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Two Ancient Roman Plates

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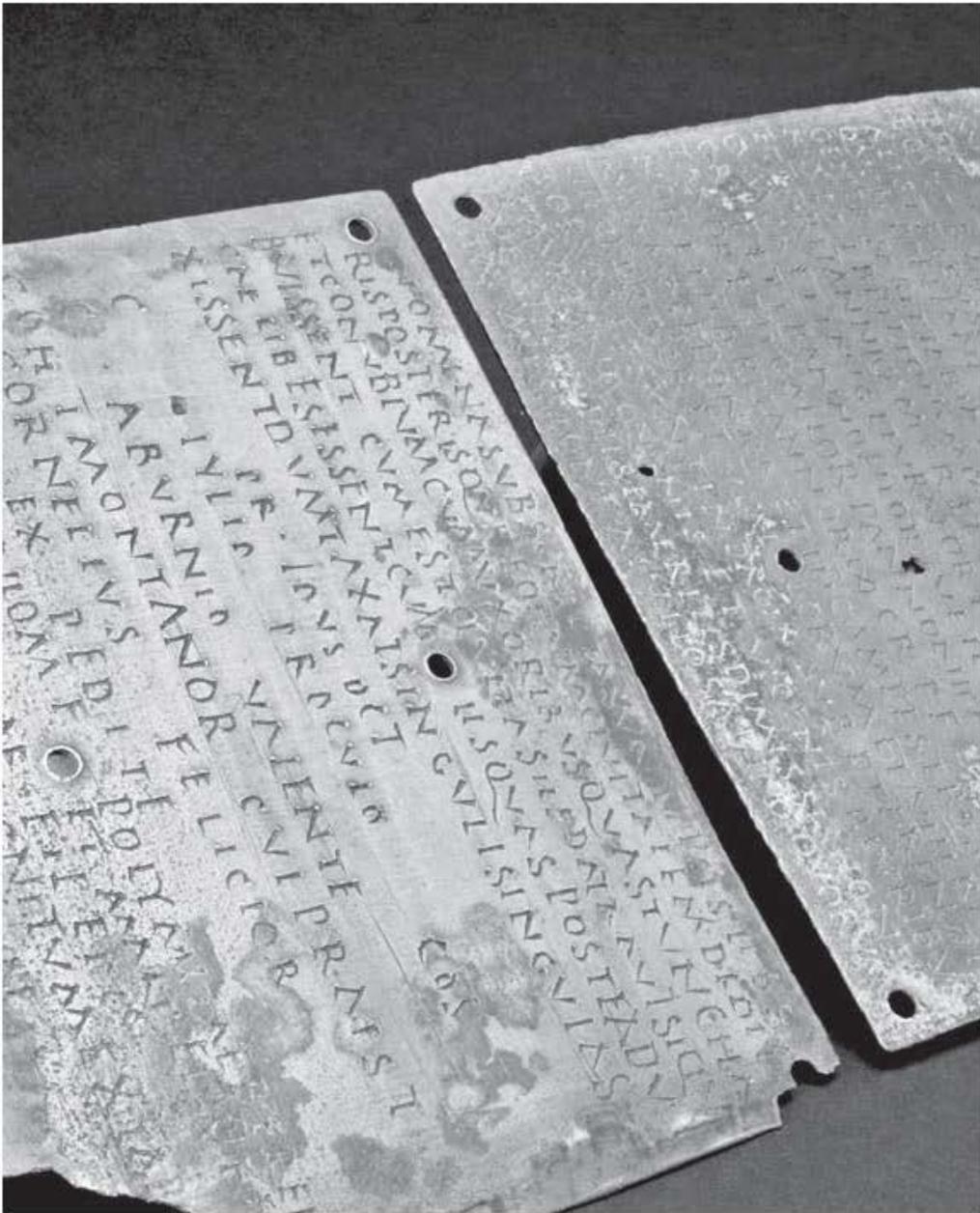
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Detail of *constituto* for Marcus Herennius Polymita, plate 1 (side B) on the right, plate 2 (side C) on the left. Spots of corrosion or discoloration on these faces show that these two ancient plates remained bound tightly together for centuries. Photograph by Mark Pollei ©. Used by permission.

