Epitaph for a Jewish proselyte child (CIJ I, 21)

CIJ I.21. Dedication to a Jewish proselyte child

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Funerary
Original Location/Place: Jewish catacomb at Via Nomentana, Rome.
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Villa Torlonia, Rome.
Date: 201 CE to 399 CE
Physical Characteristics: Marble plaque; lower right corner broken.
Material: Blue-grey marble
Measurements: Height: 29.5 cm
Width: 40 cm
Depth: 3.3 cm
Letter height: 2-3.5 cm
Language: Greek
Category: Roman

Publications: CIJ 1.21
JIWE 2.489, p. 390-391
EDR141313 [2]

Commentary: This extremely unusual inscription was excavated from the Jewish catacomb at Via Nomentana in the city of Rome, beneath the Villa Torlonia, in whose collection of antiquities it is now held. The site was first discovered in 1919 and explored by Roberto Paribeni but the antiquities of the catacombs were only published by Hermann Beyer and Hans Lietzmann more than a decade later, in 1930 (see “Catacomba giudaica sulla via Nomentana,” p. 143-155, and Beyer and Lietzmann Die jüdische Katakombe der Villa Torlonia in Rom for their respective accounts); in the 1970s, Father Umberto Fasola undertook extensive excavations, which revealed the different layers of the catacombs, as well as a significant number of previously unpublished inscriptions (Fasola, “Le due catacombe ebraiche di Villa Torlonia,” p. 7-62). The inscription under discussion here has generated a good deal of comment, as it appears to name a three-year old girl as a proselyte and Israelite.

The epitaph is dedicated to Irene, who lived for three years, seven months and one day (??????… ?????? ??? ?, ?????? ? ?????? ?! ?i?r?n?… ?z?sen ?? g, m?nas z ?meran a). She appears to have been adopted by her parents, given the attribution of ???????/trezpt?, which has been accepted as a form – albeit unusually spelled - of ???????/thrept?, or “foster-child” (Noy, Jewish Inscriptions, p. 391). The rest of the inscription is problematic. The child Irene appears to be named as a proselyte, which seems unusual at the age of three, as well as a Jew and an Israelite, for the latter of which there is no other attestation in the surviving Roman epigraphic corpus (Noy, Jewish Inscriptions, p. 391). A variety of interpretations have been offered based on the resolution of which noun, or nouns are modified by the terms proselytos (??????????, “proselyte”), eioudea (???????, “Jew”) and Is[dr]a?lit?s (???????????, “Israelite”). Harry Leon had taken pros?lytos and Is[dr]a?lit?s to govern Irene, with eioudea referring to the parents, giving a translation of: “Irene, foster-child, proselyte, her father and mother Jewish, Israelite, lived three years, seven months, one day” (Leon, Jews of Ancient Rome, p. 267). A further possibility might assign all three terms to Irene, as per the translation that I have offered here: “Irene, foster child, proselyte, of a father and mother, Jewish, an Israelite. She lived for three years, 7 months and for one day”. However, as Ross Kraemer noted, “neither translation exhausts the possibilities” (Kraemer, “On the meaning of
the term ‘Jew’ in Greco-Roman inscriptions,” p. 39). She proposed three further alternatives, such as “Irene, foster-child, her father a proselyte, her mother Jewish, an Israelite (that is, the mother)…” or “Irene, foster-child, proselyte, by her father and mother, a Jewish Israelite (again, the mother)…” and “Irene, foster-child, Israelite, her father a proselyte and her mother a Jew…” Although she notes that “case agreement might favor application of all four terms to the deceased child, assuming all these are meant to be nominatives,” their placement in the general order of the inscription and the number of spelling mistakes made by the inscriber make such a determination impossible to prove (Kraemer, “On the meaning of the term ‘Jew’ in Greco-Roman inscriptions,” p. 39). Although it is clear that it would be extremely unlikely for a three-year-old to be a proselyte, it might have occurred through the adoption of a non-Jew into a Jewish family, or by the conversion of her natural parents (Noy, Jewish Inscriptions, p. 391). Equally, Irene’s mother may have been a Jew, but her father was not, making her technically a proselyte if she was raised as a Jew (see discussion in Kraemer, “On the meaning of ‘Jew’ in Greco-Roman Inscriptions,” p. 40).

In any case, there was clearly evidence for proselytes in the city of Rome. The epigraphic corpus for the Jewish community in the city of Rome has yielded seven epitaphs, including this one, which refer to Jewish proselytes, and there are a good number of references in the literary record; of the inscriptions, two mention men (CIJ I, 68 and 222) and five mention women (CIJ I, 21, 202, 256462 and 523). Five of these were inscribed in Latin, which led Harry Leon to conclude that as the majority of Jewish inscriptions are found in Greek, by contrast?the proselytes must have come from the “more Romanized element of the community” (Leon, The Jews of Ancient Rome, p. 256). This would certainly fit with the way in which proselytes are presented in the literary record; Horace describes the enthusiasm with which Jews in the city of Rome sought out converts (Satires, I.4.140-143) and also noted the adoption of certain Jewish practices, such as the observance of the Sabbath, amongst the aristocratic members of Roman society (Satires, I.9.67-72). Augustine reported a complaint of Seneca’s on the same subject of the observance of the Sabbath in The City of God, describing it as having been adopted in all lands (6.11). Juvenal too compared those in Rome who scorned the traditional laws of the city in favour of studying the Jewish Law (Satires 14.96-106). When taken together with the epigraphic evidence, it is clear that these writers were passing comment on a practice that was active in their own day, and which clearly survived into the fourth century CE, if this inscription has been dated correctly, which goes some way to explaining the sometimes punitive measures enacted against the Jews by Roman emperors, who sought to curb their success at winning ‘pagan’ Romans as converts (Leon, Jews of Ancient Rome, p. 252).

It is unlikely that Irene’s status in this inscription as a proselyte, Jew and/or Israelite will ever be clarified; however, as the inscription demonstrates, the reality of Jewish life in the capital city of the empire may well have included a number of ‘middle grounds,’ in which the extent of an individual’s “Jewishness” may have been more fluid than the literature or our expectations readily permit.

Keywords in the original language:

- ?????? [3]
- ??????? [4]
- ?????? [5]
- ??????????? [6]
- ???????? [7]
- ??????????? [8]

Thematic keywords:

- Rome (city) [9]
- Jews [10]
- adoption [11]
- proselyte [12]
- conversion [13]
- catacomb [14]
- Israelite [15]

Bibliographical references: Beyer, Hermann W., Lietzmann, Hans, Die jüdische Katakombe der Villa Torlonia in
Epitaph for a Jewish proselyte child (CIJ I, 21)

Source URL: https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/epitaph-jewish-proselyte-child-cij-i-21

Links
[3] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%B7
[4] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CF%84%CF%81%CE%B5%CE%B6%CF%80%CF%AE
[5] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CE%B8%CF%81%CE%B5%CF%80%CF%AE
[6] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%83%CE%BD%5%CE%BB%CF%85%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%82
[7] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%E1%BC%B0%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%B4%CE%AF%CE%B1
[8] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/%E1%BC%B0%CF%83%CF%81%CE%B1%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%AF%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82
[22] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/caroline-barron