Dedication for the rebuilding of the Basilica of Cyrene (AE 1974, 672) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedicatory.
Original Location/Place: Basilica, Cyrene, Libya.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): In loco.
Date: 119 CE
Physical Characteristics: Six fragments of a single line inscription from the architrave of the northern internal colonnade of the basilica, to the north of the Caesareum in Cyrene.

Material: Limestone.
Measurements: Height: 46 cm
Letter height: 23-24 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: AE 1974, 672 (HD011679 [2])

Commentary: Six fragments of a monumental building dedication were excavated from the site of the Caesareum in the north African city of Cyrene. They record the rebuilding of the Caesareum by the emperor Hadrian, following its destruction by the Jews of Cyrene during their revolts in 116 CE. It is an important text that contributes to our understanding of that revolt, but which also attests to Hadrian's use of building works and urban infrastructure to spread his own imperial message. The inscription also reveals the attitude of the Jewish community of Cyrene to Roman buildings, and how they might be interpreted as ideological statements of Rome's power and control.

The revolts that broke out in Alexandria and Cyrene in 116 CE – the ‘Diaspora Revolt’ – and which spread to central Egypt, Judea, Mesopotamia and Cyprus are a well-discussed phenomenon; the scale of destruction that they wrought can be found in the archaeological records, with further evidence coming from papyri and the records of later historians, such as Cassius Dio and Eusebius, who offer details of the unrest but without clarification as to the specific reasons for which it broke out (for discussion of these sources, see The Temple of Hecate [3]; Smallwood, The Jews under Roman Rule, p. 389-427; Applebaum, Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene, p. 261-344). As Martin Goodman has stated, the “exceptional violence of the uprising and the devastating effects of its suppression are not in doubt, but neither Cassius Dio nor Eusebius…gives an explanation of its outbreak” (Rome and Jerusalem, p. 479). Trajan's attention had, since 113 CE, been focused on his campaigns in Parthia, in whose territory large numbers of Jews lived, meaning that the outbreak of unrest amongst the Jewish communities was unlikely to be coincidental (Goodman, Rome and Jerusalem, p. 479). Whether driven by the desire to protect the Jews of Parthia from Roman control, a strategic attempt to take advantage of Rome’s distracted attention, or led primarily by the individual Jewish rebels named by Cassius Dio and Eusebius (such as Andreas or Lucuas in Cyrene), the scale of the resulting revolts was devastating. The violence in Cyrenaica was especially severe; 220,000 were reportedly killed (Cassius Dio, Roman History, LXVIII.32.1-3 [4]), and the urban infrastructure that best represented Roman administration, religion and culture – and therefore Roman control – destroyed in such a way that the necessary repairs endured well into Hadrian’s reign (Boatwright, Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire, p. 173-4).

One of the buildings worst affected by the violence was the Caesareum of Cyrene. Having been adapted in the first century CE from a gymnasium that was built several centuries earlier, the Caesareum was an important symbol of Rome’s power in the city. It was named after its function as a centre for activities connected with the imperial cult and contained a freestanding temple as well as two gabled Doric propylaeae which acted as entrances into the complex from the main axis streets of Cyrene (Boatwright, Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire, p. 180; for detailed discussion of the Caesareum's architecture, see Ward-Perkins and Balance, “The Caesareum at Cyrene” p. 136-194; Luni, “La Basilica nel Foro di Cirene”, p. 377-400). Down the length of the north side of the Caesareum had been a Basilica, whose restoration by Hadrian is attested by this inscription. The text, which is fragmentary, was carved on limestone blocks from the architrave of the Basilica, which had been reused for the purpose of recording the dedication (Smallwood, “The Hadrianic Inscription from the Caesareum at Cyrene”, p. 37). Mary Boatwright, repeating the argument of Susan Walker, has suggested that the re-use of the existing...
blocks of the architrave for the inscription, which were of native limestone rather than the imported marble more typical of building dedications, is indicative of the urgency of the reconstruction and therefore the importance of the Caesareum complex to the civic centre of Cyrene (Boatwright, Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire, p. 180, n. 43).