Two Ancient Roman Plates

John W. Welch and Kelsey D. Lambert

The 1998 festschrift in honor of John L. Sorenson contains a lengthy chapter about the ancient practice of doubling, sealing, and witnessing important documents.¹ That article illustrated this legal practice in several ways, including photographs of a pair of Roman bronze plates from Mainz, Germany, dating to AD 103.² In September 2006, Brigham Young University will receive a similar pair of plates from the Roman province of Dacia, to be displayed near the entrance to the Harold B. Lee Library. Bronze plates such as these, known as military diplomas, were used for granting Roman citizenship and military honors to soldiers retiring after twenty-six years of service. The following article describes this particular pair of plates and explains why Latter-day Saints should be interested in this acquisition of one of the finest examples of ancient writing on metal plates,³ which happen to be physically similar in certain ways to the plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.⁴ This article goes hand in hand with the exhibition of these Roman plates at BYU, supplying background information, research results, bibliographic references, and reflections on their significance. An extensive collection of further materials relevant to such plates can be found at byustudies.byu.edu.

How Did These Plates Come to BYU?

These two plates were discovered in February 1986 near an area that was once part of the ancient Roman province of Dacia, now present-day Romania.⁵ The plates came into the hands of an extraordinary private antiquities collector in Berlin named Axel Guttman, where they remained until his untimely death at age fifty-seven in 2001. Jerome

Eisenberg of Royal Athena Galleries in New York and London acquired much of Guttman's collection at an auction and began to market these helmets, spears, vases, and other exceptionally fine Greek, Etruscan, and Roman artifacts. In 2004 he sent a catalogue to David Swingler, his long-time Latter-day Saint friend and antiquities dealer in southern California. Swingler, who had been looking for a set of bronze Roman military diplomas for thirty years, immediately noticed and took interest in six military diplomas from Guttman's collection and began searching for donors who could purchase the plates. Swingler recalls, "Dr. Eisenberg commented that in his 45 years working in the ancient art market as a dealer, this was the first and only intact pair of such plates he had seen, anywhere, for sale. [I] explained [my] interest in them for donation to the BYU Library, and explained why Latter-day Saints valued such artifacts."⁶ Swingler contacted John Welch at BYU and, after a fair amount of correspondence, sent the plates by Federal Express to Provo on inspection. Within a few days of the plates' arrival, Welch had brought together a group of five very willing donors and, with the generous participation of Eisenberg and Swingler, the acquisition was accomplished on September 13, 2005.

What Are the Physical Characteristics of the Plates?

These two plates work together hand in glove. Both are the same size, and after almost two thousand years of being bound together, they conform to each other in shape and surface features. The full text of the imperial decree is cast in portrait format on the front of plate 1 (side A). The very same text is inscribed in landscape format onto the back of plate 1 (side B) and over onto the front of plate 2 (side C). On the back of plate 2 (side D) are cast the names of the seven witnesses or officials by whose authority this pair of plates was issued. When the two plates are stacked and bound together, sides A and D become the two exterior faces of the sealed pair, and sides B and C become the protected interior faces.

The plates are 4.8 inches (12.2 cm) by 6.4 inches (16.2 cm). Each plate is 1 to 1.1 millimeter thick, about the thickness of thin cardboard, and weighs about seventy grams, or two and a half ounces. The outer side of each plate (sides A and D) has a double-grooved border about one millimeter deep; the edges of the inner sides are plain. The plates were found together and obviously are a set: "The identical recipient of both the exterior and the interior inscriptions, the similar patina, traces of fire, resulting damage on one corner and certain identical deformations which must have originated when both *tabellae* were still strung together, make it absolutely certain that both plates belong together."⁷

A small hole is found in two of the corners of each plate. Metal rings inserted through these matched holes attached the two plates. They “acted as hinges to the tablets,”⁸ so that the pair of plates could be opened and closed like a book. Similar holes are found on all plates up until the beginning of the reign of Hadrian (AD 117–38).

