Dedication to the emperor in the synagogue at Ostia (JIWE I, 13) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Funerary.
Original Location/Place: Unknown. Found re-used in the flooring of the vestibule of the synagogue at Ostia, Italy.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Ostia, Museo Lapidario, inventory no.: 8978. A cast of the inscription is also on display in the Museum of the Rome Synagogue.
Date: 151 CE to 250 CE
Physical Characteristics: Inscribed marble plaque; some damage to the upper right corner. Lines 6-7 have been re-inscribed over an erasure.
Material: Marble.
Measurements: Height: 36 cm
Width: 54.3 cm
Letter height: 2.5-3.5 cm
Language: Latin, Greek
Category: Roman

Publications: JIWE I, 13
EDH: HD014122 [2]
PH177934 [3]

Commentary: This inscription was excavated from the Jewish synagogue at Ostia, close to the Roman port of Portus; although it had been cut into two pieces and reused in the floor of the vestibule and in ‘area G’ of the synagogue, it appears to record a dedication to the Roman emperors, as well as the commemoration of a private benefaction in the form of rebuilding and a Torah ark. Although debates remain concerning exactly what was rebuilt and when, and what the nature of the Jewish dedication to the Roman emperors might have entailed, the inscription details important evidence for the presence of a Jewish community in Ostia and its relationship to imperial power.

The inscription was first published by Maria Floriani Squarciapino following her excavation of the synagogue in 1961 (see “La sinagoga di Ostia. Seconda campagna di scavo,” p. 299-315 for full details of the discovery). The plaque was discovered in two pieces having been reused as building material in the re-laying of the floor of the vestibule and in a room known as ‘area G’. The inscription, which is seven lines long, is written in Latin and Greek with the final two lines of the text most likely inscribed by a second hand; there is visible erasure beneath the lettering and the letters themselves do not follow the style of those above them. Anders Runesson has stated that the characters of these two final lines are too different from those in lines 1-5 for them to represent the correction of a mistake in the original inscription, meaning that there were two different phases to the plaque’s construction; the first dedication, in lines 1-5, was made – according to Runesson’s reading – in the second half of the first century CE, with the final two lines dated to the second half of the third century CE (Runesson, “The Synagogue at Ancient Ostia,” p. 86).

Line 1 of the inscription contains a dedication for the health of the emperor (pro salute Augusti); David Noy has noted, however, that if the missing top right corner of the plaque was restored, there would be sufficient spacing for an additional letter, perhaps a second G for AVGG, or Augustorum. Given the proposed dating based on the style of lettering, the emperors might be Marcus Aurelius with either Lucius Verus or Commodus, or Severus and Caracalla (Noy, Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe I, p. 25). Such dedications expressing “loyalty” to the emperor were common in the provinces, and were not unknown amongst the Jewish communities within them; indeed, dedications asking for the continued health and safety of the emperor are known from Pannonia (see Dedication to Alexander Severus) and from Ptolemaic Egypt, where similar “loyalty formulae” were used with the names of rulers in proseuche dedications (Noy, Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe I, p. 25). A synagogue dedication from Palestine also records the names of Septimius Severus and his family, along with ????? ?????? (huper s?t?rias) or – “for the salvation of” (CIJ II, 972; for further discussion of this formula, see Leon, Jews of Ancient Rome, p. 140-142). The fact that this is the only line of Latin text, and that the rest of the inscription is in Greek, has been understood by David Noy as evidence for the continued preference for Greek over Latin amongst the Jews of Ostia, which corresponds to similar evidence from the catacombs in Rome in the same later second
century-third century CE period, which appears to be typical of the diaspora communities across the empire (Noy, "Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe I, p. 25).

