

GEORGE W. HOUSTON

ONESIMVS THE LIBRARIAN

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1. The reading of CIL 6,8679

An inscription from the City of Rome, CIL 6,8679, appears in CIL as follows.

D M
 ONESIMVS CAE[s. n.]
 VILIC THERMAR
 BYBLIOTHEC GRA[ec]
 5 CRESCENTI ALV
 MNO SUO VIX
 AN VIII MES I
 B M FECIT

The editors of CIL 6 remark that at the end of line three the R is no longer extant and that it is impossible to tell if other letters followed the R or not.

Lines two to four of the inscription have generally been restored as follows: *Onesimus, Cae[s(aris) n(ostri) sc. servus], vilicus thermar(um) Bybliothec(ae) Gra[ec(ae)]*. Reading the stone in this way gives us an imperial slave, Onesimus, who was *vilicus* of the Greek library in some imperial bathing establishment,¹ and this inscription has accordingly been used as part of the argument that there were libraries in the great baths of Rome.²

There are, however, some problems with the usual reading. On the other inscriptions in the *Index* of CIL 6 where *thermae* are mentioned, the word *thermae* is almost always accompanied by a modifier such as *Agrippae*, *Traianae*, or *Diocletianae*. The sole exception is a Christian inscription, CIL 6,29769, in which a certain Maximus has built some structure over what had once been baths: *Maximus has olim therm[as] / divinae mentis ductu . . .*³ Also, it is a somewhat unusual word order which puts the smaller building (here the library) after the building complex of which it is a part.⁴ Given the word order on the stone, one might expect CIL 6,8679 to mean, “Onesimus, the *vilicus* in the baths in the Greek Library”, but that of course is impossible. The more common order, which moves from smaller to larger elements, appears, for example, on CIL 6,4435: . . . *vilic(us) a bybliotheca Octaviae Latin(a)* = “*vilicus* in the Latin library in the portico of Octavia”.⁵

¹ *Vilici* assigned to libraries were probably concerned primarily with the maintenance of the building, rather than with the collection of volumes. They presumably had access to funds to pay for that maintenance. See G. Boulvert, *Esclaves et affranchis impériaux sous le haut-empire romain, rôle politique et administratif*, Naples 1970, 433–34 on *vilici* in general and 235 on *vilici* assigned specifically to libraries.

² On Onesimus as librarian in a bath, see, for example, in the literature on libraries, G. de Gregori, “Biblioteche dell’Antichità”, *Accademie e Biblioteche d’Italia* 11 (1937) 18, or H. Blanck, *Das Buch in der Antike*, Munich 1992, 219; in the literature on baths, F. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge MA 1992, 179 with n. 132; and in the literature on the Roman imperial administration, Boulvert (above, n. 1) 235 n. 207. Many other studies of libraries mention libraries in baths, but not necessarily with any reference to Onesimus.

³ On CIL 6,8676 only N[. . .] survives of the modifying name, which might have been N[eronis] or N[eronianas].

⁴ Otto Hirschfeld seems to have felt the awkwardness in the word order. At one point he apparently suggested reading *hermarum* instead of *thermarum*: see B. Kuebler in *Diz. Epig.* 1, 1004 s.v. “bibliotheca”. Later, however, Hirschfeld knew that *thermarum* is correct: *Die kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten bis auf Diocletian* (photographic reprint of the third [1905] edition), Berlin 1963, 304–5 n. 5.

⁵ There are, however, at least two approximate parallels for the word order on CIL 6,8679: CIL 6,2348 and CIL 6,4433. Neither of these mentions baths.

Given these problems, it may be worth considering a different reading of the inscription. I would suggest the following for lines three and four:

vilic(us) therma[r(um) et a]
bybliothe(c)a Gra[ec(a)]

In this case, Onesimus holds two positions: he is first *vilicus* in a bathing establishment, and later a worker in the Greek section of one of the imperial libraries.⁶

