

THE CULT OF APOLLO

by Rev. Fr. JOSEPH BUSUTTI

A mutilated Latin inscription was unearthed at Mdina in 1747 and was first published by Count Ciantar.¹ The first lines are missing. The text is as follows:

municipi² MEL. PRIMVS. OMNIum....
....IT.³ ITEM.⁴ AEDem. MARMORibus⁵ exornavit
in qua⁶ statuam? ApoLLINIS.⁷ CONSECRAVIT. ITEM. P.....⁸
.....in PRONAO. COLVMNAS 1111. ET. PARAstatas⁹ item
aram ET. PODIVM. ET. PAVIMENTVM.....
colloCAVIT.¹⁰ IN. QVOD. OPVS. VNIVERSum erogavit¹¹
ex liberaLITATE.¹² SVA. HS. CXDCCXLIIS. Quorum causa¹⁴
secvndum¹⁵ MELITENSIVM. DESIDERIVM. Optimo viro¹⁶
statva¹⁷ ex aeRIS. CONLATIONE. D.D.¹⁸ posita est.¹⁹

....(patronus) municipi Melitensium omnium....it, item aedem marmoribus exornavit, in qua statuam? Apollinis consecravit. Item....in pronao columnas 1111 et parastatas.... Item aram et podium et pavementum collocavit. In quod opus universum erogavit ex liberalitate sua HS CXDCCXIIIS. Quorum causa secundum Melitensium desiderium optimo viro statua ex aeris conlatione decreto decurionum posita est

....(Patron) of the municipium, Primus of all the Maltese....also paved with marble slabs the temple, in which he consecrated a statue? of Apollo. He also placed four columns and pilasters in the porch. He also laid the altar, the podium and the pavement. On all this he spent generously 110,792 and a half sesterces. For these services money was collected and according to the wishes of the Maltese a statue was erected to the distinguished gentleman by a decree of the decurions.

The inscription records the existence of a *municipium* in Malta. This is evinced not only by the incomplete word *municipi* but also by the two abbreviated word D D – *decreto decurionum*. A municipium was a city or *civitas* with a certain measure of internal self-government. There was in it a number of citizens, the *municipes*, who were invested with specific political rights. The citizens were represented in the local Council or Curia by a number of decuriones. A board of public officials, the two *duoviri*, two *aediles* and two *quaestores*, looked after the different sections of the administration. The municipium also possessed its own cult

of the gods and its own priesthood. At the head of the list of Councilers (*album*) were put the names of the *patroni* of the municipium.

The formula *decreto decurionum*, by decree of the Decurions, was so official and normal in municipal inscriptions that it was almost invariably reproduced in its abbreviated form D D. The decuriones, as we have said, were members of the deliberative Council of the municipium. They were elected or coopted annually. Usually a hundred decurions made up a municipal Curia. They were expected to own about a hundred thousand sesterces and to pay a sum of money, the *honorarium*, when they entered on their office. They received no salary. Every five years a list of Curia members was drawn up and the order of official and social precedence was observed. Vacancies were filled by officers known as *quinquennales*.²¹

The municipium, therefore, tended to be in the hands of the leisured class. The decuriones in return for public honour were expected to give lavishly to all public objects.

The most important thing, however, was that the municipium possessed the Roman citizenship in full or in the form of the *ius latii*. It is extremely difficult to know when Malta became a municipium. Towns in Italy were given the Roman citizenship in one form or another after the Social War of 90 B.C. on the strength of the *Lex Iulia Municipalis*. But at that time 'Roman citizenship was not allowed to overleap the narrow straits of Messina'²² In 44 B.C. Antony, acting on the orders of Julius Caesar, gave the Roman citizenship to all the Sicilian towns.²³ But Augustus treated Antony's law as null and void, perhaps because in his view the Sicilians had made themselves enemies by supporting Sextius Pompeius.²⁴ Pliny the Elder, who draws on the *formula provinciae* of Augustus, lists only five colonies, two municipia and three Latin towns in Sicily.²⁵