The dedicator of the inscription is given as Mindius Faustus and his family in lines 6-7; the first part of the name has been written, in Greek, as ?????? (Mindis), which was surely intended for the Latin Mindius (Floriani Squarciapino, "La sinagoga di Ostia," when a private – now unknown – benefactor donated the ark for the Torah and some other object, see Rasmussen "The Oldest Synagogue Inscription," when the Jewish communities of the empire were facing further challenges from Christianity, we might expect that the inscription had ceased to be significant, and so the inscription plaque for the scrolls of sacred Jewish Law (White, "Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia," p. 23-58, esp. p. 34). If this was the case, the most likely donor to the synagogue was Mindius Faustus. White’s re-reading of the archaeology suggested four phases of building at the synagogue complex, beginning in the late first century CE, with renovation in the late second-third centuries CE, and two phases of renovation – the first of which was substantial – in the fourth century CE (for these arguments, see White, “Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia,” p. 23-58, esp. p. 34). If this was the case, the inscription must date to the second phase of building, in the late second-third centuries CE, indicating that he was responsible for the renovation of the existing first-century building, as well as the donation and dedication of the ???????, or “ark” for the scrolls of sacred Jewish Law (White, “Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia,” p. 39-42).

However, Anders Runesson has confidently argued against White’s interpretation, asserting that the building that housed the synagogue was always intended to be a synagogue. He has noted that the present inscription must date to the second half of the second century, based on the probability of reconstructing the plural Augustorum, rather than the singular Augusti, when a private – now unknown – benefactor donated the ark for the Torah and some other object, the name of which has been erased from the inscription, to an existing community of Jews in Ostia. Later possibly during the second half of the third century CE, a man called Mindius Faustus arranged for the final two lines of the inscription to be re-inscribed with his own name, taking ownership of the dedication for himself and his family, and before the major phase of renovation that took place in the early fourth century (Rasmussen, “The Synagogue at Ostia,” p. 87; for detailed analysis of the possible dating and arguments contra White, see Rasmussen “The Oldest Synagogue Inscription,” p. 409-433). Rasmussen suggests that Mindius Faustus may have dedicated a new ark for the Torah, as well as an additional podium on which for it to stand, which replaced the original structure but which did not necessitate the construction of an entirely new inscription; it was simply enough to change the name of the donor. By the late fourth century, however, when the synagogue had undergone substantial renovation, the gift had ceased to be relevant or significant, and so the inscription plaque was reused for repair work to the floor that had been laid during the major works at the beginning of the century (Rasmussen, “The Synagogue at Ostia,” p. 87). Why the inscription had ceased to be significant is an interesting question, particularly given its inclusion of a dedication to the health of the Roman emperor (Floriani Squarciapino, “La sinagoga di Ostia. Seconda campagna di scavo,” p. 299-315). Few challenged her interpretation of the architecture, until the publication of an article in 1997 by L. Michael White, who suggested a later date (early second century CE, in the reign of Trajan or Hadrian) for the synagogue’s construction, as well as proposing that the building was not originally intended as a synagogue, but rather was a private insula block (domestic housing) that was given over to the community in mid-late second century CE. White’s re-reading of the archaeology suggested four phases of building at the synagogue complex, beginning in the late first century CE, with renovation in the late second-third centuries CE, and two phases of renovation – the first of which was substantial – in the fourth century CE (for these arguments, see White, “Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia,” p. 23-58, esp. p. 34). If this was the case, the inscription must date to the second phase of building, in the late second-third centuries CE, indicating that he was responsible for the renovation of the existing first-century building, as well as the donation and dedication of the ???????, or “ark” for the scrolls of sacred Jewish Law (White, “Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia,” p. 39-42).
Keywords in the original language:

- salus [4]
- Augustus [5]
- ???????? [6]
- ???????? [7]
- ??? [8]
- ?????? [9]
- ????????? [10]
- ??? [11]
- ??? [12]

Thematic keywords:

- Ostia [13]
- synagogue [14]
- Jewish community [15]
- Jewish dedication [16]
- vow [17]
- Roman emperor [18]
- loyalty to Rome [19]
- sacred law [20]
- ark [21]
- Greek language [22]

Bibliographical references:

- Frey, Jean Baptiste, Inscriptions inédites des catacombes juives de Rome [24], Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana 5 (1928) : 279-305
- Noy, David, Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe. Volume I, Italy (excluding the City of Rome), Spain and Gaul [25] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Other sources connected with this document:

Inscription

A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion [29]

A group of Jews dedicates a vow to the salvation of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta and Iulia Domna. It belongs to a building project of controversial nature.

- Read more about A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion [29]

Inscription

Altar vowed for the safety of the empire (CIL XIII, 7844) [30]

- Read more about Altar vowed for the safety of the empire (CIL XIII, 7844) [30]