

THE GETA INSCRIPTION

by Rev. JOSEPH BUŞUTIL

A Latin inscription found in Gozo was published by O. Brès,¹ and later by A. Caruana² and the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*.³ The following is the text:

TI

S

IMP. M. AVREL. ANTONI
NI. PII. AVGVSTI. fr.⁴ L. SEPTI
MI. SEVERI. PERTI
NACIS. AVG. ARABici
ADIABENICI. PARTHI
CI. MAXIMI. filio.⁵
ORDO. DECVRIONVM.
CVRANTE⁶.....PVP⁷....
IMO⁸.....STO.⁹

Relying on internal evidence we shall try to find out the date of the inscription and the person in honour of whom it was made.

The names of two historical personages are included in the inscription: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Septimius Severus. We shall examine the titles appended to the name of Lucius Septimius Severus first. The full name with its titles reads as follows: *Luci Septimi Severi Pii Pertinacis Augusti Arabici Adiabeni Parthici Maximi, Of Lucius Septimius Severus Pius Pertinax Augustus Adiabenicus Parthicus Maximus.*

¹Cf O. Brès, *Malta antica illustrata*, Roma, 1810, p. 332.

²Cf A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities*, Malta, 1882, p. 142.

³Cf C.I.L. No 7503.

⁴C.I.L. *fratri*

⁵C.I.L. *filio*, Brès, *PONT*; Caruana, *Pont Max.*

⁶Caruana, *IVRI... VTE*

⁷*id Publio*

⁸*id MO*; C.I.L. *IMO*

⁹Caruana, Brès, *STO*

According to Herodian when the soldiers where Septimius was stationed learnt that the Emperor Publius Helvius Pertinax had been murdered, they called Septimius Pertinax and Augustus.¹⁰ This salutation was accepted by Septimius on 9 April 193 A.D. Henceforth Septimius began to call himself Emperor Caesar Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax Augustus. Hence from the very outset, that is from 9 April 193 A.D. Septimius employed the titles of *Pertinax* and *Augustus*. On 1 June of the same year he was proclaimed Emperor by the Senate in Rome and some days later, at his own instigation, he was granted the cognomen *Pertinax* by the same Senate.¹¹

After his triumphal entry in Rome, where Septimius spent thirty days, he began preparations for war against his rival Pescennius Niger, who had been appointed governor of Syria by the Emperor Commodus. The soldiers in Syria had saluted Niger as Emperor as soon as the death of Pertinax had become known to them. Septimius, accordingly, set out for the east. The contest between the two rivals was decided in favour of Septimius after two or three engagements mainly fought by his officers. The last battle, at Issus, ended in the defeat and death of Niger in about April 194 A.D.¹²

After Niger's death Septimius spent another two years fighting in the East. King Vologaeses of Parthia had maintained friendly relations with Niger. On the latter's decease, the Parthian king apparently instigated the satrap of Adiabene and the ruler of Orrhoene to revolt against Rome. The Roman garrisons in those districts were put to the sword. Nisibis itself, the chief city in Mesopotamia, which had been occupied by Lucius Verus, was besieged. Septimius arrived in Mesopotamia, which had been occupied by Lucius Verus, in the summer of 195 A.D. He deposed the Orrhoenian ruler, Abgarus VIII, and marched to Nisibis which he strongly fortified. From Nisibis he directed two successful campaigns against Adiabene and the Arabs. Because of the victories he scored against these two peoples he assumed the titles *Arabicus* and *Adiabenicus*. This was in 195 A.D.

¹⁰ Cf *Ab excessu divi Marci*, 1967, 2.10.1-9; *Historia Augusta, Severus*, V, 2: Imperator est appellatus apud Carnuntum.

¹¹ Cf Cassius Dio, 73, 17, 3-5; *Historia Augusta, Pertinax*, XV, 2: ipse antea Severus amore boni principis, a senatu Pertinacis nomen accipit; id *Severus*, VII, 9: se (Severum) quoque Pertinacem vocari iussit.

¹² Cf Anthony Birley, *Septimius Severus*, London 1971, p. 178.

The Parthians, who had taken no part in the fighting, began to ravage Mesopotamia and besiege Nisibis, as soon as Septimius left the East, to fight against the other rival, Clodius Albinus. For a second time he mounted an invasion of Mesopotamia in 198 A.D. By January 28 of that year the Capital City of the Parthians, Ctesiphon, was captured and given over to the soldiers to plunder. Thousands were made captives and King Vologaeses had to flee for his life. Mesopotamia was now definitely established as a Roman Province. The dream of Trajan and Lucius Verus had come true. Like Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus before him, Septimius assumed the title of *Parthicus Maximus*, the Greatest Conqueror of the Parthians.

In 193 A.D., therefore, Septimius was called Pertinax and Augustus. In 195 A.D. he took on the title Pius. In 195 A.D. as well he assumed the two titles Arabicus and Adiabenicus. In 198 A.D. he took on the title Parthicus Maximus. This means that the inscription cannot be earlier than 198 A.D.