The existence of two Maltese coins with a Latin legend suggests that at the time (35-15 B.C.) the Maltese had become a municipium with Latin rights like all the other Sicilians.²⁶ Pliny the Elder mentions Malta and Gozo but does not say anything about their status.²⁷ Gozo seems to have been a municipium in the first half of the first century A.D.²⁸ In the case of Malta we have already said that possibly the island enjoyed municipal rights in the second half of the first century before Christ. But we do not know whether those rights were revoked. We still lack documentary evidence to enable us to determine with precision when the island acquired municipal status. Nonetheless most of the Sicilian states had municipal status by the turn of the first century A.D. Probably,

then, Malta enjoyed the same status at least by the turn of the first century A.D.

The inscription makes it abundantly clear that it is the Maltese or the Melitenses who took the decisions about the running of their island. The decurions merely interpreted the wishes of the Maltese citizens. There were, therefore, at the time two political bodies: (a) the *Melitenses*, or the Maltese citizens, who possessed legislative and perhaps elective powers; (b) the *decuriones*, who had deliberative and executive functions.

What is the date of the inscription?

We have already said that the municipium in Malta seems to have been in existence by the turn of the first century A.D. It may also have existed before that time, since, that is, 44 B.C. However, it continued in existence long after the first century A.D. Hence the fact that the inscription mentions the municipium does not mean that we can determine the date with precision. We read in the inscription that the Primus spent a number of sesterces. In the first two centuries of the Empire all financial accounts were settled in sesterces;²⁹ but that practice died out by the time of the Emperor Gallienus, i.e. c. 260 A.D. and sesterces were not minted any longer. This means that our inscription antedates 260 A.D.

The office or honour of the Primus existed in the first century A.D.³⁰ There is no mention of that office or honour in later inscriptions. Similarly the number four is written 1111 and not IV – which indicates that the inscription does not belong to the later years of the Roman Empire.³¹ On the other hand the inscription is in Latin, whilst the other one which mentions a $\pi\rho\tilde{\omega}\tau\omicron\varsigma$ is in Greek. This makes it difficult to assign it to the first century A.D. Caruana's opinion that it belongs to the Antonine Age, probably the early part of that age, makes very convincing sense.

Ptolemy, who died in the middle of the second century A.D., mentions the temples which existed in Malta: that of Hera and the other one of Heracles.³² Ptolemy passes over in silence the temple of Apollo. This does not mean, however, that the latter was not in existence in Ptolemy's time. Ptolemy fails to mention the temple of Proserpina which had been restored by Chrestion.³³

As Apollo is the only god who is mentioned in the inscription it is reasonable to conclude that the *aedes* or temple belonged to that god. Only a few of the architectural items of the temple are mentioned: *aedes*, *podium*, *pronaos*, *columns parastatae* and *pavement*. Even with the help of these few items one can somehow guess what the temple looked like.

The whole structure of the temple seems to have rested on a high platform which was called *podium*. In Roman temples the podium had steps at the principal end and a crypt in the podium itself usually housed the public treasure and the different documents of the temple. The Primus is said to have defrayed the costs involved in the construction of the podium. On the podium stood the *aedes*, the house of the god — Apollo. It normally consisted of a *váoc* or *cella* (room) which belonged exclusively to the god. Only priests were allowed to enter the *váoc* or *cella* and on special festive occasions the faithful were allowed to visit it and admire the sacred vessels and other objects which were put on show for the occasion. Even sacrifices and other religious services were held not inside the *váoc* but outside. If the Primus consecrated a statue, it was probably that of Apollo which would have been placed in the *váoc*. On the *podium* in front of the *váoc* stood the *pronaos* or ante-room. It was probably open and its sidewalls perhaps terminated in *pilasters*, as the word *pará(statae)* appears in the inscription. There were four columns in the porch. The Primus also met the expenses involved in having the temple paved with marble. The floor was also covered probably with marble tiles.