The inscription, although fragmentary, can be reconstructed from other epigraphic texts that have survived whole in Cyrene (see Gasperini, “Le iscrizioni del Cesareo e della Basilica di Cirene, “ p. 3-22 for examples). Hadrian is named with his imperial titles, which emphasise his divine lineage as the son of the deified Trajan and grandson of the deified Nerva (divi Traiani Parthici filius divi Nervae nepos). The text is damaged at the point where the number of times he had held tribunician power is given, but it is still possible to date the inscription from the following statement that it was set up during his third consulship (consul III), which occurred in 119 CE. The most important part of the inscription is found at the end, where we discover the reason for the building’s reconstruction; i.e. that it had been destroyed in the Jewish revolt (tumultu Judaico dirutam) and that Hadrian ordered it to be rebuilt for the (Roman) community of Cyrene (civitati Cyrenensium restitui iussit). The speed with which this was evidently done is not surprising; the Caesareum was the most important building in this part of the city and the focus of imperial cult activity. Mary Smallwood has noted that the destruction of the complex dedicated to the imperial cult was to be expected during the Jewish revolt – it represented the full extent of Roman hegemony and control in the region, as well as being a monumental complex to a dynasty whose claim to divinity was entirely at odds with Jewish religious belief (Smallwood, The Jews under Roman Rule, p. 398). The problematic nature of Roman religious structures for the Jews is further evident if we consider the other buildings deliberately targeted for destruction during the revolt. The archaeological evidence demonstrates that as well as the Caesareum, the temples of Hecate, Apollo and Zeus, and perhaps also those of Artemis, Demeter, Isis and the Dioscuri were also destroyed, suggesting that the anger of the Jewish community in Cyrene was directed especially towards pagan religious buildings, possibly due to the messianic purpose that emerged as the revolt progressed (Smallwood, The Jews under Roman Rule, p. 398 and n. 25).

However, there may have been a further dimension to the destruction of the Caesareum; this inscription records not simply the rebuilding of the Caesareum, but particularly the Basilica, which housed the judicial heart of the Roman city. It was the meeting place for the Roman proconsul during his visits to the city, and the location for all judicial proceedings. Just as the complex utilised for the worship of the imperial cult was at odds with the interests and religious beliefs of the Jews of Cyrene, so too was the part of the complex that enforced Roman – rather than Jewish – law. Indeed, Cyrene appears to have been of particular focus for Hadrian’s administration of the legal system; a dossier of imperial letters have been found which record the new laws established for the city by Hadrian (Spawforth and Walker, “The World of the Panhellenion II”, p. 97), and a public inscription from Cyrene from 128/129 CE refers to the emperor as nomothet?s, or “lawgiver” (SEG XVIII, 731). The destruction of the civic space in which this kind of activity took place was deliberate and provocative, and indicative perhaps of the ideological foundation of the Jews of Cyrene’s revolt.

Irrespective of what exactly led to the outbreak of unrest in Cyrene, the destruction wrought upon the city was temporary at best. Hadrian’s efforts not only repaired the damage, but they also elevated the city’s status aesthetically and civically; Cyrene was the primary recipient of imperial generosity in Cyrenaica, benefitting from a renewed civic centre and attention from the emperor. It was later termed a metropolis, and one of only a small number of cities from outside of Greece or the Greek East to be admitted into the Panhellenion (Boatwright, Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire, p. 182). Although the destruction of the city by the Diaspora Revolt in 116 CE was certainly severe, it did not last, and in fact afforded Hadrian the opportunity with which to raise the city’s profile in accordance with his own plans and interests.

Keywords in the original language:

- Traianus [5]
- Parthicus [6]
- divus [7]
- Hadrianus [8]
- basilica [9]
- tumultus [10]
- diruo [11]
- civitas [12]
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- Cyrenensis [13]
- restituo [14]
- Iudaeus [15]

Thematic keywords:

- Jews [16]
- Trajan [17]
- Hadrian [18]
- Diaspora Revolt [19]
- riot [20]
- Cyrene [21]
- Caesareum [22]
- basilica [23]
- temple [24]
- law court [25]
- Diaspora [26]
- Roman power [27]
- building [28]
- imperial cult [29]
- Roman law [30]

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

The Temple of Hecate and the Jewish Riot in Cyrene [44]

Hadrian orders the restoration of a temple destroyed and burned during the Jewish riot of Cyrene

- Read more about The Temple of Hecate and the Jewish Riot in Cyrene [44]
Colonisation of Cyrene and the Jewish Riots under Trajan [45]

A Roman commander from Attaleia in Pamphylia is honoured for services that included the colonisation of Cyrene after Trajan

- Read more about Colonisation of Cyrene and the Jewish Riots under Trajan [45]

Inscription

Epitaph for a soldier who fought the Jewish Revolt in Cyprus (AE 1992, 1689) [46]

- Read more about Epitaph for a soldier who fought the Jewish Revolt in Cyprus (AE 1992, 1689) [46]

Text

Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3 [4]

The Diaspora Revolt

- Read more about Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3 [4]

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