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M. AURELIUS BASSUS, EQUES ROMANUS, FROM MURSA

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In the latest volume of *Osječki zbornik (Recueil de travaux)*, 20 (Musée de la Slavonie à Osijek, 1989), M.Bulat published 14 new Latin inscriptions discovered in the past fourteen years at Osijek, in the territory of Roman Mursa.<sup>1</sup> The material used for these inscriptions is partly white marble (6), and partly a porous, probably local, limestone of a rather poor quality which is one of the main reasons that these latter inscriptions (8) are badly preserved.

Apart from five fragments of no great importance, there are six dedications and three tombstones. Two of the altars were dedicated to Juppiter Optimus Maximus (Nos. 1 and 5), the latter by Gamicus, an arkarius, for the well-being of C.Iulius Agathopus, conductor ferrariarum Pannoniarum itemque provinciarum transmarinarum, already known from an inscription from Ljubija, Dalmatia, and dated to A.D. 201 (ILJug 779 = AE 1973,411). One of the other altars was erected to Deus Invictus Mithras (No. 3) by an unknown dispensator, and another to Silvanus Domesticus (No. 4) by Abascantus, vilicus of Eucolpus, Augusti dispensator. Altar No. 6 is dedicated to Juppiter Optimus Maximus Aeternus by an Augustalis of colonia Mursa, C.Eq(uitius?) Artemidorus. The last one is a dedication erected to Juppiter Optimus Maximus, Juno, and Minerva, the name of the dedicant not being preserved (No. 8). Of the three tombstones I would like to draw attention to the last one (No. 14).

It is a smallish slab of porous limestone, with an almost square form (40 x 41,5 x 6,4 cm.), unadorned, the inscribed field surrounded by a simply moulded frame, its back side only roughly hewed. It was discovered on the bank of the river Drava, having been transported from an area under construction in the Lower town where the remains of Roman Mursa are located. The tombstone was broken into several pieces which were put together in the Museum workshop. Unfortunately, its surface is rather badly damaged.<sup>2</sup> The text runs as follows (Tafel Va):

*D(is) M(anibus) / Aur(elio) Agripp(a)e ex /  
provinci(a) Arabia / c(ivitate) CILIS( )  
Sahareno /<sup>5</sup> qui vix(it) ann(os) XXIII / M.  
Aur(elius) Bass(us) eq(ues) R(omanus) / nepoti  
dulcis/simo.*

<sup>1</sup> Neue römische Inschriften aus Osijek, op.cit., pp.31-44 (in Croat. with a German summary), Tab. I-VII.

<sup>2</sup> M.Bulat, op.cit., No.14, pp.43-44, phot. Tab. VII,2. I am grateful to him for his permission to republish the inscription, and A.Šemrov for having examined the stone at Osijek. For several improved statements of the first version of my text I would like to thank Prof. Dr. G.Alföldy and W.Eck, as well as Dr. J.Fitz.

The height of the letters is 3 cm in the 1st line and 2,3 cm in the others. The surface of the stone is not only damaged but also rather inadequate for engraving letters, as is indicated by an unscribed, indeed unscritable, space between *DVL* and *CIS* in the 7th line, and very probably, following the editor who examined the stone, by the analogous space between *BASS* and *EQ* in the 6th line. This is probably the reason why the letters are awkwardly shaped and uneven, and strike us as rather inadequate. There are two ligatures in the text, in both cases *AVR*, in the 2nd and 6th lines. Small triangularly shaped interpuncts are unevenly distributed. There are none between *D* and *M* in the 1st line, or after *ANN* in the 5th line.

4 *c(ivi?) Chis(ensi?) Bulat.*

Commentary:

M.Aurelius Bassus, an eques Romanus, set up this tombstone at Mursa to his nepos, Aurelius Agrippa. Of the first person only his social status is known, of the second only his provenance. The word nepos may mean either a nephew, or a grandson, although numerous epigraphical attestations indicate that the word mostly has the meaning of a grandson. Were Aurelius Agrippa a grandson of M.Aurelius Bassus, he, too, would have been a Roman knight which, however, is not stated on the inscription. This information could have been omitted for various reasons, so this is not a conclusive argument in favour of either interpretation. Agrippa died at the age of 24. Were M.Aurelius Bassus his grandfather, he could have hardly been less than seventy. His presumed old age could naturally not prevent him from undertaking a long and dangerous journey, but it leaves open the possibility that Agrippa's relative was rather a younger man, his uncle. Consequently it may be concluded that it is equally possible for Aurelius Agrippa to be either a nephew of M.Aurelius Bassus, or his grandson. Most probably both were from the East, although not necessarily both from Arabia. The cognomen Bassus which occurs throughout the Roman Empire, is more frequently attested in its eastern part.

