



Decius as the 'restorer of cults and liberty' (AE 1973, 235)

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[1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedication. Statue base.

Original Location/Place: Unknown. Found reused as a spoil in Temple B, Cosa (Etruria), Italy.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Built into the wall in front of the entrance to the Museo di Cosa, Italy.

Date: 251 CE

Physical Characteristics: Inscription panel cut from the front of a statue base, re-used in the Temple with the inscribed face visible. The block on which it was inscribed had been broken into a number of fragments, six of which include the inscription. The epigraphic field was originally situated within raised borders to the right and left, although these have now been lost. The lettering is monumental, but uneven and irregularly inscribed. It has suffered bad weathering.

Material: Grey travertine.

Measurements: Width: 71 cm

Height: 94 cm

Depth: 29 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:

CIL III, 8031

Commentary: This inscription was discovered at the site of Cosa, in southern Etruria (Cosa, Tuscany) in 1953; it was cut from a statue base that had been reused in the latest phase of the floor of the cella of Temple B, on the northeastern side of the Forum (Babcock, "An inscription of Trajan Decius," p. 147). The statue base names the emperor Trajan Decius (249-251 CE), and celebrates him with the epithet "restorer of cults and liberty" (*restitutori sacrorum et libertatis*); this description is important in light of the decree of universal sacrifice to the gods issued by Decius at the start of his reign, which has been understood by some scholars as a deliberate persecution of the Christians. If that was indeed the case, then this inscription would appear to attest to the positive reception of the restoration of traditional Roman religious practice amongst a relatively small, Italian community, which can be compared with other indications of the decree's reception across the Roman world.

The inscription was carved on grey travertine limestone and has suffered a good deal of weathering, rendering much of the lettering hard to read. This is further complicated by the apparent *damnatio memoriae* that has removed the name of the emperor. Although there was much debate regarding how to identify the emperor's name in the initial years following the inscription's publication, Ugo Marelli's study of the stone confidently identified traces of the letters necessary to restore *Traianus Decius* in the partial deletion of line 2 (Marelli, "L'Epigrafe di Decio a Cosa," p. 52-56, following Babcock's suggestion in "Inscription of Trajan Decius," p. 148-150; for arguments *contra*, see Manacorda, "Considerazioni sull'epigrafia nella regione di Cosa," p. 73-79). Decius had come to power in 249 CE as one of the "soldier emperors"; he originated from Sirmium, in the Roman province of Pannonia (modern Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) and had a distinguished senatorial background that had seen him promoted as the



protégé of the earlier emperor Maximinus. He had been sent by Philip to restore order in the Pannonian and Moesian provinces after the revolt of Tiberius Claudius Pactatian, and was so successful that in May or June of 249 CE, his own troops acclaimed him as emperor. Philip and Decius met in Verona in August or September 249 CE, with Philip falling during the subsequent battle, leaving Decius as the new leader of Rome (see Drinkwater, "Maximinus to Diocletian," p. 36-38). Although Decius's reign was to be brief, coming to an end in 251 CE, it was one of great significance to the religious history of the empire, and one that led to the 'definition' of Roman religion as one of conceptual unity rather than of individual devotion to cult practices (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 153-154).

To describe an emperor as a *restitutor* ("restorer") was not unusual in third century inscriptions; from the reign of Gordian III onwards, it appeared in numerous dedications, associating the emperors with a variety of achievements. They might be acclaimed *restitutor* on account of the peace and prosperity that they had brought to a particular province, or it could refer more specifically to the capital itself, where it symbolised the restitution of order after civic strife (see e.g. the dedicatory inscription of the [Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome](#) [2]). *Restitutor* could also refer to the restoration of particular virtues, such as *pietas* ("piety"), *libertas* ("liberty") – as it also does in the case of this inscription – or *securitas publica* ("public safety"), whereby the emperor's own personal connection with these qualities extended them beyond his person and into the populace of the empire as a whole. As Ugo Marelli has noted, the formula *restitutor libertatis*, along with the variants *conservator libertatis* ("conserver of liberty") and *auctor libertatis* ("creator of liberty"), is relatively well diffused in the third century CE, an epoch in which emperors came to power through the violent deposition of the "tyrants" that preceded them (Marelli, "L'epigrafe di Decio a Cosa," p. 54). *Restitutor sacrorum*, "restorer of cults," is far less common however; it is used to describe a series of emperors in the mid-late third century CE, including Decius, Julian, Valerian, Diocletian, Galerius and Maximinus Daia, all of whom exhibited some form of renewal of Roman religion and a growing unease with the practice of Christianity. Due to the pattern of erasure in line 2, however, Decius is the only emperor to whom this particular instance of the epithet could refer (Babcock, "Inscription of Trajan Decius," p. 154).