2. Onesimus on CIL 6,8679 and Onesimus the *Vilicus Balinei Caenidiani*

The reading I have proposed causes some problems of its own. Although imperial slaves and freedmen might well hold more than one position, they regularly recorded on inscriptions only the last, or most recent, position they had held,⁷ and it is rare to find two posts recorded as I have proposed for CIL 6,8679. There are, however, a few parallels. For example, CIL 6,278 records a *Dorus Larc(iorum?) disp(ensator) qui ante vilicus huius loci*; on CIL 6,9005 we find a *Coetus Herodian(us) praegustator divii Augusti, idem postea vilicus in hortis Sallustianis*; and on CIL 10,6324 (Tarracina) we have *praegustator et a c[u]biculo*. None of these cases simply lists the two posts, as we would expect to find in the *cursus* of a senator or *eques*, and that is why I have suggested, for CIL 6,8679, not just *vilic(us) therma(rum)*, [*a*] *bybliothe(c)a Gra[ec(a)]*, but that an *et* should be added between the two posts. Since we do not know how far to the right the text extended in line three, it is difficult to know if there was room for an *et* or not; I obviously have assumed there was.

With the reading I suggest, we are still left with the problem of why the word *thermarum* is left unmodified, with the baths not called “Thermarum Agrippae” or “Thermarum Traianarum”, or by some other specific name, as we would ordinarily expect. A possible solution may come from another stone, recently discussed in this journal by P. R. C. Weaver and P. I. Wilkins.⁸ The stone that Weaver and Wilkins discussed was published originally by H.A. Sanders in the *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* and has recently been republished. Weaver and Wilkins were able to establish a complete and correct text of the stone, which includes in lines 6 to 8 the following.

Onesimus Caesar(is)
N(ostri sc. servus), vilicus balin(ei)
Caenidiani...

As Weaver and Wilkins note (page 244), the two stones “involv[e], one suspects, the same Onesimus . . . *Onesimus* is one of the commonest slave/freedman names in the *Familia Caesaris* – over 80 are recorded – but the chance of another *vilicus* engaged in the Imperial bathing service, whether also librarian or not, must be strictly limited.”

I am inclined to agree that the two stones (neither is Onesimus’ own sepulchral inscription; each refers to a foster child) probably do refer to the same Onesimus. If this is one and the same man, then we have an imperial slave assigned first to the imperial bathing service, which he specifies as the *balineum Caenidianum* in our second inscription, and later to one of the libraries, where he worked in

⁶ For the title *a bybliothea*, see, for example, CIL 6,8743, *ab bybliothece*; 6,5190, *a bibliotec(a)*; 6,5347, *a byblio[thea]*, where the lacuna might have contained *Latina* or *Graeca* or the name of a specific library. It would be surprising for a *vilicus* to move on to a position as librarian, for *vilici* were, at least in the provinces, slave officials of some importance. We will return to this problem in Part 3 below.

⁷ On both points, see P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris. A Social Study of the Emperor’s Freedmen and Slaves*, Cambridge 1972, 224.

⁸ “A Lost Alumna”, *ZPE* 99 (1993) 241–44.

the Greek section. This may offer an explanation for the unmodified *thermarum* on CIL 6,8679: Onesimus first worked as *vilicus* in a relatively minor bathing establishment, the *Balineum Caenidianum*. Later, after he had moved on to a post in a library, he decided to refer to his earlier position by using a slightly grander term, not *balineum* but *thermae*; but, there being no such thing as the *Thermae Caenidianae*, he simply dropped the modifier.⁹

