The emperor Vespasian consults with an Italian oracle what to do with the German captive Veleda

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Oracular

Original Location/Place: Casalinaccio, close to the acropolis of Ardea

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo di Villa Giulia (Italy)

Date: 78 CE to 79 CE

Physical Characteristics: Only a small fragment has survived. The top, bottom, and sides are broken. There is no word separation and the letterforms are rounded. There is a small vacat on the bottom of the inscription, probably indicating that this was the end of the text

Material: Marble

Measurements: 16,50 centimetres in height, 16,50 in width, and 2,5 thick. Letters are 1,1-1,2 centimetres tall

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek

Publications: The fragment was originally edited by Guarducci, “Veleda,” who added further corrections in “Nuove osservazioni sull’epigrafe ardeatina di Veleda,” incorporating or rejecting suggestions proposed by other scholars. Since then, the most important restorations of the still unresolved text have been proposed by P. Mingazzini [SEG 14.611] and R. Merkelbach [SEG 31.851].

Commentary: The fragment is small, the inscribed text is not complete, and many details will remain unknown. However, one name appearing in line 3, Veleda, makes it possible to explore how important this document is to understand Rome’s attitude towards captives, religiosity, and the military, exactly in the period in which Jerusalem fell.

Veleda was a female descendant of the German aristocracy who played a prominent role in the so-called Batavian revolt. According to Tacitus (Histories IV.61), the commander of the legion, Munius Lupercus, was sent to her as a gift and she exercised extensive authority “according to the German custom.” Both in this text and his monographic work on Germania (chapter 8), the Italian author explains that the indigenous population believed that maidens of noble birth had prophetic powers and, consequently, their counsels were highly appreciated. Veleda belonged to such a distinguished group and was regarded by many Germans as a divinity because she predicted the destruction of the Roman legions. In 69 CE, the leader of the Batavian auxiliaries, Julius Civilis, instigated an uprising followed by local tribes inhabiting the lands around the Rhine mouths. At Rome, this year saw four different Roman emperors claiming power and, consequently, swift military response was limited. Veleda participated in the revolt and, from a tower, one of his Bructeri relatives is said to have “carried to her the questions and brought back her answers, as if he were the messenger of a god” (Tacitus, Histories IV. 65). Only at the end of 70 CE could the Batavian rebels be crushed, but it was not until 77-78 when the governor of Lower Germany, Rutilius Gallicus, conquered the native territory of Veleda and could finally hold the prophetess captive (Statius, Silvae I.4.90; see Henderson, A Roman Life, p. 86; Levick, Vespasian, p. 160).

From the discovery of our inscription in the territory of Ardea [2], it must be inferred that Veleda was later transported to Italy. In the imperial period, the importance of this Latin settlement diminished but was still considered a relevant sacred location by virtue of its temples (see Di Mario, Ardea). In one of them, a marble fragment was found containing an oracular text (Guarducci, “Veleda”). Even if the word ???????/chrêsmos (“oracle”) is supplemented in our edition, the religious nature of the document can be suggested because of the appearance of the verb “to consult” in subjunctive ([????]???, l. 3). The presence of Veleda also provides us with a chronology according to which the four letters preserved in line 2 would correspond to the Roman emperor between the second half of 69 and 79 CE: Vespasian. His name appears in the dative case indicating that the oracular response was given directly to him. The imperial question – one of the few sentences fully preserved – is simple: what shall I do? In line 4, the reference to a maiden (????????/parthenos) unmistakably connects Vespasian’s consultation with Veleda and the virginal description reported by Tacitus as mentioned above. Moreover, the description of this woman as tall (????????/makra) complies with the ancient stereotype of northern European people in the eyes of the Romans.

The tone of the inscription is highly poetic, a characteristic of other Greek oracular texts from prestigious sanctuaries such as Delphi, Didyma, or Claros. This aspect makes the restoration of lines particularly speculative and, for this reason, suggestions proposed by various scholars are removed from our edition and commentary. For
example, a clear reference to the German tribes is to be interpreted in line 6 when the text mentions a group of “Rhine-drinkers”. Likewise, their reverence (?????????/sebousin) to Veleda matches again with Tacitus’s account of the divine powers of the prophetess. Line 7 develops the effects caused by this reverence that made the Germans shiver (??????????/phrissontes). However, it is not possible to elucidate to what exactly the genitive ????/chryseês (“golden”) is referring. The most likely relation is to the word starting with ????- at the end of the line, which is the root of the Greek terms for horn (??????/keras) and thunderbolt (????????/keraunos).

The problems of interpretation are even more acute in lines 8 and 9. The adjective ?????/argên (“idle”) is connected with the accusative relative pronoun in line 6, so it is referring to Veleda. The final clause introduced by the conjunction ????/hina can also be related to the primary question contained in line 4. Accordingly, Vespasian would be asking what to do with Veleda “so that she does not grow (??????/trephêi) idle.” The last line contains the actual response of the oracle as indicated by the use of the imperative ??????????/apomyssetô (“let her wipe”). Again, it is impossible to know the nature of the bronze (????????/chalkoun) object which Veleda was supposed to clean. Nonetheless, it probably implies that the German maiden was sent to the temple of Ardea where she could continue practising her mantic powers as well as completing other menial tasks such as this wiping.

In conclusion, whereas the exact words and clauses of the inscription are still open to interpretation, the historical message is largely straightforward. The Roman emperor was consulting an oracle in order to decide what to do with a war captive who allegedly had divine powers and was revered by subjected peoples. This testimony therefore illustrates that a high degree of religiosity could be involved in such decisions. This aspect becomes especially relevant to the study of the Flavian period because it can provide us with new insights into the Roman attitude towards the contemporary campaigns in Judea and the subsequent treatment of Jews. In particular, the case of Veleda should be linked with another episode relating to Vespasian. The biographer Suetonius (Vespasian 5) reports that, during the Jewish war, the emperor consulted the oracle of Carmel, which encouraged him to be ambitious. Likewise, a “distinguished Jewish prisoner, Josephus by name” predicted his success. This accurate prophet in the eyes of Suetonius is no other than Flavius Josephus, who also happens to report the same episode in his work: Jewish War III.399-408. There, he presents himself as a “messenger of greater destinies” who was promising Vespasian and his son Titus that they would become emperors. Vespasian did not give much credit at first, but his hopes increased when he took account of diverse omens and found out that Josephus “proved a veracious prophet in other matters.” Now, if the testimony concerning Veleda is also taken into consideration, it is possible to confirm that this Roman emperor was particularly prone to use and accept the messages of human divination (see Levick, Vespasian, p. 69-70). Likewise, both episodes illustrate the importance of personal religiosity concerning not only the fortune of war prisoners, but also the fate of Roman power under the Flavians.

Keywords in the original language:

- ??????? [3]
- ????????????? [4]
- ??????? [5]
- ?????? [6]
- ????????? [7]
- ??????? [8]
- ??????? [9]

Thematic keywords:

- Vespasian [10]
- oracle [11]
- omen [12]
- religiosity [13]
- captive [14]
- war [15]
- Josephus [16]
- Germany [17]
- Germans [18]
Bibliographical references:

- Guarducci, Margherita, *Nuove Osservazioni sull’epigrafe ardeatina di Veleda* [22], Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archaeologia: Rendiconti 25 (1951): 75-87

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