The name of the first historical figure with its titles as it is mentioned in the inscription is as follows: *Imp. Marci Aurelii Antonini Pii Augusti: of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Augustus.*

Septimius Severus had two children by Julia Domna: one was Bassianus, so called after his Syrian wife's father, and was born on 4 April 188 A.D.; the younger one was named Publius Septimius Geta, after the Emperor's father, and was born in 189 A.D.

After his first victory over Niger in 195 A.D. Septimius, who was an ardent admirer of the dead Emperor Marcus Aurelius, chose to call himself 'son of Marcus Aurelius'. His elder son Bassianus he renamed after that Emperor and henceforth bore the official name of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Hence the Marcus Aurelius Antoninus who is mentioned in our inscription is not the Stoic Emperor, but Bassianus, the elder son of Septimius Severus, who is more commonly known as Caracallus or Caracalla — a nickname given to him after his father's death.

Before setting out for his second war in the East, Septimius had ordered the Senate to confer upon his elder son the title of *imperator destinatus*. On 28 January 198 A.D. when Ctesiphon was captured, Septimius Caracalla became co-ruler with his father. The younger son, Geta, was made Augustus in about 209 A.D. It seems that Septimius had wanted his two sons to share the rule. On 4

February 211 A.D. Septimius died at York in Britain.

After studying the titles borne by Septimius's elder son it seems that the inscription was made after 198 A.D. Furthermore, the name Lucius Septimius Severus is not preceded by the words *imp* (imperator) and *Caes.* (Caesar). The name of Caracalla is put before that of Septimius Severus. It looks, therefore, that Septimius was already dead when the tablet was made. It also seems that the inscription was made when Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the elder son of Septimius, was alive. In other words it was made in the period covering the years 198 A.D. – to 217 A.D. The elder son of Septimius died in 217 A.D.

It is clear that the inscription was not made in honour of either Caracalla or of his father, Septimius Severus. Had that been the case, the names of M. Aurelius Antoninus and L. Septimius Severus would not have been in the genitive but in the dative (M. Aurelio, to M. Aurelius not of Marcus Aurelius). On the other hand the tablet was raised by the *ordo decurionum* by the highest representative of the Gozitan municipium. The person, therefore, in honour of whom the inscription was made must have been very prominent. The *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*¹³ suggests the word *fratri* (to the brother) after the titulature of M. Aurelius Antoninus and the word *filio* (to the son) after that of L. Septimius Severus. If this is so, then the tablet seems to have been dedicated to the brother of Caracalla and the son of Septimius Severus, that is to the younger son of Septimius, Geta. In that case the tablet was raised when both Caracalla and Geta were co-emperors, that is, in the period extending from 4 February 211 A.D. to about 3 January 212 A.D.

If we are right in what we have been saying, the first two lines which are missing, may have been as follows:

IMP. CAES. P. SEPTI.

MIO. GETAE. PIO. AUGUSTO.¹⁴

About 3 January 212 A.D. Caracalla murdered his brother when he stabbed him in his mother's arms. There followed, then, the *damnatio memoriae* of Geta. Caracalla ordered that Geta's name be erased from all the monuments and inscriptions and that Geta be

¹³ Cf C.I.L. 7503.

¹⁴ For other inscriptions containing the same words Cf Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Nos 433, 458, 459, 460. Cf also *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania*, Ward-Perkins, No 36, 435, 438, 444.

treated as though he had never existed. If we follow the Corpus, then it would seem that the first lines of the inscription and the words *fratri* and *filio* were erased by the municipal authorities in Gozo.

It looks, therefore, that the inscription was made in 211 A.D. Caracalla and his brother were not on good terms long before Geta's assassination. When the two brothers were in Britain, where Septimius had died, Caracalla had already tried to suborn Geta's soldiers and to have himself accepted as the sole ruler. The soldiers, however, remained loyal to Geta. It seems that in Rome the Senate was in its majority on Geta's side. In other words if the date suggested above is correct, then the Gozitans seem to have been in favour of Geta.

The tablet was made by the *ordo decurionum*. At the time there was a *municipium* in Gozo. The members of the local Senate or Curia were all taken together called the *ordo decurionum*, or class of decurions to distinguish them from the non-members of the municipal Curia. It was usually the *ordo decurionum* that set up commemorative tablets or statues in honour of the imperial family. The task was put under the charge of a curator, perhaps the officer in charge of the municipal finances. His names may have been Pupilius and Maximus.

From what we have said above it looks as though the whole inscription read as follows:

Imperatori Caesari Publio Septimio Getae Pio Augusto, imperatoris Marci Aurelii Antonini Pii Augusti *fratri*, Lucii Septimi Severi Pertinacis Augusti Arabici Adiabeni Parthici Maximi *filio*, *ordo decurionum curante Pup. imo . . . sto.*

To the Emperor Caesar Publius Septimus Geta Pius Augustus, brother of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus, son of Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax, Augustus, Arabicus Adiabenus Parthicus Maximus, the *ordo decurionum* (has dedicated this tablet) the person in charge being Pupilius . . . Maximus.