Overall, this pair of plates has been unusually well preserved. The metal is extremely brittle, but it has survived the long years with only a few fractures in the corners. Except for two extraneous holes, likely caused by some impurity in the casting, plate 1 is completely intact. A small portion of the upper right edge of plate 2 has broken off, along with an even smaller piece of the lower right-hand corner near the hole for the ring. Both of these pieces will be reattached for later display. Some other small areas are rougher or worn away where the two pieces may have rubbed together.

Side A of plate 1 has some slight burnt discoloration as well as a heavy green patina. On its inner surface, side B, plate 1 has been mostly preserved in its original matte brown color, except for a five to ten millimeter green band of rust around the outer edge. The band of rust is wider in one corner because the plate was bent up slightly in that area.⁹

The inner surface, side C, of plate 2 has also been cleaned, being rusted green only around its edges. While the larger broken-off corner on plate 2 corresponds with the burn marks on plate 1, the fire damage on plate 2 is minimal. On the back of plate 2, across the middle of side D, is a two-centimeter-wide stripe that has remained a shiny gold color because of a sealing box that was originally affixed there, while the outer borders of this center stripe are covered with two to three millimeters of dark green rust.

How and Why Were the Plates Sealed Together?

On the back of plate 2, running down the middle of the witnesses' names is a two- to three-centimeter vertical band that has unique patination and preservation. This area is where the seal fastened the two plates together (see fig.1). Wire strands were strung through two holes punched along the center line of each tablet. The wire was then twisted together to fasten the plates tight to each other.¹⁰ Over the knots of wire binding the plates together, wax was poured, “on which the witnesses impressed their seals. A half-cylindrical bronze seal was soldered over the wax for protection” (fig. 1).¹¹ These seals would be broken by a judge or official should a dispute arise over the reading of the open text on side A. In that case, the backup copy of the text found on the interior faces B and C could be



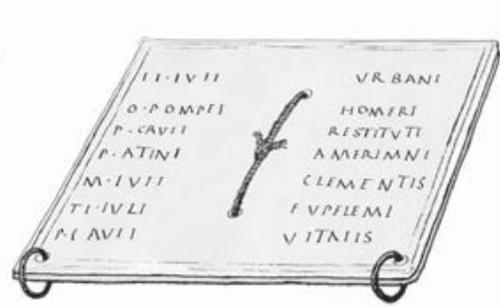
1



2



3



4



5



6

FIG. 1. Drawing of the method used to bind and seal the plates. (1) The two plates were attached with a ring in two of the corners. (2) The pair was then closed up. (3) A wire was strung through two holes in the middle of both plates. (4) The wire was twisted to fasten the plates snugly together. (5) Wax was poured over the wire and impressions of the witnesses' seals were attached. (6) A metal box was secured over the seals for their protection. Drawings by Michael P. Lyon.

read to verify and establish the correct reading of the terms of the grant or decree. Because the sealing wire and sealing covers were made of softer metal or materials, they corroded long ago and have left no further trace.

What Are the Plates Made Of?

The plates are made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, as is discussed in detail by Michael Dorais and Garret Hart in the accompanying article.¹² In addition, much can be learned about the history of these plates by studying the corrosion or patina patterns on the metal.

