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SANCTISSIMUM NUMEN: EMPEROR OR GOD?

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Among the new inscriptions of Mustis published a few years ago by A. Beschaouch occurs a tralatician text recording that C. Orfius Luciscus had completed and dedicated an arch on behalf of the emperor's *salus*.¹ The readings and restitutions given in the Corpus (where it was originally published as *CIL* 8,16417) have been corrected by the editor in the light of intervening discoveries and the text now reads in its revised form:

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A 168
 ALVTE · IMP · CAES · IM · AVRELI COMMODI ANTONINI FELICIS AUG. C.
 MAX · TRIB POTEST · XIII · IMP · VIII COS V P P C · ORTIUS · L · F · CORN · LVCISCVS PRAI
 ERVM · Q · Q SACERDOS PVBLICVS · DEAE · C · ELESTIS · ET AESCVLAPI ARCVN QVEM SVO ET C · CA · IO
 RO · PRAECIPVA · ERGA · SANCTISSIMVM · NVMEN RELIG PROQVE PERPETVO PATRIAE AMORE PRO
 5 MPLIVS · STATVA · IANO · PATRI · PERFECIT ET DEDICAVIT · STATVAM · QVOQVE IN FORO MAR///EV
 B · CIVIS · DEDICATIONE · LVDOS ICAENICVS et EPVLVM CVP · IIS ET CAEREALICIS EXIBVER

Pour le salut de l'empereur César Marc-Aurèle Commode Antonin, Pieux, Heureux, Auguste, vainqueur des Germains, des Sarmates et de la Bretagne, grand pontife, revêtu de la puissance tribunice pour la 13^e fois, imperator pour la 8^e, consul pour la 5^e, père de la patrie;

Caius Orfius Luciscus, fils de Lucius, de la tribu Cornelia, préfet suppléant des duovirs, duovir pour la 2^e fois quinquennal, prêtre officiel de la déesse Caelestis et d'Esculape, après avoir, en supplément, fait une statue à Janus Pater, a achevé la construction et fait la dédicace de l'arc qu'au nom de Caius Orfius... et au sien, en raison de la particulière vénération qu'il voue à la Très-sainte Puissance divine (de l'empereur), et de son perpétuel attachement à sa patrie, il avait promis; par ailleurs, il a érigé sur le forum une statue de Marsyas.

Et, à l'occasion de la dédicace de ce monument (= l'arc), ils ont donné des jeux scéniques et offert un banquet aux curies et (au collègue) des *Cerealicii*.

Mustitana 14 = *AE* (1968) 609

As well as giving various civil and religious offices of Orfius, the inscription records that, in addition to the arch he had promised out of everlasting love for his *patria*,² the benefactor contributed a statue of Ianus Pater, also a statue of Marsyas erected in the forum,³ and

¹ A. Beschaouch, *Mustitana* I. Recueil des nouvelles inscriptions de Mustis, cité romaine de Tunisie, *Karthago* 14, 1968, 121-224 at 190-192.

² For similar private beneficence towards the construction of arches see M. Le Glay, *Évergétisme et vie religieuse dans l'Afrique romaine* in *L'Afrique dans l'Occident romain* (Ier siècle av. J.C.-IVe siècle ap. J.C.; Coll. de l'école franç. de Rome 134), Rome, 1990, 77-88 at 82.