Once the construction of the temple was completed, the ceremony of dedication took place. The god Apollo was born on the seventh May and that day was probably chosen for the religious ceremony of the dedication. The temple and the lands belonging to it were sacred to Apollo. On the anniversary of the dedication a public sacrifice was annually offered. The temple enjoyed the right of asylum. On normal days it was left in the care of the *aedituus*.

For the columns, marble slabs and other items, including labour, the Primus paid 110,792½ sesterces. We have already said that during the first two centuries of the Empire accounts were kept in sesterces. Augustus ushered in a new system of coinage which in no small way helped in the economic unification of the Mediterranean.³⁴ Local money in the provinces soon disappeared. The new system was based on the gold *aureus* and the silver *denarius*. Brass or better orichalcum coins were used as token money. (1 aureus = 25 denarii = 100 sesterces). Taking into consideration the various debasements one finds it extremely difficult to state exactly what one sestertius was equivalent to in modern money. According to one reckoning³⁵ a sestertius was equal to about 1 Maltese Cent. In other words the Primus spent about £M. 1107,9205.

We have no means of knowing what each separate item cost. Marble was, of course, imported and probably a rate of 5% was imposed as cus-

toms duty. The columns and the other items would have been made of local stone. Nothing is known about the cost of labour. The sum might have been paid in hard cash; but payments might also have been settled by bankers-(*argentarii*) It is true that we do not know of the existence of *argentarii* in Malta; but a Maltese inscriptions speaks of a *statio*³⁶ which may indicate that trade and business were very well organised.

If an honorary statue was erected in honour of the Primus, as it seems to have been the case, the sum spent by the Maltese was possibly in the region of 5000 sesterces.³⁷ The cost of maintenance, services and priests was most probably met by rental of property that had been set aside for religious purposes.

From a historical point of view the most important piece of information that one can extract from the inscription is that there was in Malta the cult of the god Apollo. That god is the brightest as well as the most complex creation of polytheism.³⁸ 'Beauty of every sort, whether of art, music, poetry or youth, sanity and moderation are all summed up in Apollo.'³⁹ Above all Apollo is the *Averter of Evil*, the *ἀποτροπαῖος* whether physical as of disease or moral.⁴⁰ He was soon assimilated to the sun-god⁴¹ and was mostly invoked as the god of prophecy of the arts and of medicine. Apollo's cult spread from the Greek city-states across the Hellenic world. That cult had existed in Sicily since the eighth century and the god was worshipped in all the sicilian cities.⁴² It had also penetrated Southern Italy and Libya. The cult of Apollo reached Rome from Cumae in the sixth century B.C.⁴³ In Rome Apollo was mostly worshipped as the god of Medicine hence his titles: *Medicus*, *Medicinalis*, *Salutaris*.⁴⁴ and the Vestal Virgins invoked him with the words: Apollo Medicus, Apollo Paeon.

It was in the time of Augustus that Apollo's cult reached its peak in Rome. Augustus himself was born in May, the month of Apollo and considered himself the son of Apollo⁴⁵ The battle of Actium was won with the special help of Apollo. Henceforth that god became the special patron of Rome. In 29 B.C. a temple was built on the very property of the Emperor. Propertius left a description in one of his poems⁴⁶ In 15 B.C. the Secular Games were held in Rome and Apollo's worship was significantly brought out.

We do not know enough of the cult of Apollo in Malta. The Phoenician god Eshmoun seems to have been represented on Maltese coins.⁴⁷ Eshmoun was the god of medicine and was identified with the Greek god Asklepios, who was the son of Apollo. In a Greek inscription found in Malta mention is made of the *ἱερο μνημονες* - who were special priests

who, among other things looked after the temple of Apollo. If the god was introduced in Malta from Rome then he was venerated on the island as the god of medicine. This is interesting from the point of medical history of the Maltese islands.