In the case of sides A and D, the patina is characterized by “a thin fairly uniform green crust of copper basic carbonates with splashes of the related blue mineral azurite. . . . Whether we call it patina or corrosion, it is important because locked in it is some evidence of the environment in which the bronze has lain in the past.”¹³ The outer sides, A and D, were exposed to “the multi-mineral soil, groundwater and soil atmosphere within the soil in which [they were] buried.”¹⁴ Although side A has been cleaned, it still maintains evidence of considerable corrosion. Side D has also been corroded, but not nearly as heavily as side A. “It clearly retains vestiges of mineral bronze patination. Natural hard green malachite and bronchatite patinas, as well as spots of hard black tenorite, chalcocite or bornite are clearly noted. Some small spots of red-brown cuprite are also present.”¹⁵

The internal faces B and C of these plates were “sealed tightly to each other as companion plates for 19 centuries,” and, not surprisingly, they have unique patterns of corrosion where they touched each other. Upon excavation, the plates likely had to be pried apart due to “a profuse growth of purple-red cuprite blotches actually cement[ing] them together.”¹⁶

How Were the Plates Inscribed?

Two different techniques were used to write on these plates. Sides A and D were cast; sides B and C were inscribed. As Eisenberg and Swingler describe, the wording on “the outside faces of both plates is correctly a cast copy of an original engraving on metal, cast through the lost-wax mould-and-casting process.” This process was typical for military diplomas, where the original “was engraved and sent to the archives in Rome.” The text on the interior faces of the plates was engraved, “correctly hammer-and-chisel cut.” This is the typical process for the inner text of Roman plates that were then sealed and bound to each other to prevent tampering.¹⁷

What Do the Plates Say?

The text on both sides of each plate is neatly written and aligned. Because of this textual clarity, the text can be read problem-free, as long as one can understand its use of technical Latin abbreviations.¹⁸ The text of side A, which is replicated almost exactly on sides B and C, reads as follows, translated by John F. Hall, BYU Professor of Classical Languages and Ancient History:

Imperator [Emperor] Caesar, Son of the Divine Nerva, Nerva Traianus Augustus Germanicus Dacicus, Pontifex Maximus, in the thirteenth year of his tribunician power, and acclaimed imperator [victorious general] six times, and Consul for the fifth time, father of his country.

To the horse soldiers and foot soldiers who have completed military service in three cavalry brigades and sixteen auxiliary cohorts which are identified as follows: the First (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded) and the Second Flavian Commagene Archers, and the Second Pannonian Veterans, and the First Bruttian Thousand Strength Ulpian (presented with the high award of Commemorative Chain and with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded), and the First Brittanian Thousand Strength (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded), and the First Iturean, and the First Thracian (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded), and the First Augustan Iturean, and the First Vindelician (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded) and (the designation of Ever Faithful), and the First Veteran Pannonian, and the First Mountain, and the Second Gallic Pannonian, and the Second Spanish, and the Second Brittanian Thousand Strength (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded and the designation of Ever Faithful), and the Second Gallic Macedonian, and the Third Level Countryside (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded), and the Third Cyprian (with distinction of Roman Citizenship awarded), and the Fifth Gallic, and the Eighth Raetian, all of which are in Dacia under the command of D. Terentius Scaurianus and are dismissed in the twenty-fifth year of their service.

An honorable discharge having been granted by Julius Sabinus to those whose names are inscribed below, and to the children of them and to the descendants of them [Trajan] awards citizenship and the right of legal marriage with wives they possess at the time when citizenship was awarded to them, or, if they are unmarried, [the right of marriage] with those whom afterward perhaps they may lead into marriage.

[Done] name by name on the day before the Ides of October in the consulship of Gaius Julius Proculus and Gaius Aburnius Valens to a foot soldier of the First Mountain [Cohort], under the command of Cornelius Felicior, namely to Marcus Herennius Polymita Berens, son of Marcus, and to his son Januarius and to his son Marcellus and to his daughter Lucana.

Recorded and posted on a bronze tablet which is affixed in Rome to the wall on the back of the Temple of Minerva built by the Divine Augustus.

What Rights Were Granted by These Plates?