First a possibility should be examined whether M.Aurelius Bassus from Mursa and a Roman knight of the same name from Thyatira, province of Asia,<sup>3</sup> could be regarded as identical. In Thyatira a M.Aurelius Bassus had erected an inscription in honour of his benefactor, a consular Gn.Licinius Rufinus.<sup>4</sup> Bassus is styled as ἱππικὸς, ἀπὸ χειλιαρχιῶν which is a Greek translation of a militiis.<sup>5</sup> These are not specified on the inscription. He is further mentioned on an inscription from Ephesus discovered some years

<sup>3</sup> H.Devijver, *Prosopographia militiarum equestrium quae fuerunt ab Augusto ad Gallienum, pars prima*, Leuven 1976, p.145, A 216. Cf. E.Birley, *Epigr. Studien* 8 (1969), p.80; *PIR II*, p.283, n.164.

<sup>4</sup> *IGRR IV*, 1214: Μ. Γν. Λικίν[ιον Ῥο]υ(φ)εῖνον τὸν λαμπρότα/τον ὑπατικὸν Μ. Αὐρ. / Βάσσοις ἱππικὸς ἀπὸ <sup>5</sup>χειλιαρχιῶν τὸν ἔαυ/τοῦ εὐεργέτην. Cf. also Nos. *IGRR* 1215, 1216, and 1217 where the same consular is mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> H.Devijver, *Some observations on Greek terminology for the Militiae equestres in the literary, epigraphical and papyrological sources*, *Zetesis - Album amicorum E. de Strycker*, Antwerpen-Utrecht 1973, p.560 (= *MAVORS* 6,1989, p.67).

ago,<sup>6</sup> from which it is known that he was a tribune of the legion II Italica, stationed in Noricum, and βουλευτής in Thyatira. It is thus clear that he belonged to the municipal elite of his native town, but it is not possible to say, however, whether he was granted citizenship by M.Aurelius or became a citizen by virtue of the Constitutio Antoniniana, although his praenomen and social status make the first supposition more probable.<sup>7</sup> On the inscription from Mursa, however, no posts are mentioned, thus the question, whether both men were one and the same person, should remain open.

It should not be excluded, however, that M.Aurelius Bassus from Mursa and his namesake from Thyatira were not two different persons. The supposedly different origin of either of the relatives, as might result from the Mursa inscription, would not speak against this assumption. Assuming that only Aurelius Agrippa was from Arabia it must be postulated that either a sister or a daughter of M.Aurelius Bassus had married a resident from the province of Arabia. The fact that both Bassi were of equestrian status would further argue in favour of the identification of both men. Another argument can perhaps be adduced in support of both men actually being a single individual. As a tribune of II Italica he served in Noricum. Although other posts in his career are not known, it would not be wholly unexpected to find other evidence of him somewhere in the same part of the Empire. His presence in Mursa can perhaps be accounted for - apart from the possibility that he was there privately - as an interval between the two posts from his presumed *tres militiae* (for both see below). A weighty argument against the identification of both Bassi is the fact that no military or other posts of his career are noted on the inscription.

M.Aurelius Bassus erected a gravestone to his nephew / or grandson, who was from the province of Arabia. Unlike his uncle / or grandfather, the young man has no praenomen, which is common enough in the first half of the 3rd century A.D. A look at the indexes of names in various epigraphic collections of the inscriptions from Arabia tells us that his cognomen is not rare in the province. The geographic and/or ethnic provenance of the nephew is noted very exactly. As a first item his province is mentioned: Arabia. His provenance in terms of province may perhaps have been emphasised because it was not the same as that of his uncle, or perhaps because he came from a border region between Syria and Arabia which had belonged to different provinces at different times (see below). The first *C* in the 4th line should almost certainly be interpreted as *c(ivitate)* for which there are

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<sup>6</sup> Die Inschriften von Ephesos, II (IK 12), Bonn 1979 No. 243 = AE 1982, 865: [τὸν νεωκόρον τῶν Σεβαστῶν Ἐφεσίων δῆμον] / [ἑτείμησε]ν / ἢ [λαμ]προτάτη / Θυατειρηῶν / πόλις / ἐξ ὑποχρέσεως Αὐρ. / Βάσσου χιλιάρχου λεγιῶνος δευ/τέρας Ἰταλικῆς καὶ Αὐρ. Ἀλεξάν(δρου) / Θυατειρηῶν βουλευτῶν. Cf. also H.Devijver, Equestrian Officers from the East, Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East, Proceedings of a Colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986, BAR Intern. Ser. 297, Oxford 1986, pp.118, 140 (= The Equestrian Officers of the Roman Imperial Army, MAVORS 6, 1989, pp. 282, 304).

