Under Marcus Aurelius, Cyrene was still restoring religious spaces damaged in the Jewish riots at the end of Trajan’s reign. The new construction is a vow for the fortune, victory, and everlasting preservation of the imperial family, the Senate and the Roman people.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):
Building inscription

Original Location/Place: Above the entrance of the cella of the temple of Zeus in Cyrene (Libya)
Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Not reported by Reynolds
Date: 172 CE to 175 CE

Physical Characteristics: The monumental inscription was found in 7 fragments of different sizes during the excavations of the pronaos of the temple of Zeus. Letters are slender, carefully carved, and there is no separation between the words.

Material: Marble
Measurements: The total width of the inscribed surface is calculated in c. 7.3 metres, and the height in 1.5 metres.

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek


Commentary:
This monumental inscription looks like many of the texts carved on buildings from the Greek East in order to commemorate their construction. An entry of the Digest (50.10.3.2) even established that “it was not lawful for any other name than that of the Emperor, or of him by whose money it was constructed, to be inscribed upon any public work.” Consequently, the appearance of vows for Marcus Aurelius, his house (?????[oikos]), the Senate and the Roman people is not particularly noteworthy. The extraordinary feature of this fragmentary text derives from the letters ????? appearing in line 5. Preceded by a archaising Dorian dative article ???/toi – on the significance of this Greek dialect, see below – this sequence can only refer to Jews (????[loudaikoi]) as rightly proposed by the original editors and accepted by all the other editions of the inscription available. Since this reference is associated with the participle [ka]tablêthenta (“seized”), it is possible to connect the building activity of the temple of Zeus with the Jewish riots that struck Cyrene at the end of Trajan’s reign.

The Jewish riots under this emperor is one most unclear episodes in the history of relations between Rome and the Jews. Contemporary literary witnesses are almost non-existent and the later sources are sometimes contradictory. Even the exact chronology of the events is not completely secure, with Eusebius’s Ecclesiastic History beginning in 115 CE but other materials – particularly the Egyptian papyri – indicating the spring of 116 CE (see Pucci Ben Zeev, Diaspora Judaism, p. 145-156). What should remain undoubted is that it spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean when Trajan was completing his victorious Parthian conquest. In the case of Cyrene, the main source besides Eusebius (Ecclesiastical History IV.2.1-5) is the Byzantine compilation of Cassius Dio (Roman History, LXVIII.32.1-3 [2]) prepared by Xiphilinos. They both report that the Jews of Libya followed a leader (Andreas or Lucus), and the Bithynian historian adds that they attacked both Greeks and Romans “eating the flesh of their victims, making belts of their entrails, anointing themselves with their blood and wearing their skins for clothing.” Even if not as graphic, the Historia Augusta (Hadrian 5.2) and Artemidorus (Onirocritica IV.24) record violent clashes in the region which are also confirmed by a series of almost contemporary inscriptions. These texts, some of them bilingual, contain the orders of Hadrian between 118 and 119 CE concerning the restitution of central spaces of civic and religious life such as the temple of Hecate, the Caesareum (SEG 17.804), and the public Baths (AE 1928.2). All these buildings had suffered from what is called tumultus Judaicus (“Jewish riot”), which would correspond to the Jewish reference also found in the line 5 of our inscription. The main difference between these epigraphic testimonies is that, while the former were produced only 1 or 2 years after the end of the revolt, the latter is dated to Marcus Aurelius’s reign. This means that the
memory of such disruptive events was kept in the city of Cyrene for several decades despite imperial efforts to
repair monumental destruction equally corroborated in the archaeological excavations (see Applebaum, Jews
and Greeks, p. 269-285).

The favourable disposition of Hadrian towards Cyrene is not only shown by the building inscription mentioned
above (cf. Boatwright, Hadrian, p. 173-184), but also through a series of letters exchanged between the Greek
city, the emperor, and his successor Antoninus Pius (SEG 28.1566, see Reynolds, “Hadrian, Antoninus Pius”).
The dossier confirms firstly the right of the Cyrenians to be part of the newly established commonality of Greeks or
Panhellenion, with Hadrian praising their Aegean, Dorian, and Spartan pedigree (?????????/eugeneia:SEG 28.1566, l. 16. 42). Secondly, Antoninus Pius refused to grant the rank of assize centre to nearby Berenice [3], so Cyrene remained the sole capital of the region. This title rendered with the Dorian form
?????????/matropolis appears in the line 4 of our inscription. The use of such an archaizing dialect in other forms
including the name of the citizens themselves (????????/Kyranaôn instead of ??????????/Kyrênaïôn) is very
relevant because it links language with the historic and legendary roots which, on the one hand, the Roman
emperor was praising and, on the other hand, ignored the long-standing presence of Jews in the city. Flavius
Josephus (Against Apion II.44) attributes their settlement to Ptolemy Lagos, who wanted to strengthen his
control over eastern Libya at the end of the 4th century BCE. By 140 BCE the Jewish population in Cyrene was
significant enough to receive a copy of the letter that the Roman Senate sent to Ptolemy according to 1 Maccabees
16:15-23. Likewise, Agrippa also responded to a complaint of the Jewish Cyrenians concerning the money sent to
the Jerusalem temple (Jewish Antiquities XVI.169-170). In the early imperial period, therefore, a fair degree of
interaction and tolerance of the different religious and ethnic groups of Cyrene must be supposed, especially when
Augustus (Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities XVI.161) is said to have confirmed their legal and fiscal
equality (?????????/isonomia, ?????????/isoteleia, see Applebaum, Jews and Greeks, p. 175-190, 201-241). According to Flavius Josephus too, at the very end of the Jewish War (VII.437-455) this status quo
was disrupted “when the madness of the Sicarii, like a disease, attacked the cities around Cyrene.” A man called
Jonathan enticed the less well-off promising “signs and apparitions” in 73 CE and killed 3000 of the wealthy Jews
in the city. There is no other source for this episode but, if true, it must have created resentments with both the
gentile communities of the region and the Roman administration. This process also needs to be connected with the
punitive measures against the Jews (e.g. the Fiscus Judaicus) which struck not only Judea but also the
Diaspora following the final victory of Titus (see Goodman, “Diaspora Reactions”). This new context in Cyrene and
the Roman Empire is regarded as the most important factor leading to the extraordinary events to which both the
contemporary inscriptions and our text allude (see Smallwood, The Jews, p. 331-388).