The text on the plates grants military honors and citizenship rights to retiring soldiers who served in the Roman army in the campaign against Dacia. In particular, these plates went to an individual soldier named Marcus Herennius Polymita, son of Marcus. The name Polymita “was likely a Greek nick name.”¹⁹ The diploma also extends these rights to his three children—two sons, Januarius and Marcellus, and one daughter, Lucana. Typical to most military diplomas, his wife’s name is not included, which is likely an indication that she was not a Roman citizen.²⁰

One cannot say with certainty where the soldier is from. Berens is an otherwise localized agnomen. Mirković suggests that he may have originated from Beroe in Thrace.²¹ According to Garbsch, however, he may have come from Beroia in Macedonia or from a Macedonian colony in Syria.²²

It is possible that Herennius had taken this Roman name before his retirement, or he may have assumed all or part of this name with this grant of citizenship. He may have received citizenship as part of a collective bestowal on the First Mountain Cohort or by personal appointment from the emperor in reward for his bravery as a soldier. Herennius began his military service in AD 84 at the latest, at which time his troop would have been in Pannonia. The First Mountain Cohort was designated an auxiliary cohort between the years AD 98 and 100, approximately ten years before Herennius retired. This particular diploma is the fourth one that has been found for a soldier belonging to the First Mountain Cohort.²³

Citizenship rights. In the first century AD, no civic status was more powerful than that of Roman citizenship, a privilege enjoyed by a small percent of the population in the Roman Empire at the time of Trajan. As a Roman citizen, Herrenius would have had the right to wear the toga, to be exempt from taxes, to receive government appointments, and to appeal any adverse legal judgements to the emperor in person.²⁴ Proof of citizenship was crucial, since the penalty for falsely claiming to be a citizen was death.²⁵ The widespread distribution of military diplomas across the Roman Empire shows that retiring soldiers returned to their native lands and valued these significant rights, probably having few remaining ties to Rome other than the diploma itself. In addition, “the grant of citizenship passed on in law to a man’s descendants,”²⁶ a point that is well illustrated

by the Apostle Paul, who was a Roman citizen by birth, his father having been previously granted citizenship (Acts 22:28–29).

Marriage privileges. The rights and privileges associated with marriage were variable depending on which branch of the military employed the soldier. Typically, the diploma allowed a soldier to marry upon retirement and extended the privilege of citizenship to all children born to him.²⁷ A retired soldier who had been granted citizenship for his family “was required to register the birth of his children within thirty days before a Roman official, and he received a wooden diptych [a two-leaved, hinged tablet] recording the declaration, which acted as a certificate of citizenship for the child for the rest of his life. Like the military *diplomata* this contained the names of seven witnesses, and provided a presumptive proof of citizen status.”²⁸ His wife, if foreign, would be recognized legally under Roman law, but she was rarely granted citizenship,²⁹ and the extension of citizenship to children was eventually discontinued around AD 140.³⁰

Who Witnessed This Decree?

At the end of the diploma, on side D, the names of the seven witnesses appear: Titus Julius Urbanus, Publius Cornelius Alexander, Lucius Pullius Verecundus, Publius Atinius Amerimnus, Gaius Julius Paratus, Gaius Tuticanus Saturninus, and Marcus Julius Clemens. Although little is known about the specific qualifications to become a witness according to ancient Roman law, witnesses represented an elite group of citizens because “witnessing was an ancient privilege of citizenship.”³¹ These seven names have been found variously on different military diplomas from AD 79 to 129, but they have been found as a complete group of seven on only one other diploma from the same year.³² Without these seven attestations, the diploma was not considered official. Roman registration “documents, like the military *diplomata*, were guaranteed by the signatures of the seven witnesses required by Roman law in the certification of all documents.”³³ Their official collective seal or individual seals would have been affixed to the wax covering the sealing wire that held the two plates together.