³ On Marsyas in the Forum see now M. E. Hoskins Walbank, *Marsyas at Corinth*, *AJN Second Series* 1, 1989, 79-87 at 80ff. with bibl. n.6.

provided scenic games along with a banquet for the curiae and the college of Cerealicii on the occasion when the monument was dedicated. If one may fairly judge from other inscriptions at Mustis, the possibility cannot be excluded that the text originally began with the name of an Augustan deity in the dative case, followed by *sacrum* and *pro*.⁴

The inscription is of interest inter alia for the striking phrase [*p*]ro praecipua erga sanctissimum numen relig(ione). Beschaouch took this to refer to the emperor - therefore Commodus, whose name is certainly to be completed in the first surviving line; his thirteenth grant of *trib. pot.* then dates the text securely to A.D. 187-188. The dedication belongs in consequence to the last major reign before the Severan period, an era when official language discarded entirely the restraint of the early principate and began to address the emperor with ever more sanctifying terminology.⁵ Typical of the epoch is the use of the superlative (*optimus, fortissimus, felicissimus* etc.), the application of θεῖος or *divinus* to just about everything that concerned the emperor or his activities, above all the practice of addressing members of the imperial family not only by the names of gods (Jupiter, Juno, Dea Caelestis etc.) but more generally as θεός, θεά, *deus* with their corresponding adjectives. This is all very much in line with the contemporary vogue of bombast and grandiloquence, a usage frequently complemented by the 'devotus' formula, *DNMQE*.⁶ Attention might be drawn in particular to a text of A.D. 216 from Tusculum which addresses Caracalla as *numen praesens*:

imp. Caes. M. Aurelio An/tonino Pio Felici Aug. | principi iuventutis, nu/mini praesenti, restitu/tori et conservatori | semper vitae adque (sic) | dignitatis suae, de/votissimus numi/ni eius | M. Aemilius Macer Faustinia[nus] | v. c. (in latere) dedc. (sic) XVIII kal. | Septem. | Catio Sabino II et Corne/lio Anullino cos.

CIL 14, 2596 = ILS 453

As the use of *praesens* makes clear, a distinction is drawn between the emperor - here called *numen* much as elsewhere he can be termed *deus* - and the 'real' gods of Olympus. The

⁴ Beschaouch was unable to find the stone, which was originally seen and copied by a Captain Prudhomme. While it is true that CIL 8,1577 begins *pro salute imp(eratoris) [Caes(aris)]...*, the facsimile of CIL 8,16417, reproduced by Beschaouch from the Corpus, shows room for at most two letters before *salute* at the beginning of the first line; at all events only one letter is restored at the beginning of all succeeding lines apart from line 2: *p.] max. ...*, and line 3: *it]erum...*. It seems not impossible, therefore, that *pro* will have stood towards the right-hand end of a preceding line, thus leaving room to the left for the possible name of a deity followed by *sacr. / sacrum* on the model, say, of Must. 2 (= AE, 1968,586): *Aescula[pio Au](gusto) sacrum. Pro salute...*; M 6 (= AE 595): *Plutoni frugif(ero) Aug(usto), genio Mustis, sacr(um). Pro salute...*; M 7 (= AE 596): *Telluri Aug(ustae) sacr(um). Pro salute...*. See also M 15 (= AE 590), M 16 (= AE 591), M 19 (= AE 593), M 20 (= AE 588).

⁵ See in general F.Taeger, *Charisma*, Stuttgart 1960, Vol.2, 407ff.; R.Turcan, *Le culte impérial au IIIe siècle*, ANRW 2, 16, 2, 1978, 996-1084 at 1051-1056; A.Mastino, *Le Titolature di Caracalla e Geta attraverso le Iscrizioni (Indici)* (Studi di Storia Antica 5), Bologna 1981,57-75, 125-135; D.Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (EPRO 108), Leiden 1987, Vol.I, 2, 342, 344f.

⁶ Taeger (above, note 5) 244f., 409, n.30; H.G.Gundel, *Devotus numini maiestatique eius. Zur Devotionsformel Weihinschriften der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Epigraphica 15,1953,128-150; Turcan (above, note 5) 1018; Mastino (above, note 5) 66 with n.294.

deific terminology is then matched by the grandiloquent salutation "restorer and ever preserver of life and of his own dignity", which is in turn capped by the devotion formula in the superlative. One may compare the characteristic exaggeration in the well-known inscription of the Corporation of Fishers and Divers, who have set up a dedication to Caracalla (or Elagabalus) as *deus*:⁷ *Deo Imp(eratori) Caes(ari) M(arco) Aurel(io) / [Imp(eratoris) Septimi Severi f(ilio) O]ptimo Antonino Pio...*(CIL 6,1080 = 31236).

