

VII.—THE CAERVORAN INSCRIPTION IN PRAISE OF  
THE SYRIAN GODDESS.

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One of the best known of the inscriptions which have been found on the line of the Roman Wall is that which was discovered at Caervoran (the Roman camp of *Magna*) in 1816, and which is now deposited in the museum of the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries. It is numbered 306 in the *Lapidarium Septentrionale*: 759 in the British volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (vol. vii.), and it is to the following purport:—

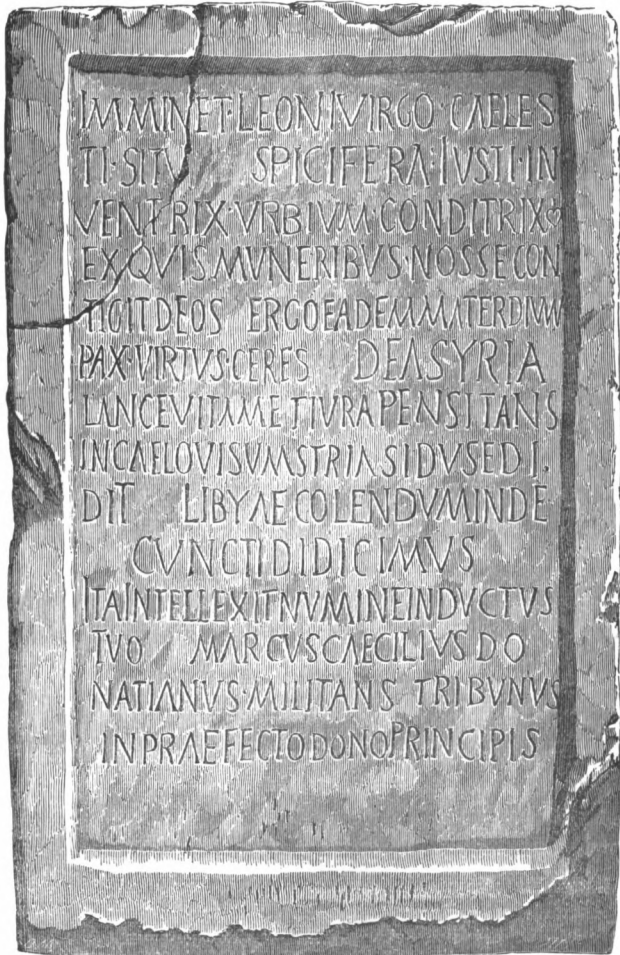
*Imminet Leoni Virgo caelesti situ  
Spicifera, iusti inventrix, urbium conditrix,  
Ea quis muneribus nosse contigit deos.  
Ergo eadem mater divum, Pax, Virtus, Ceres,  
Dea Syria, lance vitam et iura pensitans.  
In caelo visum Syria sidus edidit  
Libyae colendum; inde cuncti didicimus.  
Ita intellevit numine inductus tuo  
Marcus Caecilius Donatianus, militans  
Tribunus in praefecto dono principis.*

The inscription is evidently meant to be poetical, and consists of ten Iambic lines, unfortunately composed without much regard to the laws of metre.

Literally translated it is as follows:—

Over the lion hangs the Virgin in her heavenly sphere,  
Bearing an ear of corn, discoverer of justice, founder of cities,  
By which gifts we are accustomed to know the gods.  
Therefore the same is mother of the gods, Peace, Virtue, and Ceres,  
The Syrian Goddess weighing in her scales life and laws.  
Syria gave forth this constellation first seen in her sky,  
To be worshipped by Libya: thence have we all learned [her holiness].  
Thus hath understood, led on by thy divinity,  
Marcus Caecilius Donatianus serving  
As tribune instead of prefect by the gift of the prince.

This little poem, which we may call 'a Roman tribune's confession of faith,' has often attracted the notice of commentators, but I do not think much light has yet been thrown on its meaning.



(3 ft. 4 ins. by 2 ft. 2 ins.)

At first sight the allusion to a Heavenly Virgin, who is also a mother, might naturally lead the discoverers to think that they are dealing with a Christian monument, but the references to Ceres and Cybele, mother of gods, would at once dispel such a notion. The

first two lines are evidently astronomical, and refer to the constellation Virgo with its bright and beautiful star, *Spica Virginis*, next in place to Leo, among the signs of the Zodiac.

But what does the tribune mean by saying that he identifies this divinity with the mother of the gods, with Peace, Virtue, and Ceres, that she is the inventress of laws, the founder of cities, and the being who weighs life and laws in equal scales (a possible allusion here to the constellation Libra on the other side of Virgo)? Above all, what does he mean by saying that she is the Syrian goddess, and that her worship passed first from Syria to Africa?

I think that I have found the answer to this question, and that the inscription is virtually an apotheosis of Julia Domna, wife of the emperor Severus and mother of Geta.

Consider, in the first place, what is likely to be the meaning of the reference to Libya or Africa. One Roman emperor and one only came from the province of Africa, namely, Septimius Severus. We learn from the *Historia Augusta* that he was early possessed by the idea that he would one day succeed to the empire, and was on the look out for all sorts of omens of his future greatness.

After the death of his first wife, Marcia, he determined on a second marriage, and had the nativities of all eligible wives calculated, being himself highly skilled in astrology, and when he heard that there was in Syria a certain female named Julia who had such a nativity that she was destined to be mated to a king, he sought her in marriage, and obtained her by the good offices of his friends. This is Julia Domna, the mother of Geta, and, as we are told, by a second and unlawful marriage the wife of her stepson Caracalla, Geta's murderer. Undoubtedly in the reigns of Severus and Caracalla her word was very powerful in the State, and an officer admitted 'by the favour of the Prince,' to rule as Tribune with brevet rank of Prefect in the camp of Magna, might in those evil days of corruption and servility think to increase his credit with his imperial patroness by penning these lines of slavish adulation to this new Syrian goddess who had first cast her beams on the African Severus and through his devotion to her cause had become worshipped throughout the wide Roman Empire.

Certain it is that never was the influence of Syrian worship more powerfully felt at Rome than under the dynasty of Severus. It was then that the Roman world found itself with amazement the submissive slave of a dissolute Syrian youth, priest and namesake of Elagabalus, god of Emesa. It was then also, to quote a more beneficent result of Semitic influence on Rome, that the young and devout Severus Alexander raised in his private chapel an altar on which he paid his devotions to Abraham and Christ, side by side with the Hellenic Orpheus.

Whatever may be thought of the precise value of my suggestion, it is certain that there never was a time when African and Syrian influences were so curiously brought into juxtaposition as during the reigns of Severus, his son, and his grandsons.

External evidence, as far as it goes, entirely corresponds with the internal evidence which I have thus adduced.

Hübner in his note on this inscription says, 'The letters are of the third century, thin and tall, but good. Bucheler says that it was not made before the age of the Antonines. But by the lettering it is more recent still and is to be ascribed to the time of Severus or his sons.'

Upon the whole, then, I contend that the inscription is meant as a piece of flattery of the empress Julia Domna, and is either a sort of rude hymn to some goddess of her adoration, or (which I think more probable) an actual apotheosis of the empress herself.