike the majority of Rome’s territories, which were governed by individuals chosen by lot amongst the senators, Egypt remained under the control of the emperor, who reserved the right to appoint its most senior administrative figure at will. Caius Cornelius Gallus, an equestrian, was named the first prefect of Egypt in return for helping Octavian secure Alexandria in 30 BCE (Dio Cassius, Roman History, LI.9.1-4; Suetonius, Augustus, LXVI). The trilingual inscription appears to have been dedicated shortly afterwards. Gallus’s fall from grace a few years later may lie behind the stele’s re-use in the foundations of the altar of the Temple of Augustus in 13/12 BCE but it was originally located in the complex surrounding the temple of Isis in Philae (Hoffman et al., Die dreisprachige Stele des C. Cornelius Gallus, p. 10; 16-18. For the downfall of Gallus’s career,
The Latin text of the inscription focuses on the victories won by Gallus during a campaign against a series of revolts starting in the city of Thebes, in 29 BCE, and was erected in celebration of the subsequent campaign. The victories were clearly extraordinary, with Gallus stating that he led his army over the “first cataract of the Nile, into which region arms had not previously been borne either by the Roman people or by the kings of Egypt” (excercitum ultra Nili cataractae trans ducto, in quem locum neque populo Romano neque regibus Aegypti arma sunt prolata). The stele was set up at Philae, just above the Cataract – the southern boundary of Egypt – to emphasise the extent of Egypt under Roman control (Cornwell, Pax terra marique, p. 129). Gallus’s claim was, however, a potentially bold one, traversing “political and topographical boundaries” by claiming to have extended into territory beyond that held by the Ptolemies or the Pharaohs (Myers, Frontiers of the Empire, p. 114). This could have been interpreted as a statement of personal success that had superseded the accomplishments of Octavian, commemorating individual military campaigns in a manner closer to that of Republican generals than those loyal to Octavian’s emerging routine (Myers, Frontiers of the Empire, p. 114, n. 14). Indeed, the Latin inscription is extremely detailed in its discussion of Gallus’s achievements: the double victory of Thebes is mentioned (Thebaidis intra dies XV…bis acie exercitu ultra Nili); Octavian’s post reges / a Caesare deivi filio devictos / Aethiopum ad Philas auditis, eodem rege in tutelam recepto. However, Hannah Cornwell has suggested that these successes must be understood in the context of the first lines of the Latin inscription, in which Octavian is presented as the ‘conqueror’ of the kings of Egypt (post reges / a Caesare deivi filio devictos); Octavian’s achievement – the defeat of the Egyptian ruling dynasty – is credited first in the list, from which Gallus’s actions are enabled (Cornwell, Pax terra marique, p. 138). In the Greek version of the text Octavian’s conquest of the Egyptian king’s is recorded, but his role is given in the context of appointing Gallus as the prefect, not as the conqueror 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religious framework that spoke to the security of Philae under Rome's control (for literacy in Egypt in this period, see Fewster, Penelope, “Bilingualism in Roman Egypt,” p. 220-245). The use of traditional Pharaonic formulae to describe Octavian's position and the combination of religious symbols with the content of the text presented Rome's control of Egypt within a traditional, Egyptian frame of reference that would make sense to an Egyptian cultic audience (Cornwell, Pax terra marique, p. 140). The three inscriptions, when read together, promote the message that under Octavian – and through the careful administration of the evidently capable Gallus – Egypt could be assured of her dominance, prosperity, and most importantly, security.

Keywords in the original language:

- Caesar [2]
- Gallus [3]
- Aegyptus [4]
- divus filius [5]
- devictus [6]
- praefectus [7]
- Alexandria [8]
- dux [9]
- Thebaid [10]
- hostis [11]
- vincit [12]
- victor [13]
- expugno [14]
- rex [15]
- populus romanus [16]
- Aethiopia [17]
- exercitus [18]
- pater [19]
- Niles [20]
- donum [21]

Thematic keywords:

- Egypt [22]
- conquest [23]
- Roman power [24]
- Octavian [25]
- Actium [26]
- province [27]
- Roman administration [28]
- prefect of Egypt [29]
- Gallus [30]
- Roman victory [31]
- Ethiopians [32]
- Horus [33]
- stele [34]
- Nile [35]

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