<sup>7</sup> See B.Holtheide, Römische Bürgerrechtspolitik und römische Neubürger in der Provinz Asia, Freiburg (Breisgau; Hochschulsammlung Phil.-Gesch. 5), 1983, p.107ff.

parallels from the province of Lower Pannonia where the tombstone was discovered. These are tombstones, likewise erected for residents from the eastern part of the Empire; thus, for example, CIL III, 4331 from Brigetio (present-day Szőny), erected for M.Aurelius Antonianus, ex civitate Zeugma, or a new tombstone from Sirmium (present-day Sremska Mitrovica) for C.Antonius Victor, optio spei leg(ionis) III Gallic(ae) whose provenance is described as Trahenti origine DEISTA(?) civitat[e ...]ss.<sup>8</sup> The fragmentary name of the civitas is interpreted by Miroslava Mirković as civitat[e Lala]ss(eorum), or, less likely, given the available space between the preserved letters, as civitat[e I]ss(eorum). In her opinion Tracheia in this case would mean Isauria, cf. Strab. 14, 668 = Steph. Byz. s.v. Τραχεῖα.<sup>9</sup>

The letters next to the first *C*, *CILIS*( ), cannot to my knowledge be supplemented and explained. Likewise, no explanation can be offered for Bulat's reading *CHIS*( ). There seems to be no such city known to date in the province of Arabia; no such or similar town name is listed either by Stephanus of Byzantium or by Hierocles in his Synecdemos. The closest parallel comes from an inscription from Misenum on which an otherwise unknown civitas Chil( ) is mentioned, probably, as may be assumed from the context, a Syrian community.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that many Arabic and Syrian toponyms are preserved on inscriptions which can only rarely be identified with those already known.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, there seems to be some evidence for the term Saharenum. A dedication from Tharba (Tarba) was set up in the honour of Athena by Ῥάεος Οὐάλου Καυαρηνός.<sup>12</sup> Waddington explains it as an ethnicon derived from a postulated locality Κάαρα, somewhere in the Ḥawrān. In the eastern part of Lejā (ancient Trachonitis) he noted two ruined villages, named Sawarat al-Saghira and Sawarat al-Kabira, respectively (Great and Small S.), and proposed to identify Κάαρα with the former.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently another inscription came to light at Bosana (Bousān, Jebal-Drūz, set up for one of the several anonymous gods known from these parts of the Empire, to their god, [θε]ῶ ἀντων, by οἱ ἀπὸ Βοσ[ά]νων Καυαρηνο[ί].<sup>14</sup> The ancient name of the village, Bosana, is already

<sup>8</sup> M.Mirković, *Arh.vest.* 41 (1990), pp.633-634.

<sup>9</sup> Mirković, *op.cit.*, p. 635.

<sup>10</sup> ILS, 9221: *C. Iul. C. f. Cl. Alexandro / stolarc. class. pr. Misenum. p.v. / [[Philippianae]] ad ampliatio / iudicis divi Alexandri Aug. / ceterorumq. princip., praep. / reliq. class. praett. Misenum. et / Ravenn. pp. vv. expeditioni / Orientali, adlec. in ordine / decur. splendidiss. civitat. / Mis. itemq. splendidis. col. / Antiochiens. et splendidis. / col. Mallotar., patron. quolque civitati Chil., homini vere/cundiss., C.Iul.Aprilis vet. Augg., / l. d. ab Aurel. Serapione trib., praep. In latere: dedic. Idib. Mart. / Presente et Albino cos.*

<sup>11</sup> For a rare instance of a new name which appeared on an inscription and could be identified with a name already known from the literature, cf. M.Sartre, *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine*, Coll. Latomus 178, Bruxelles 1982, p.49 n.187 who cites an unpublished inscription from the Museum of Damascus on which a toponym Ἀρφαθουγα is mentioned, probably identical with Joseph., BJ 3, 3, 5: ἀπὸ κόμησ καλουμένησ Ἀρφῶσ (when describing Agrippa's kingdom).

