



Dedication of a bridge at Coptos (CIL III, 13580)

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[1]

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

Original Location/Place: Coptos, Egypt (modern Kuft)

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): British Museum, London. Inventory number: GR 1894,1105.1

Date: 90 CE to 91 CE

Physical Characteristics: Limestone block with a Latin inscription recording the building of a new bridge during the reign of Domitian.

Material: Limestone

Measurements: Height: 58.5 cm

Width: 67.5 cm

Depth: 14.5 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:

CIL III, 13580

Commentary: This inscription commemorates the construction of a bridge in the Egyptian town of Coptos, approximately 43km north of modern Luxor, which was erected following the orders of the emperor Domitian in 90-91 CE. The inscription is an interesting example of the *damnatio memoriae* ('damnation of memory', in which the names of those 'damned' were erased from inscriptions) that the monuments and inscriptions of Domitian suffered following his assassination in 96 CE. This text, however, suffered a double *damnatio*, with the name of a former prefect of Egypt also erased during Domitian's lifetime. The continued survival of the dedication following both erasures invites questions as to what *damnatio memoriae* meant to a provincial audience, and the extent to which the condemnation of individuals at the heart of Roman power had meaning amongst local communities.

The limestone slab upon which the inscription was placed likely formed part of the structure of the bridge that it commemorated, or was at very least erected close by to it. The bridge appears to have been built across an irrigation canal just west of the town, probably to support or improve the road network to the port mentioned in the inscription, at Berenice, and also possibly the port at Myos-Hormos (Quesir) (Petrie, *Koptos*, p. 27). The inscription states that the bridge was built 'from its foundation' (*a solo*) on the orders of Domitian, whose listed titles provide the date that the bridge was constructed; the fifteenth consulship and the honorific acclamation *Germanicus* give the date as 90-91 CE. The inscription also states that the project was organised and overseen by Caius Iulius Magnus, a centurion in the Legion III Cyrenaica (*cura Cai Iuli Magni / centurionis legionis III Cyrenaicae*), which likely provided the men responsible for the actual construction. The *Legio III Cyrenaica* had been placed in Cyrenaica by Mark Antony but later defected to Octavian who moved them to a garrison at Nikopolis, just outside of Alexandria, where they were to remain based for much of the first century CE. Epigraphic and literary evidence both attest to the presence of the legion near Koptos in the final decades of the first century CE, and attribute a number of improvements to the infrastructure and road-port networks to them; the construction of this bridge was likely part of these endeavours (see (Alston, *Soldier and Society*, p. 23-38; 79-83). This was an important aspect of



Roman rule: legions cost a lot (see e.g. Edict of the governor of Galatia on the requisitioning of transport and accommodation and [Hadrian, Roman soldiers, and Asia](#) [2]), but they also built and thus brought benefits to the local population, at least in certain cases.

Inscriptions mentioning Domitian's name and titles were included in the *damnatio* voted by the Senate following his assassination in 96 CE (Suetonius, *Domitian*, 23.1). He was the second emperor, after Nero, to suffer an officially mandated *damnatio*, which covered inscriptions and portraits of the damned emperor, in order to ensure that no vestige of his name or image would be remembered (Varner, *Damnatio Memoriae*, p. 111). Of the c. 400 surviving texts and inscriptions that mention Domitian, the erasure of this name and titles occurred in approximately 40%; it was a major attempt by the Senate to eradicate all memory of him, and was directly comparable with the removal of his statues from public display (Varner, *Damnatio Memoriae*, p. 132, n. 184. For the removal and destruction of the portrait images of Domitian, see *ibid*, p. 112-132). Domitian's name and his honorific title Germanicus have been erased from the inscription here, leaving the building of the bridge attributed to a nameless *Imperator Caesar*, but this is not the most striking feature of the inscription's text. Domitian's *damnatio* is in fact the second instance in which a name was removed; line 5 of the inscription has been completely erased, although some small traces of the lettering has allowed for a proposed reconstruction. The erased line should begin a list of local dignitaries, the first of which should be the Prefect of Egypt, according to the rules of precedence (Petrie, *Koptos*, p. 27; Flowers, *Art of Forgetting*, p. 238). William Flinders Petrie identified the Prefect of Egypt in 90 CE as Marcus Mettius Rufus, who is also named by Suetonius as having been appointed to the position by Domitian (Petrie, *Koptos*, p. 27; Suetonius, *Domitian*, 4). Mettius Rufus incurred the suspicion of Domitian who accused him of disloyalty and removed him from office; of eleven inscriptions from Egypt that mention his name, four have suffered erasure (Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, p. 342, n. 11). Harriet Flower has noted the particular symbolism of this erasure – Domitian had ordered the erasure of Mettius's Rufus' name from the stone, but his own name was later removed from the same inscription. She states “the attack on Domitian can, therefore, be understood in terms of his own autocracy in the sphere of memory and could consequently be presented as a ‘just’ or ‘proportional’ punishment” (*Art of Forgetting*, p. 237). Although the erasure of Domitian's name did little to restore that of Mettius Rufus to memory, the double *damnatio* illustrates the essential nature of memory sanctions, highlighting the particular aims and fears of those who institute them, while “providing no more than a distorting mirror to view the individual who is the subject of the sanctions” (Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, p. 236). The fact that the central power in Rome paid so much attention to these details, to these inscriptions in public spaces, is indicative of their expectations that at least part of the people would read them, and that such texts had a meaningful impact beyond the power of their aesthetic. The removal of Mettius Rufus's name may have seemed a powerful statement concerning the emperor's lack of trust in his former Prefect, but the additional *damnatio* of that same emperor on the same stone emphasised the fluctuating fortune of those at the centre of Roman power.