3. Could a *vilicus* be promoted to work in a library?

The reconstruction of Onesimus' career which results if we take the men named on these two stones as one and the same requires that we assume he was first *vilicus balinei Caenidiani*, and then *a bybliotheca Graeca*. Werner Eck has pointed out to me that this would ordinarily imply not a promotion, but a demotion, since *vilici* were of relatively high rank compared to other slaves in the *Familia Caesaris*.¹⁰ Certainly *vilici* attested in the city of Rome tend to be older than men who were librarians (*a bybliotheca*), implying that *vilicus* was the higher-ranking post;¹¹ and they often seem to have had some cash of their own, whereas we do not find evidence of that among the librarians.¹² Despite this, it may be that *vilici* in Rome were not invariably as important as *vilici* in provincial posts. Sometimes several *vilici* were assigned to a single building complex, implying that they could not all be in charge of the building: so, for example, the four men who were *vilici* of the *praedia Galbana* (CIL 6,30983),¹³ and perhaps the two *vilici* of CIL 6,679, who rebuilt a shrine of Silvanus, although these last two were not certainly members of the *Familia Caesaris*. On other occasions, we hear of *vilici* who seem to have been responsible for smallish structures: a Hermes was *vilicus*, it seems, of a shrine of Nemesis (CIL 6,532); Auximus (not certainly a member of the *Familia Caesaris*) was *vilicus a Tritones* (CIL 6,8684); Atticus, apparently a slave of the imperial freedman Epaphroditus, was that freedman's *vilicus* (CIL 6,8759); a Euporus calls himself simply *vilicus Cae[is(aris)] aquarius*, not a grandiose-sounding title (CIL 6,33733). It must be admitted that these items are hardly overwhelming evidence, and I would not want to push them too far; but it does seem at least possible that, in the city of Rome, there were some *vilici* who were not high in rank, and that a career which took a man from the post of *vilicus* of an otherwise unknown *balineum* to a position in one of the imperial libraries may be possible. We should bear in mind that on CIL 6,8679 no specific library is named, and that means Onesimus might have been *a bybliotheca* not in a public library, but in the emperor's own library on the Palatine. That might be a more desirable post than one in a public library, as it could conceivably lead to contact with the

⁹ I have not been able to find a parallel instance of baths being called *bal(i)neum* on one stone, *thermae* on another. The suggestion offered here, however, depends not upon parallels but upon human psychology, the natural desire to sound important.

¹⁰ For the evidence on the rank of *vilici* in the provinces, see Weaver (above, n. 7), 202.

¹¹ There is not much direct evidence. From the city of Rome, we have the ages at death of two *vilici*: one (CIL 6,37827) died at age 30, and the other (CIL 6,37828) at 32; neither of these is certainly a member of the *Familia Caesaris*. We also have the age of two librarians: one (CIL 6,5188) died at age 30, the other (CIL 6,5192) at 28. So far, the two posts seem to be held by men of roughly the same age. But there are some further indications concerning ages: Sabbio, a *vilicus aquae Claudiae*, had been married 24 years when his wife died (CIL 6,8495); Flavius, a *vilicus thermarum*, was married for 40 years (CIL 6,8676); and the mother of Auximus, *vilicus a Tritones*, died at age 87 and was honored by her son (CIL 6,8684; not certainly a member of the *Familia Caesaris*). For what it is worth, then, this slim evidence does seem to indicate that *vilici* tended to be further along in their careers than librarians.

¹² Quite a few *vilici* build or restore shrines or altars. Often, of course, this is a function of their job, but occasionally we find *vilici* who are not in charge of temples or shrines offering gifts to some god. Thus on CIL 6,276 a *vilicus praedior(um) Peduceanor(um)* under Titus makes a dedication to Hercules, and on CIL 6,30855 Zmaragdus, *vilicus horreorum Galbianorum*, honors the Bona Dea. No librarian is known to have built or restored anything.

¹³ The *praedia Galbana*, which apparently included both warehouses and dwellings, were huge, and I would not argue that this is a small building, just that here not all the *vilici* can be in charge of the whole structure, since there are at least four of them. Presumably one of the *vilici* had some sort of authority over his mates, unless the parts of the *praedia* were administered quite separately from one another.

emperor or his immediate staff, and it could be that such a post would seem higher in rank than that of *vilicus* of the *balineum Caenidianum*. But certainty in such matters is not obtainable.

If the two men named Onesimus are in fact identical, several interesting consequences follow. First, we no longer have any inscriptional evidence for libraries in baths. Second, we find that an imperial slave could be promoted in what we can only consider a surprising order, namely from *vilicus* in a bathing establishment to a post in a library. Finally, we can now date Onesimus the Librarian to the late first or early second century AD, given that he worked first in the *balineum Caenidianum*, which must have been named after Vespasian's concubine Caenis.¹⁴ But problems and considerable uncertainties remain, and until they can be resolved we should not place too much trust in either the earlier reading or the one I have proposed.¹⁵

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

George W. Houston

¹⁴ See Weaver and Wilkins (above, n. 8), 242. This bath seems to have escaped the notice of E. M. Steinby, ed., *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, Vol. 1, A–C, Rome 1993.

¹⁵ I am most grateful to Werner Eck for his careful reading and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I would very much appreciate further comments or observations, and can be contacted at: Department of Classics, CB 3145, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA; or via email at gwhousto@email.unc.edu.