<sup>12</sup> Le Bas-Waddington, *Inscriptions grecques et latines (VI<sup>e</sup> partie: Syrie)*, No. 2203 a: Ῥάεος Οὐάλου Καυαρηνός [μ]νημόσυνον ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ κα[ί] τέκνων τὸν βω[μ]ὸν ἀνέθηκεν.

<sup>13</sup> In the commentary ad No. 2203 a.

<sup>14</sup> SEG 7, 1089: Οἱ ἀπὸ Βοσ[ά]νων Κα/ουαρηνο[ί] θε]ῶ ἀντων / τὸν βωμὸν ἀνήγει[ραν] / εὐεβε[ί]α[χ]α[ρ]ι[ν].

attested in Waddington, No. 2242 and 2251. MacAdam lists Saouarenoi among the tribal or clan names attested in the epigraphy of the Jebal-Drūz and the Ḥawrān.<sup>15</sup>

Naturally it remains to be explained whether the change *Σαουα-* to *Saha-* could be accounted for linguistically. From a strictly linguistic point of view it would be unusual to expect *Σαουαρηνός* to be transcribed as *Saharenius*, but both versions of the name, Greek and Latin, are transcriptions of an Arabic name which could have theoretically contained two vowels, like double *a*, with a consonant between them, a spirant, or else a letter which sounded to a Latin speaking person as a guttural.<sup>16</sup> Provincial epigraphy often displays strange and unexpected transcriptions, and in addition it can never be quite excluded that any irregularities may have been due to the stonecutter's ignorance. Assuming that M.Aurelius Bassus, who had erected the Latin tombstone in question, was from the province of Asia, Latin was certainly not the language he would have most often used. At Mursa a Greek inscription would be an exception, so it is understandable that the text is in Latin.

There are perhaps other possibilities for the explanation of the Arabic geographic and/ or ethnic term transcribed in Latin as *Saharenius*. Apart from two toponyms, one, an inhabited site near the ruins in the Syrian Desert, *Sha'arra*,<sup>17</sup> and the other, one of the most important sites in *Lejā*, now deserted, *Sha'arah*,<sup>18</sup> there is a region in the western section of the Jordanian plateau, the southern part of which is known locally as the *Sharā*, which had apparently given the name to a widely worshipped local Arabian deity *Dushara* (Lord of the *Sharā*), in Greek *Dousares*.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless the first possibility to explain the name *Saharenius* seems to me to be much more plausible.

If the original home of the clan or the tribe *Saouarenoi* were to be sought somewhere in *Lejā*, or in the northern *Jebal-Drouz*, the mention of the province to which *Aurelius Agrippa* belonged, although in itself nothing unusual, would be even more justified. This region lay on the frontier between the provinces of *Syria Phoenice* and *Arabia*, and it is known from reliable sources that *Septimius Severus*, who split the province of *Syria* into two provinces after the rebellion of *Avidius Cassius*, removed it from the control of a Syrian governor to the advantage of the province of *Arabia*, whose governor remained loyal to the antagonist of *Niger*.<sup>20</sup>

A tombstone from *Celeia* (*Celje*, *Noricum*) may be cited as a parallel for such an exact ethnic and geographic provenance for deceased emigrants from *Syria*, on which one *Aurelius*

<sup>15</sup> H.I.MacAdam, *Studies in the History of the Roman Province of Arabia. The Northern Sector*, BAR Intern. Ser. 295. Oxford 1986, p.135.

<sup>16</sup> For helpful discussions on various linguistic possibilities I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Erika Mihevc-Gabrovec (Ljubljana) and Dr. Kathrin Müller (München).

<sup>17</sup> E.R.Stoeber, F.A.Norris, *Syria. Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909, Division I*, Leyden 1930, p.54.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101; cf. MacAdam, p.59.

<sup>19</sup> G.W.Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass., London 1983, p.8.

<sup>20</sup> Bowersock, *op. cit.*, pp.113/114. Sartre, *op. cit.* (n. 11), p.54ff.

Maximus, whose profession is not known, is described as *civis Surus ex regione Zeugma vico Hennia* (unknown).<sup>21</sup> His brother, Aurelius Bassus, Barath(a)e (filius), erected the tombstone for him and for Aurelius Sabinus, his compatriot from the same region, *civis Surus ex regione Zeugma*. The latter was from a village, the name of which was not inscribed on the stone, although there is enough space left on the stone for at least two more lines. The last inscribed line consists only of the word *vico*, without the name. Similarly, a dedication to Silvanus from Aquincum (Budapest, Pannonia Inferior), was erected in A.D. 228 by a person (his name is not known because the inscription is fragmentary) who described his origin as *Surus, ex regione Dolica, vico Arfuaris* (also unknown).<sup>22</sup> The same manner of describing a person's origin was adopted by others, who had come to the East from the western part of the Empire. Thus province and village are stated on the tombstone of Valeria Constantia from Bostra (Bosra),<sup>23</sup> set up by her husband, a centurio, Flavius Marcellinus: *ex provincia Pannunia vico Doecis*, likewise not identified.

