

Peasant and Power in Souk-el-Khmis: the Imperial Archive in CIL VIII 10570

In 1880, Mommsen published the inscribed altar found in rural North Africa that was later republished as CIL VIII 10570. The inscription has factored into several kinds of ancient history, notably the economy and organization of imperial states, the legal procedure of petition and response, and emperor in the Roman world. It has garnered less recognition as a source for the history of the archive as an institution, especially in the provinces, and even less as a source for the way petitioners use imperial law. In part that must be because the reference to an archive has never been secure, since damage to the stone and inconsistent letter-forms have raised some doubt as to the genuine reading. While most editors have followed Mommsen in restoring *tabulario* for this crux, no one has advanced a compelling argument for that suggestion, and the most recent editor, Hauken, restored *tuiario*, an otherwise unattested word that he supposes means the same thing as *tabularium*.

In this paper, I argue Mommsen is right, not only on epigraphic grounds but also, following Omeltchenko, Bartolino, and Adams' work on Latin in North Africa, for reasons having to do with the orthographic peculiarities of Latin epigraphy in North Africa. I then argue that the historians who have used this inscription a source have overlooked or underemphasized the significance of the fact that the imperial peasants, who repeatedly emphasize their abject and powerless condition, acquired procuratorial documents from an administrative center and leveraged it against the procurator who had allegedly roughed them up. While many historians have taken the peasants claims at face value, I suggest this overlooks a fundamental tension in their petition. On the one hand, in what survives of the petition the farmers begin and end by emphasizing their humble conditions and their humiliating treatment at the hands of the imperial administrators. On the other hand, the central part of their request contains a relatively

sophisticated argument that relates the content of two texts, a *lex Hadriana* on bronze and procuratorial letters on an unknown material, in order to demonstrate that these same administrators had not only violated the an imperial law but also their own procedure.

Thus, contrary to the scholarly image of the imperial peasant as a proto-serf, I argue that the petition actually implies that the petitioners at the very least had access to someone with a keen sense for legal argument. Moreover, I suggest that the role of the *tabularium* in this legal process is further evidence for Dennis Kehoe's argument that the empire was more interested in securing the property-rights of tenants than those of wealthier landowners and leaseholders. Finally, I emphasize that what is interesting about CIL VIII 10570 is not the apparent helplessness of the farmers and not the emperor's interest in securing their rights, but that under duress and at the hands of violent administrators, the farmers of the Saltus Burunitanus organized a set of documents produced by the imperial administration in order to defend themselves against their alleged aggressors, and thus for a little while turned paper into rock and beat scissors.

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