



Discharge diploma for a sailor from Misenum (CIL XVI, 1)

[cil_xvi_1_interior_tablets_1-2.jpg](#)



[1]

[cil_xvi_1_exterior_tablet_2.jpg](#) [2]



[3]

[cil_xvi_1_exterior_tablet_1.jpg](#) [4]



[5]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Military diploma.

Original Location/Place: Castellammare di Stabia (Naples). Discovered during the excavations on the hill at Varano in 1750.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inventory no. 3706.

Date: 52 CE

Physical Characteristics: Two bronze tablets, inscribed on the exterior and interior.

Material: Bronze.

Measurements: Height: 14.8 cm

Width: 17.5 cm

Depth: 0.4 cm

Letter height: 0.4-0.6cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman



Publications: *CIL* XVI, 1

(*ILS* 1986)

[EDR126382](#) [6]

Commentary: This small, bronze plaque is the earliest surviving military diploma from the Roman world. It records the honourable discharge, by the emperor Claudius, of a number of sailors from the imperial fleet – made up of non-Roman auxiliary sailors – at Misenum, on the Bay of Naples. Although hundreds of similar military diplomas survive from the later empire, this is the earliest known document; the diplomas reveal the potential benefits that could be accrued through military service for non-Roman citizens: the privilege of Roman citizenship, the right to *conubium* and citizenship for one's offspring, and how these policies changed over time (Phang, *Marriage of Roman Soldiers*, p. 53).

The diploma consists of two small bronze tablets that were originally tied firmly together. The notice of honourable discharge is inscribed on both sides, with only the exterior text visible to its owner; this reproduced the interior text exactly, along with the names of seven witnesses who authenticate the contents of the document (Sherk, *Roman Empire*, p. 100). As the final lines of the inscription state, these tablets were themselves a copy of the official imperial constitutions that were published on bronze tablets and attached to the wall of the temple of the 'Loyalty of the Roman People' on the Capitoline Hill in the city of Rome until 89/90 CE, after which they were located on a wall behind the temple of *Divus Augustus* on the Palatine (Phang, *Marriage of Roman Soldiers*, p. 53). None of the inscriptions fixed to the temple site on the Capitoline Hill have survived, only the separately engraved diplomas like this that were given out to veterans as a record of the privileges that had been awarded to them. Diplomas were only given out to veterans from the Praetorian Guard, the urban cohorts, the auxilia, the cavalry (*equites singulares Augusti*) and the imperial fleet, but not to the legionary soldiers who were already Roman citizens.

This diploma was concerned with the honourable discharge of sailors from the imperial fleet at Misenum, on the Bay of Naples. This permanent fleet had been formally established by Augustus following his victory in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE; although little is known of the precise circumstances that led him to base a permanent naval force in Italian waters – Suetonius tells us it was to 'protect' them (*Augustus*, 49) – his actions may not have been a complete innovation (Saddington, 'Evolution of Roman Imperial Fleets', p. 209). By the late 60s BCE there was a large enough fleet to be worth consigning to the control of a consul in Ostia (Cicero, *On the Lex Manilia*, 33) and following his defeat of the pirates in the Mediterranean, Pompey Magnus proposed that ships be stationed off the Italian shoreline as a deterrent (Cicero, *Flaccus* 30; Saddington, "Evolution of Roman Imperial Fleets," p. 209). Although the exact size of this fleet is not known, it became an indispensable means of security, and was used politically rather than for exploration or transport; by the reign of Domitian the fleet had acquired the title of *Praetoria*, indicating its use as an adjunct to the Praetorian Guard, "to be used when operation by sea was the most convenient approach" (Saddington, 'Evolution of Roman Imperial Fleets', p. 210).

The first four lines of this diploma give Claudius's imperial titulature, stating that he is in his fifth consulship, with tribunician power for the twelfth time, giving a secure date of 52 CE. Lines 5-6 record what kind of veterans this diploma and its privileges are awarded to: the trierarchs (captains, usually Greek) and rowers (*trierarchis et remigibus*) who served under the imperial freedman Tiberius Iulius Optatus (*militaverunt...sub Tiberio Iulio Augusti liberto Optato*); it was not uncommon for an imperial freedman to command a fleet as it gave the imperial household indirect control of its activities and secured its loyalty, which was especially important here so close to Rome (Webster, *Roman Imperial Army*, p. 165). The tablet states that the sailors have been 'discharged honourably' (*sunt dimissi honesta missione*), meaning that they had completed their twenty-six years of service to Rome; the opportunity to be so discharged presented itself just once a year, when the prefect of the fleet would send a full record to Rome of sailors eligible for dismissal. The official constitution was drawn up in Rome and affixed to the temple on the Capitoline, with a list naming those discharged; this explains the reference in line 9 to the 'names written here below (*quorum nomina subscripta sunt*)'. This diploma, although addressed to an individual, was a direct copy of the tablet in Rome and so referred to the total list of sailors to be dismissed. The individual bronze tablets were then sent out to the prefect who distributed them amongst the veterans; this was the crucial step, as until the individual *tabellae* had been received, the sailors in question remained in active service (Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 88-9).