The question arises whether a similar interpretation is to be placed upon the phrase *sanctissimum numen* in the Mustis inscription. In other words is Commodus likewise addressed as *numen*, simply by way of grandiloquent terminology? A closer look at the text suggests that this is not the case. In the first place the dedication dates from before the inflation of language and the trend to bombastic exaggeration had really taken hold. More importantly, Orfius Luciscus refers to his exceptional piety (*pro praecipua religione*) to the most sacred *numen*. To parade one's *religio* in this way is surely characteristic of the way one would address a god, not the emperor.⁸ Above all, to refer to a deity as *numen* is standard practice. The following examples chosen at random will suffice to undergird the point.⁹

deo num(ini) Mal(agbello): CIL 8, 8795; cf. 18020; AE (1940) 148

Numini [...]co, Genio fluminis : CIL 8, 9749

[Saturn]o do[mino n]umin[i inv]icto p[atru?]:CIL 8,12494

venerandum numen adorans: AE (1968) 164

diis bonis numinibus praesentibus Aesculapio et Saluti...: AE (1973) 630

n[umini pr]aesenti Iovi Baz[osen]o deo patrio: AE (1973) 631

numi[ni] prae[stantis]simo: AE (1976) 411

numini praesenti: AE (1976) 699

[numini] posuit: AE (1977) 707

Of particular interest are examples where the adjective *sanctum* occurs with *numen*:

numini san[c]to Victoriae vi[c]trici: CIL 8, 9017

Genio summ[o] Thasuni et deo sive deae [nu]mini sanc[to]: CIL 8, 21567

Genio Petrae numini sancto: AE (1969-70) 727

numin(i) sanct(o) deo: AE (1975) 752

⁷ Turcan, o.c. 1054; R.E.A.Palmer, Severan Ruler Cult and the Moon in the City of Rome, ANRW 2, 16, 2, 1978, 1085-1120 at 1097-1113; Mastino, o.c. 186f., noting that the authenticity of the text has been questioned.

⁸ Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. 6 and 7. *Religio* is perfectly appropriate with *numen*, of course, but would surely be inappropriate of the emperor. Is there any parallel? To address the emperor as *numen*, as in CIL 14,2596 (above, p.197) is itself most unusual; cf. Mastino, o.c. 66, n.295, 131, 148, noting that the usage is unique in the case of Caracalla and Geta at least.

⁹ The examples listed are limited to where a deity is called *numen* - usually in apposition to the name. References to the *numen* of a deity (and of course of the emperor) are common enough but not directly relevant.

The key example for present purposes, however, is a dedication to Ops Augusta from Tebessa, where the deity is addressed as *numen sanctissimum* - exactly as in the Mustis inscription:

Opi Aug. sa[c.] | A. Pompeius Dativu[s] | numini sanctissi|mo per antistis (sic) | iussus de suo | fecit.

CIL 8, 16527

What Orfius Luciscus appears to have done, therefore, is to record that his act of generosity was occasioned both by his exceptional piety towards some deity and by his perpetual love of native city. If that is the case, what could the identity of the *numen* have been? No less than eighteen deities are mentioned in the inscriptions of Mustis, though of these Ianus Pater can probably be excluded since his sole mention is in the inscription under discussion; here the addition of a statue to Ianus Pater probably (though not impossibly) distinguishes him from the *sanctissimum numen*. At first sight the *pro salute* formula might suggest the text originally began *Aesculapio Aug. sacrum*, but in point of fact the formula follows a dedication to some seven other deities at Mustis,¹⁰ so little is to be gained by that line of argument. Is there then any particular deity who might have been the appropriate recipient of an arch financed out of civic pride and celebrated on completion and dedication by scenic games and banquets?