The importance of this inscription for the religious history of Malta cannot be overestimated. When the inscription was made the citizens of the Maltese municipium were still pagans. There was a temple of Apollo with a priesthood attached to it. The citizens collected money in order to honour the Primus for having spent a large sum of money on the temple of Apollo. We know from Ptolemy that at the time there stood in Malta the temples of Hera and Heracles. The worship of Apollo, even if superimposed on a local or Punic cult, connects the religion of Malta with the Graeco-Roman Pantheon. Though Apollo was primarily worshipped as the sun-god during the Empire⁴⁸ the idea that he was a god who brought disease and cured it continued to haunt the minds of the people. From this point of view the cult of Apollo is also interesting to the student of the medical history of these islands.

At the time the Roman Empire swarmed with municipia and Malta and Gozo formed part of this confederation. The little municipia vied with one another in enhancing their cities as we are reminded by the orator Aristides.⁴⁹ The building of a temple and the setting up of a statue are typical municipal activities of the time. The standard of living could not have been very low, if one single person had enough money to build a temple.

¹Cf Bk 1, Not. 11, 1X.

²The reading *municipi* was first proposed by Count Ciantar.

³Ciantar suggests *fecit* and that reading is followed by O. Brès, *Malta Antica Illustrata*, Roma 1816, p. 312 and later by A. Caruana in the *Report on the Phœnician and Roman Antiquities*, Malta 1882, pp. 144-145, and in his other work *Frammento Critico*, Malta 1899, p. 296. The text, however, requires a longer word like *posuit*. C.I.L. No. 7495 and Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, No 5415, do not fill in the missing letters.

⁴Ciantar reads *IDEM*

⁵Ciantar, Brès, Caruana have *AEDEM MARMOREAM*. The text requires something longer. C.I.L. and Dessau have *Marmoribus exornavit*. For other inscriptions bearing the same words Cf Dessau No 2099.

⁶C.I.L. and Dessau read *et in ea*. For *in qua* Cf Dessau No 3536: *Et aedem opere signino imposuit in qua...*

⁷C.I.L. and Dessau suggest *statuam*.

⁸ Ciantar proposes *posuit*. A longer word is required. After ITEM one would expect a noun and not a verb. Brès and Caruana (Report) have PRO (in front); but the columns were normally placed in the porch and not in front of it. C.I.L. and Dessau leave the gaps unfilled.

⁹ Ciantar, Brès, Caruana have *parascenium*, whilst C.I.L. and Dessau read *parastatas*. As the inscription deals with the building of a temple and not of a theatre *parastatas* is to be preferred. Following the logical order of the sentences in the inscription one would expect ITEM after *Parastatas* and perhaps *Aram* after Item. Cf *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania*, by J.M. Reynolds and J.B. Ward Perkins, p. 97 No 318; p. 107, No 347.

¹⁰ *Collocavit*: a very common architectural term Cf *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. It was first suggested by Ciantar and adopted by Brès and Caruana. C.I.L. and Dessau read simply — *cavit*.

¹¹ The text requires *erogavit* (C.I.L., Dessau) Ciantar, Brès and Caruana read simply *universum*.

¹² C.I.L. and Dessau read *ex liberalitate*; Ciantar, Brès and Caruana only *liberalitate*.

¹³ Brès and Caruana have HS CXDCCXII and Caruana converts the Roman numbers to 1792 sesterces. C.I.L. and Dessau have CXDCCXIIS which is equivalent to 110,792 and a half sesterces. Ciantar says: sestertios nummos centenos denos mille septingentos nonaginta duos. The horizontal bar on the first three Roman digits represents thousands. Cf R. Cagnat, *Cours d'Epigraphie Latine*, Paris, 1954, p. 30-32. The S is a Semis or half a sesterius. Cf Dessau, No 5415 and 7194.

¹⁴ Ciantar, Brès and Caruana have S.Q. For S cf Note 13. Dessau and C.I.L. suggest *Quorum causa*.

¹⁵ Ciantar reads OB, whilst Brès and Caruana simply *Melitensium*. C.I.L. and Dessau propose *secundum*.