The decree issued by Decius in 249 CE required all inhabitants of the Roman empire to sacrifice to the gods. It has not survived to us in direct evidence, but is rather known from four different sources, and although we know little of its exact contents, the sources that appear to refer to it respond to an order to sacrifice to the gods, to taste the sacrificial meat and to swear that they had always sacrificed. It was a formal edict, but it is not clear how or whether local magistrates should punish those who did not comply (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 137). The first body of evidence comes from forty-four *libelli* (papyrus certificates) from Egypt, which confirm that sacrifices were performed in accordance with the decree, and which appear to have been issued to individuals by the magistrates who supervised the sacrifice, and of which all extant copies contain some variation of a confirmation that the gods have been sacrificed to and the sacrificial meat consumed (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 137, n. 13 for discussion. See especially p. 140-141 and p. 147-151 for the administrative problems of issuing and keeping track of these certificates. See also [Papyrus Rylands 112a](#) [3]). They are contemporary to the decree and come from several different places and villages (see Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 136, n. 4 for discussion). The second group of important sources are the letters written by the bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, which describe the empire-wide persecution of Christians in which this decree resulted (Cyprian, *Letters*, 5-43; see also [Cyprian, Lapsed VIII](#) [4] and [Cyprian, Lapsed XXVII](#) [5]). The quotations from the letters of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, that are given by Eusebius also attest to the persecutions (see *Ecclesiastical History* VI.41-2 and 44), as well as the account of the martyrdom of Pionius (*Passio Pionii*) in Smyrna (see Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 136, n. 7). All are important contemporary sources and come from different parts of the empire, confirming the universal application of the decree; indeed the only exception to the edict appears to have been the Jews, for whom James Rives had rightly noted there would be some trace in the historical record had they been forced to sacrifice. Indeed, Diocletian made the Jews of Caesarea exempt from the requirements of his fourth edict, which is then recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud, at Avodah Zarah 5.4, 44d (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 138, n. 16).

The decree has often been taken as evidence of Decius's explicit aim to punish the Christian communities of the empire; it has been cited as proof of persecution and of the "explicit disapproval of the imperial court" of Christianity (Hekster, *Rome and Its Empire*, p. 71). Whilst it is clear that Christians could not join in obligatory sacrifices, and that the administrative checks upon such religious performance obviously resulted in terrible repercussions, in recent years scholars have cautioned against interpreting the edict as proof of Decius's specific aim to work against the growing Christian body of the empire. Such an aim is not attested in any historical source and, as Clifford Ando has noted, we should not "deduce intent from effects" (*Imperial Rome*, p. 139). Indeed, historians such as Graeme Clarke have rather suggested that the aim of the edict was a demonstration of the increase of central power, believing it to be a "foretaste of that autocracy which marks fourth-century government,"



of which Christianity suffered as a "side-effect" (Clarke, "Christianity in the first three centuries," p. 626; Hekster, *Rome and its empire*, p. 71). James Rives has convincingly suggested that "Decius may have formulated his decree in universal terms," seeking rather to encourage greater focus on the performance of cult acts than to punish for individual beliefs (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 141; 135). If this is considered in light of the barbarian interactions that had plagued the empire in both east and west in recent years, it may be that Decius's decree was aimed at ensuring that a greater volume of sacrifices be offered to the gods – any gods – in order to secure Rome's continued safety and security. As Clifford Ando notes, "what was wanted was a demonstration of *religio*, a demonstration of an appropriate disposition," not proof of a specific theological concept (*Imperial Rome*, p. 137). Although it is certainly possible that Decius felt hostile towards the Christians, there is no tangible evidence for this in the literary or archaeological record, and certainly nothing as deliberately aimed at wiping out Christianity as the later decrees of Diocletian and Gallienus (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 142). Given the geographic spread of the empire by 249 CE and the introduction of numerous "foreign" cults, such as Mithras or Jupiter Dolichenus, as well as Christianity, which had flourished in the different areas of the empire, Decius perhaps aimed at emphasising traditional Roman religion as an answer to the problems of his time (Geza Alföldy has argued convincingly of this, see "Die Krise des Imperium Romanum," p. 53-102). The inscription under discussion here might fit with such an image of the emperor and his particular investment in the restoration of traditional cult, but corresponding evidence in the coinage minted during his short reign is lacking, with most coin types issued by him in celebration of his Balkan origins or with standard motifs such as *Pax*, *Victoria* and *Abundantia* (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 143).

The decree should, therefore, be understood as evidence not for the explicit desire to abolish one religion, but rather as encouragement that religious practice take centre stage in civic life, in the traditional form that promoted sacrifice as the central tenet of religious celebration. It sought to return Roman religion to its origins, in which cult practice was instigated and driven by the different civic centres across the empire, in a combination of observances that were both specific to each individual community, but also linked by their demonstrations of loyalty to the imperial cult and the 'major' gods such as the Capitoline Triad. However, as convincingly argued by James Rives, the fact that this encouragement of traditional religious practice came from the emperor and the magistrates that represented him was indicative of the growing centralisation of Roman religion; it "applied the procedures of imperial bureaucracy to matters of cult...[altering] the balance between imperial and local" ("The Decree of Decius," p. 152). Although the decree did not demand the observance of one particular god or set of beliefs, it required commitment to a specific cult act – sacrifice – which came to define Roman religion as a whole, through the obligation to the imperial court that such an edict demanded (*ibid*). This "conceptual unity" was intended – as the inscription from Cosa implies – to bring about the restoration of Rome's ancestral traditions in a more secure way, and yet the greatest irony of Decius's decree is that it had the opposite effect; by the fourth century CE, Christianity had shown itself to be "a highly effective hierarchic organization that provided a much more suitable structure for universal religion," which was exploited by Constantine in his presentation of it as the more suitable religious partner to the politics of empire (Rives, "The Decree of Decius," p. 154).

Keywords in the original language:

- [Traianus Decius](#) [6]
- [pater patriae](#) [7]
- [restitutor](#) [8]
- [sacra](#) [9]
- [libertas](#) [10]
- [res publica](#) [11]
- [Cosanus](#) [12]
- [numen](#) [13]
- [maiestas](#) [14]

Thematic keywords:

- [Decius](#) [15]
- [Christianity](#) [16]
- [Roman piety](#) [17]
- [Roman religion](#) [18]



- [Roman cults](#) [19]
- [imperial cult](#) [20]
- [sacrifice](#) [21]
- [liberty](#) [22]
- [Jews](#) [23]
- [decree](#) [24]
- [stability](#) [25]
- [prosperity](#) [26]

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