The extent of the destruction caused by the Jews in each of the public buildings cannot be traced. However, the
size of the temple of Hecate and the Caesareum was minor compared to the magnitude of the religious complex
dedicated to Zeus in Cyrene (see Goodchild, “The Temple of Zeus”). Our inscription shows that the cela needed
to be rebuilt (?????????/anestasen) and we also know that a colossal statue of the god was placed at the end of
Commodus’s reign (SEG 17.802). From both pieces of epigraphic information, it is possible to suggest that
these structures destroyed during the Jewish attacks were not rapidly refurbished, but rather substituted as part of
a larger project which took several decades to complete. The process is analogous to the reconstruction of another
very important religious sanctuary of Cyrene, that of Apollo (see Pernier, Tempio e altare). The Pythian god
was considered founder of the city because, according to the legend, he had inspired Battus of Thera to colonise
this part of eastern Libya (Herodotus, Histories IV.150-159; Callimachus, Hymn to Apollo 66-67; Strabo,
Geography xvII.21; SEG 9.72). Under Trajan, an inscription records that new porticos were prepared
coinciding with the celebration of the second Dacian victory (SEG 9.101). This is the same period in which the
aforementioned temple of Hecate, which belonged to this religious sanctuary, may have been finished (see
Serafini, “La dea Ecate”). While it is certain that the latter was attacked in the Jewish riots and almost immediately
restored, there is no such explicit evidence under Hadrian for the central spaces dedicated to Apollo. Instead, they
underwent an extensive rebuilding program that was completed under Commodus (SEG 9.172-173, 189). In this
project, the involvement of a prominent local named Caspellius Aristoteles was both crucial and extolled, a man
who – not coincidentally – is also known to have acted as eponymous magistrate of Sparta (see Spawforth, “The
World of the Panhellenion,” p. 97-98). This Lacedemonian-Dorian connections had granted Cyrene access to the
prestigious Panhellenion organisation mentioned above; so one can see a real effort by the local institutions and
citizens of the polis to revive their mythic connections with Greece, their colonial past, and archaic language.
In this process, members of the Jewish diaspora would be discordant, especially when the stigma of their destructing riots had been present in the civic memory of Cyrene for many decades (against Ziosi, “Sulle iscrizioni,” cf. AE 2010.1763; SEG 60.1833). Not surprisingly, the considerable epigraphic evidence attesting Jews not only in this city but also in the surrounding region disappears almost completely after Trajan (see Lüderitz, Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse), and only resurfaces in Late Antiquity (Kerkeslager, “Jews in Egypt and Cyrenaica”, p. 63). As a result, our inscription illustrates the consequences that rebellious acts by the Jewish population could have in a Greek dominated context where they were a minority. Moreover, the Roman response to their attacks in Cyrene does not appear to have been milder. A colony of military veterans sent by the late Trajan seems to be a measure to bring control and prevent further riotous behaviour. The surviving evidence from Hadrian, Antonius Pius, Marcus Aurelius, and Commodus was not any more positive either. Indeed, the Greeks living in Cyrene were those praised for their distinguished past and their places of gentile worship received imperial support to overcome the Jewish tumultuous memory. Accordingly, we can see clear winners and losers in the public epigraphic discourse available to us.

Keywords in the original language:

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

Thematic keywords:

- Marcus Aurelius [12]
- Cyrene [13]
- Jewish revolt [14]
- riot [15]
- Diaspora [16]
- Trajan [17]
- civic memory [18]
- public discourse [19]
- lineage [20]
- legendary past [21]
- Graeco-Roman cults [22]
- Zeus [23]
- temple [24]
- Roman Senate [25]
- Roman people [26]

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Other sources connected with this document:

Colonisation of Cyrene and the Jewish Riots under Trajan [40]
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 [40]

Inscription

The Temple of Hecate and the Jewish Riot in Cyrene [41]
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 [41]

Inscription

Roman Soldiers and a Local Temple in Dura Europos [42]
Alexander, a man of Semitic origin, has to restore the doors of a temple taken away by the Romans when they retreated from Dura Europos

- Read more about Roman Soldiers and a Local Temple in Dura Europos [42]

Inscription

Hadrian and Zeus in Aizanoi [43]
Hadrian restores the ancient lands of Zeus in Aizanoi using Hellenistic precedents and members of his administration
• Read more about Hadrian and Zeus in Aizanoi. [43]

Inscription

Dedication for the rebuilding of the Basilica of Cyrene (AE 1974, 672) [44]

• Read more about Dedication for the rebuilding of the Basilica of Cyrene (AE 1974, 672) [44]

Text

Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3 [2]  
The Diaspora Revolt

• Read more about Cassius Dio, Roman History LXVIII.32.1-3 [2]

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