¹⁶ Ciantar suggests *ob merita eius*. Brès and Caruana *Omnium*. C.I.L. and Dessau *optimo viro*. For *optimus vir* Cf Dessau, No 7184.

¹⁷ Suggested by C.I.L. and Dessau. Ciantar, Brès and Caruana read simply *aeris conlatione*.

¹⁸ Ciantar, C.I.L. and Dessau read D D. Caruana following Brès reads SS in Report etc and adopts D D in the *Frammento Critico*.

¹⁹ Suggested by C.I.L. and adopted by Dessau. It is omitted by Ciantar, Brès and Caruana.

²⁰ The first lines of the inscription are missing. They must have included the names and titles of the Primus. The word *municipi* in the genitive is normally followed by an adjective and not by a noun in the genitive. Cf Dessau No 6943, 5976. It seems therefore that the word is governed by some word like *Patronus* which does not feature in the inscription. Cf Dessau No 6764, 6680.

²¹ Cf G.H. Stevenson, *Roman Provincial Administration*, Oxford 1949, p. 170.

²² Cf J.S. Reid, *The Municipalities of the Roman Empire*, C.U.P. 1913, p. 115

²³ Cf Cicero, Ep. ad Atticum, XI V12, 1; Diodorus Siculus, XI 11, 35; and XV 1, 70.

²⁴ Cf P.A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B. C. — 14 A. D.*, O.U.P. 1971, p. 240.

²⁵ Cf Pliny, N.H. 111, 88.

²⁶ Cf E. Coleiro, *Maltese Coins of the Roman Period*, Numismatic Chronicle, Seventh Series, Vol. XI, 1971, p. 78.

²⁷ Cf Pliny, N.H. 111, 88.

- ²⁸ Cf *The Ceres Inscription*, Journal of the Faculty of Arts, Vol. IV, 1972.
- ²⁹ Cf *Essays in Roman Coinage*, edited by R.A.G. Carson and C.H.V. Sutherland, p. 27; Michael Grant, *Roman Imperial Money*, London 1954, p. 264.
- ³⁰ Cf Kaibel, *Inscriptiones Graecae*, No 610
- ³¹ Cf R. Cagnat, *Cours d'Epigraphie Latine*, Paris, 1954, p. 30-32.
- ³² *Geographica*, Book IV, 708,13.
- ³³ Cf C.I.L. No 7494.
- ³⁴ Cf Michael Grant, op.cit. p. 5.
- ³⁵ Cf Paul-Louis, *Ancient Rome at Work*, London 1965, p. 262.
- ³⁶ Cf A. Caruana, Report etc. op.cit. p. 137; Jules Toutain, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World*, p. 318.
- ³⁷ Cf T. Frank, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, Vol. 1V, p. 100, Baltimore 1940.
- ³⁸ Cf L.R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Oxford 1909, Vol. 1V, p. 98.
- ³⁹ Cf W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their gods*, C.U.P. p. 73.
- ⁴⁰ Cf Guthrie, op.cit. p. 87.
- ⁴¹ Cf Mario Meunier, *La legende doree des Dieux et des Heros*, Paris, 1945 p. 14; pp. 44-45; Farnell, op.cit. p. 145.
- ⁴² Cf Eugenio Manni, *Sicilia Paganà*, Palermo 1963, pp. 191-220; also Farnell, op.cit. p. 453.
- ⁴³ Cf Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals*, London 1899, p. 179-182; N. Turchi, *La Religione di Roma Antica*, Bologna, 1939 p. 222.
- ⁴⁴ Cf W. Warde Fowler, op.cit. p. 182; Livy, XL, 51, 3, 63; C. Kerényi, *Asklepios*, London 1960 p. 7.
- ⁴⁵ Cf F. Althein, *Roman Religion*.
- ⁴⁶ Cf Bk 1V, XX1
- ⁴⁷ Cf E. Coleiro, op.cit. p. 78.
- ⁴⁸ Cf J. Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, passim.
- ⁴⁹ X1V, 223, 391.