The first reward that honourable discharge brought was the privilege of Roman citizenship (*civitatem dedit*), which was conferred upon the sailors themselves, and also on their children and their descendants (*ipsis liberis posterisque eorum*). The extension of citizenship to auxiliary veterans was not unknown to Rome, and was based on the Republican principle of rewarding individual foreigners (*peregrini*) for their efforts in war on Rome's behalf,



but the formalisation of these rules most likely occurred under Claudius, who began to offer the grants on a much wider scale, as part of his policy of “promoting Roman citizenship wherever possession of Roman culture could serve as justification” (Starr, *Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 89). The second privilege awarded to the sailors was the right to *conubium*, or to contract legal marriage; now that they had been made Roman citizens, the veteran sailors automatically had the right to legal marriages with Roman women, but the diploma is specific in its confirmation that marriage with *peregrinae* or non-Roman women was also now legitimate, even if the marriage had taken place before citizenship had been achieved (*conubium cum / uxoribus quas tunc habuissent / cum est civitas iis data*). The diploma also precludes multiple marriages with *peregrinae*, stating that *conubium* only exists for the ‘first’ marriage, whether contracted before or after the citizenship was awarded; Sara Phang has suggested that this was a deliberate limitation, aimed at reducing how often citizenship could be extended to veterans’ children as a means of controlling the influx of citizen numbers (*Marriage of Roman Soldiers*, p. 60).

Towards the end of the inscription, in lines 22-23, the identity of the sailor to whom honourable discharge is awarded is revealed: Sparticus Dipscurtus, son of Diuzenus, of the Bessi. The Bessi were an independent Thracian tribe, situated between Moesia and Mount Rhodope in modern Bulgaria; that Sparticus Dipscurtus came from such a distance to Misenum is perhaps unsurprising given the auxiliary nature of the fleet, but the potential for mobility – both geographic and social – that the Roman military offered should be particularly noted. Prior to his enrolment in the Roman fleet, Sparticus Dipscurtus existed on the fringes of Rome, and yet following his loyal service to the empire, he was rewarded by becoming fully integrated legally and perhaps culturally too, with his children accorded the same rights as those born to the Italian families of much more secure legal heritage. The diplomas also served a purpose for the imperial administration too; although initially provided in order to safeguard against fraud, they also acted as a ‘moral guide’ for the behaviour of veterans (Phang, *Marriage of Roman Soldiers*, p. 82). They dictated the model for legitimate marriage, *conubium*, but the inclusion of *peregrinae* promoted the integration of non-Roman communities within such a model, thereby gradually increasing the cultural and legal contact of Rome with the extremities of her territory. As Chester Starr noted, it is impossible to state the extent to which these sailors were fully ‘Romanised,’ but over the course of their twenty-six years in service they would have certainly grown familiar with the language, customs and beliefs of the native Italian culture that surrounded them. In this sense, the diploma represented, in a very tangible way, an “actual change in status and culture” (*Roman Imperial Navy*, p. 95). It was the physical proof of loyalty and service to Rome, with the numerous examples that have survived down to us an indication of the particular significance that they held in amongst veteran communities.

Keywords in the original language:

- [trierarchus](#) [7]
- [remex](#) [8]
- [classis](#) [9]
- [Misenum](#) [10]
- [dimissus](#) [11]
- [honestus](#) [12]
- [liber](#) [13]
- [civitas](#) [14]
- [conubium](#) [15]
- [tabula aenea](#) [16]
- [Roma](#) [17]
- [Capitolium](#) [18]
- [fides](#) [19]
- [populus romanus](#) [20]

Thematic keywords:

- [Roman citizenship](#) [21]
- [fleet](#) [22]
- [Misenum](#) [23]
- [sailor](#) [24]
- [auxiliary troops](#) [25]
- [marriage](#) [26]



- [Claudius](#) [27]
- [honourable discharge](#) [28]
- [Rome \(city\)](#) [29]
- [loyalty to Rome](#) [30]
- [rewards](#) [31]
- [descendants](#) [32]
- [Romanization](#) [33]

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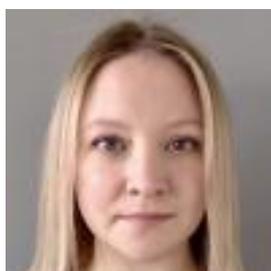
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