No proposal can be better than an educated guess but it might be tentatively suggested that a likely candidate could be the deity who was the *genius* of the city and could hence be very appropriately addressed as *sanctissimum numen* at the dedication of a public work intended to embellish the municipium.¹¹ That would point to Pluto, Genius Mustis, who like most other local deities bears the epithet *Augustus*.¹² Interestingly, one of the two inscriptions to Pluto (here *frugifer*) at Mustis, combines the *pro salute* formula on behalf of Antoninus Pius with a dedication by M.Cornelius Laetus, who has a *cursus* resembling that of Orfius Luciscus.¹³ The text likewise records various public works both in accordance with or in

¹⁰ Above, note 4.

¹¹ On the status of Mustis see Beschtaouch, o.c. 142-151.

¹² For the significance of the term see Fishwick, ICLW, 1991, Vol. II, 1, 446-454.

¹³ *Plutoni frugif(ero) | Aug(usto), genio Mustis, | sacr(um). Pro salute | Imp(eratoris) T(iti) Aeli(i) Hadrian[i] A]ntonini | Aug(usti) Pii, M(arcus) Corneli[us] M(arci) f(ilius) | Cornelia (tribu) Laetus, flamen | perpetu[s], (duum)uir, sacerdos | Caelestis et Aesculapii | publicus, cum pro honore | flamoni(i) perp(etui) (sestertium) X (milia) laxas[et] et ob honorem (duum)uiratus | (sestertium) II (milia), inlatis aerario (sestertium) III (milibus), | statuam aeream posuit et in templo Caelestis portic(um) columna[rum] (quattuor), ampliata pecu[ni]a, fe[cit]. D(ecreto) d(ecurionum). Idem q[uo]q[ue] [de]dic(auit), ampli[us], in eode[m] templo porticum | auitam, [u]e[st]u[st]ate conl]absam, [co]llumnis [(quattuor ?)], [adiecta] pecuni[a], | res[tituit].*

addition to the funds he had promised¹⁴ - in this case an (unidentified) statue of bronze, the construction of a portico with four columns in the temple of Caelestis, the restoration in the same temple of a portico of [four?] columns built by his grand-father and now collapsed with age. The fact that similar generosity in supporting public works had been the occasion of a dedication to Pluto Aug., Genius Mustis seems to support the possibility of a similar dedication in the inscription of Orfius Luciscus, not that the inference is in any way binding.¹⁵ Alternatively, but less probably, one might suppose a dedication to Aesculapius on the model of *M 2* (*AE* 1968, 586). Here the sum of ten thousand sesterces is promised for the construction of some monument (*in opus*), an act of munificence on the part of the benefactor which would embellish the town; though in this case the dedication to Aesculapius is clearly determined by the circumstance that C.Julius Placidus has adorned the temple of Aesculapius with three statues, marble revetments and paintings. Further than that it is hardly worthwhile to speculate. Deo volente some future epigraphical discovery will turn up to show how near - or far-off - the above guesses came to the facts of the matter. Whatever the identity of the deity may have been, it seems clear that by *sanctissimum numen* C.Orfius Luciscus was referring to a god, not the emperor.

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¹⁴ See the thorough discussion of Beschouch, o.c. 154-162.

¹⁵ A Mauretanian inscription from Ksar Chebeul (between Bida and Tubusuptu) can also be brought to bear: *Genio Petrae | numini sancto | pro salute P(ublii) Aeli(i) Classici proc(uratoris) Aug(usti) liberorumque eius* (*AE*, 1969-70,727). Here the *Genius* of Petra (a place-name) is addressed as *numen sanctum*, a situation which corresponds to the suggested reference of *sanctissimum numen* in *M 14 = AE* (1968) 609; cf. above, p.198.