

# An emperor rewards his supporters: the earliest extant diploma issued by Vespasian

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Two complete tablets of a diploma of the Ravenna fleet were brought to my attention by Richard Linenthal of Bernard Quaritch Ltd. They are part of the collection of Martin Schøyen: Oslo/London, The Schøyen Collection MS 2032. This diploma of 26 February 70 is the earliest of a small group of such documents that were issued to serving soldiers as rewards for specific actions rather than after completion of a stated length of service. Like Augustus, Vespasian had to secure the loyalty of his army and deal with the disharmony resulting from civil war. It may be argued that the diploma is among the most important found so far in illustrating the political will of an emperor in action.

The tablets are in excellent condition and are still linked together with two hinge wires and almost complete binding wires. The latter consist of two flattened strips of metal tightly wound together. The binding holes are set wide apart, c.2.5-3 mm from the outer edges of the tablets, which is a characteristic of early diplomata. The dimensions of the tablets are: tabella I: height 14.8 cm; width 13.4 cm; thickness c.2 mm; tabella II: height 13.4 cm; width 14.8 cm; thickness 1.5-2 mm. Their combined weight, with hinges and binding wires, is 713.28 g.

The outer faces are very dark brown with patches of green patina. The inner faces are lighter in colour with more overall light-green patina. There are no framing lines on either outer face. The find-spot of the diploma is unknown. Published with kind permission of the owner.<sup>1</sup>

The lettering on the inner face is bold and well formed, and in the same hand for both tablets. Commonly the A's are left uncrossed with two exceptions: NOMINA in line 5 and QVAS in line 8. The average height of letters on this face is 5 mm, but the initial I of IMP and the I (or L?) of DERNAIVS/(DERNALVS?) are both 7 mm. Letters on the outer face of tabella I are not quite so well spaced or carefully executed. Only the A of CAPITOLIO is crossed. On the outer face the average letter height is c.4 mm. The outer face is well prepared and smooth but in line 9 a gap is left in the word CAELIBES between I and B in order to avoid a slight flaw in the metal.

Text:

*Imp. Vespasiani Caesaris<sup>1</sup> Aug(usti), tribunicia<sup>2</sup> potestate, co(n)s(ul) II, beneficiari(i)<sup>3</sup> qui militant in classe Ravennate sub Sex. Lucilio Basso, quorum nomina sub scripta sunt, ipsis liberis posterisque<sup>4</sup> eorum civitatem dedit et conubium cum uxoribus, quas tunc<sup>5</sup> habuissent, cum est civitas iis data, aut, siqui caelibes essent, cum iis quas postea duxissent dum taxat singuli singulas. a.d. IIII k. Martias Imp. Vespasiano Caesare Aug(usto) II, Caesare<sup>6</sup> Aug(usti) f. Vespasiano<sup>7</sup> cos.*

*Dernauius Derdipili f., Dacus.*

*Descriptum et recognitum<sup>8</sup> ex tabula aenea quae fixa est Romae in Capitolio in podio muri ante aedem geni p(opuli) R(omani)*

*Q. Antisti Q. f Ser(gia tribu) Rufi Clodiani, Philipp(iensis) eq. R., C. Vettidi Rasiniani, L. Valeri Nasonis, Phil(ippiensis); P. Vetti Pieri, Philip(piensis); M. Vibi Macedonis, vet(erani); C. Cassi<sup>9</sup> Longini, veter(ani); C. Iuli Aquilae, Aprensis.*

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1 I am most grateful to Martin Schøyen for allowing this document, like others in his collection, to be published.