What could both men have been doing at Mursa? The town was a *colonia*, founded by Hadrian (κτίσιμα Ἀδριανοῦ, Steph. Byz.) in A.D. 133,<sup>24</sup> and belonged, since the division of Pannonia into two provinces by Trajan, to Lower Pannonia. It was an important settlement on a crossroads and an important administrative centre, a river harbour of *classis Flavia Pannonica*, later *classis Histrica* (Not. dign. occ. XXXII, 52), and perhaps had a legionary camp.<sup>25</sup> No posting of the *cursus honorum* of M.Aurelius Bassus is stated on the inscription. Obviously the fact that he was *eques Romanus* had been the only information he deemed important and worthy to be noted in the text. If the identification of Bassus from Mursa with his namesake from Thyatira proved to be correct, it would be interesting to note that legionary tribunate, the most administrative of the *tres* or *quattuor militiae*, is his only known function.

The tombstone is in every respect of a rather poor quality. The fact that no post of Bassus' career was given on the inscription could perhaps be explained by the unexpected death of his nephew / or grandson in circumstances, which were, for reasons unknown to us, unfavourable for choosing a tombstone of a better quality and a better workshop for its production. This would at the same time indicate that Mursa had been just a very temporary

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<sup>21</sup> AIJ, 54.

<sup>22</sup> CIL III, 3490.

<sup>23</sup> E.Littmann, Greek and Latin Inscriptions. Section A: Southern Syria, Syria. Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909. Division III, Leyden 1921, p. 234, No. 537 = M.Sartre, Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie. Tome XIII, fasc.1, Bostra, Paris 1982, p.248, No. 9193: *D. M. / In hoc monumento posita / sum, ego, Val. Con<sup>5</sup>stantia, ex provin/cia Pannunia, vico / Doecis, (q)uae vixit / an(nis) XXXV, cuius hunc / titlun posuit Fl(avius) / <sup>10</sup> Marcellinus, cen(turio), / virginiae suae / (a)ete(rna) s(ede) p(osita) ego h(ic) q(ui)esco.*

<sup>24</sup> CIL III, 3280 = 10261. Cf. also 3279.

<sup>25</sup> For Mursa see: RE 16,1 (1933), 670-677, s.v. (M.Fluss); Danica Pinterović, Mursa i njeno područje u antičko doba (Mursa und sein Raum in der Zeit der Antike), Osijek 1978; cf. also TIR L 34 Budapest, Amsterdam 1968, s.v.

residence for both men. Bassus could have been at Mursa, which as we have just said, was more likely his intermediary rather than his final destination, either on an official mission or unofficially. Given that no military post is noted on the inscription, the latter possibility seems to be more acceptable. In either case, it would not be unusual that he had been accompanied by his nephew / or grandson. It can not be excluded, however, that he had been sent to this part of the Empire on military business, either as praefectus of a cohort or of an ala. Several auxiliary units were stationed at Mursa itself at the end of the 2nd and in the 3rd centuries A.D., e.g. cohorts I and III Alpinorum,<sup>26</sup> but their chronology is not always clear. In any case it is far from certain, as has been seen, that he had spent a considerable time at Mursa. On the other hand this could have been just an interval between the two posts in his career, as we have mentioned above.

The end of the 2nd century A.D., would be the earliest possible date for the tombstone. If once again we postulate that M.Aurelius Bassus from Mursa is the already known eques Romanus from Thyatira, we must date his legionary tribunate of the II Italica to some time after the end of the Marcomannic Wars, when the legion already had its permanent camp at Lauriacum. It had been raised by M.Aurelius and L.Verus in A.D. 165 in preparation for the Danube campaign and was first stationed at Ločica and then at Albing. The inscription should most probably be assigned to the first half of the 3rd century A.D.

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<sup>26</sup> See CIL III, 10269 (cohort I Alpinorum); J.Szilágyi, *Inscriptiones tegularum Pannonicarum*, Diss. Pann. Ser. 2,1, Budapest 1933, p.87; CIL III, 3759 (III Alp.). Cf. also A.Mócsy, *RE Suppl.* 9 (1962), 620ff.



Grabinschrift aus Musa (Osijek, Museum)