What this *damnatio memoriae* meant to the local population of Koptos is difficult to state; the importance of the bridge that connected the town with the road network that led to the ports surely overrode any particular association with Domitian, and there is little further epigraphic evidence for *damnatio memoriae* there to suggest that the inhabitants of the town were eager to distance themselves from his memory. The fact that the majority of inscriptions from the Roman world that suffered *damnatio memoriae* were left standing in their original locations might seem to counter this argument, however; Eric Varner has suggested in his survey of the *damnatio memoriae* of Domitianic monuments, portraits and inscriptions, that erased texts were perhaps deliberately left on public display as a “visual marker of Domitian's posthumous humiliation and repudiation” (Varner, *Damnatio Memoriae*, p. 133). The decision to erase his name from inscriptions also varies enormously across the Empire; in the city of Rome itself his name has almost entirely disappeared, and an inscription from a statue base at Puteoli that honoured Domitian was completely erased, cancelling all trace of the town's positive relationship with him (Flower, “A Tale of Two Monuments,” p. 629). His name was not erased, however, from important documents such as the Flavian Municipal Law that survives from the town of Irni in southern Spain, although perhaps because this was a legal document, rather than an honorific dedication. The most interesting example, however, is in the form of an edict from Antioch in Pisidia (AE 1997, 1482). The edict was concerned with a grain shortage in 92/3 CE that was resolved by the governor L. Antistius Rusticus. Following Domitian's death, Domitian's name and titles were removed from the decree but the erasures also affected large sections of the text that dealt with L. Antistius Rusticus's career in Antioch, meaning that the inscription lost much of its relevance to the local community (Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, p. 245). Memory sanctions defined the relationship of emperors to their community, with the removal of their names from monuments indicative of a transition in that relationship that had occurred between ruler and subjects. *Damnatio memoriae* “fitted in with a general recasting of the past, including the rehabilitation of the previous emperor's victims,” which allowed the communities of the empire the opportunity to engage with a narrative history that suited their own particular purpose (Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, p. 283). That the bridge and its inscription survived in Coptos after the double erasure of the inscription perhaps suggests that the Roman



presence in the region was more significant than the works, aims and fears of one man or emperor; Rome was represented through the improved infrastructure that the bridge provided, with the nameless emperor to whom the construction was attributed emblematic of Roman power as a whole.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Domitianus](#) [3]
- [pater patriae](#) [4]
- [pons](#) [5]
- [solum](#) [6]
- [praefectus castrorum](#) [7]
- [Berenice](#) [8]
- [centurio](#) [9]
- [legio](#) [10]
- [Cyrene](#) [11]

Thematic keywords:

- [bridge](#) [12]
- [Egypt](#) [13]
- [Coptos](#) [14]
- [army](#) [15]
- [legion](#) [16]
- [building](#) [17]
- [Roman infrastructures](#) [18]
- [Domitian](#) [19]
- [damnatio memoriae](#) [20]

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[Damnatio Memoriae: une vraie perpétuité](#) [24]

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Edict of the governor of Galatia on the requisitioning of transport and accommodation](#) [28]

The governor Sextus Sotidius Strabo Libuscidianus sets the rules for requisitioning official transport and accommodation in the territory of Sagalassos

- [Read more about Edict of the governor of Galatia on the requisitioning of transport and accommodation](#) [28]

Inscription

[Hadrian, Roman soldiers, and Asia](#) [29]

Hadrian issues an edict to prevent the abuse by soldiers crossing Asia during one of his imperial visits

- [Read more about Hadrian, Roman soldiers, and Asia](#) [29]

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- [4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pater-patriae>
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