The number seven was particularly significant in ancient Israelite texts and to early Christians, and in this instance to Romans as well. Seven witnesses attested irrefutably the validity and correctness of these plates, which makes one wonder if John the Revelator had this imperial Roman convention in mind when he saw and spoke of a book with seven seals that would be opened by Jesus Christ at the time of judgment: “And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. . . . And one of the elders saith unto

me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (Rev. 5:1, 5). Since the Book of Revelation is generally thought to have been written toward the end of the first century, during the reign of Trajan, a connection between Revelation 5:1–5 and the Roman practice evidenced by these plates issued by Trajan is possible.

Who Was Trajan?

The text inscribed on the plates dates their issuance to the day before the Ides of October in the thirteenth tribunal year of the emperor Trajan,³⁴ which equates to AD 109 on our calendar. In early imperial Rome, dates were calculated based on the tribunal year of the emperor. Because Trajan renewed his tribunician power on September 18 each year, these plates inscribed on October 14 were issued during the first month of that tribunal year.³⁵ By that time in his reign, Trajan had been acclaimed “victorious general” on six occasions, a title reserved for emperors who were successful in battle.

As a historical figure, Trajan is known mostly for his impressive military career, during which he conquered Dacia and extended the Roman Empire to its largest-ever geographic size. Trajan’s conquering spirit coupled with his diplomacy caused him to issue a high number of military diplomas in order to reward his large and diverse army.

He is also remembered for his correspondence with Pliny the Younger, which resulted in peaceable treatment of the Christians in the province of Bithynia-Pontus, on the south shores of the Black Sea.³⁶ In this famous correspondence between the two, Pliny questioned the torture and killing of Christians from a legal standpoint, and he wrote to Trajan that they “bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.” Trajan replied, “It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people.”³⁷

When Did the Romans Begin Issuing Such Plates?

Throughout Roman civilization, government officials and private individuals made widespread use of *tabulae*:

In Roman legal affairs and other ceremonial acts with public implications, writing on wooden, wax, or bronze tables was special and preferred. . . . These tablets are associated with acts that order the state and

the household; . . . they are not temporary jottings, but authoritative and final embodiments of the new reality they help to create. . . . Roman-law documents written on *tabulae* were traditional creations far older than the imperial dates of the surviving examples would suggest.³⁸

The use of bronze indicated permanency—“bronze tablets were believed eternal,”³⁹ and thus the use of bronze was “a favorite physical medium for the fulfillment of a vow . . . signal[ing] expense undertaken and lasting gratitude.”⁴⁰

The practice of documenting citizenship on a bronze tablet first appeared in 89 BC with Spanish cavalrymen. The Roman practice of recording military service and family information for soldiers on bronze plates was apparently adopted from these Spaniards and is generally believed to have begun in the reign of the emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), for it was during his reign that the grant of citizenship began to be heavily regulated and a “standardized document appear[ed].” Claudius was intent on spreading the reaches of Roman influence by extending citizenship to active and retiring soldiers in order to “form the basis for a large-scale extension of the citizenship.”⁴¹ This widespread grant of citizenship to noncitizen soldiers of provincial origin would have increased the number of new Roman citizens by an average of several thousand per year, not including the wives and children of the soldiers.⁴²

When and How Were These Plates Issued?

Although scholars do not know all of the purposes of Roman military diplomas, it is clear that they were highly valued by their recipients. The basic archival copy of such a plate, called the *constituto*, was an official imperial decree granting citizenship to an entire legion or cohort, and it was placed publicly on a temple wall in Rome. According to the last line of the plate given to Marcus Herennius, a copy of its decree was affixed in Rome on a wall in the temple of Minerva built by Augustus.

In addition, a pair of plates with a copy of the *constituto* as well as features specific to one soldier and his family was given to the retiring soldier. That pair of plates would remain with the retiree after his release from military service.⁴³ These diplomas become “of particular significance for both military and civil history since they are (when intact) precisely dated both by imperial titles and consuls . . . and give both day and month.”⁴⁴ With such accurate record keeping, Roman historians can trace the existence of various Roman legions at the time of each plate’s issuance.

Although it is possible that most if not all Roman soldiers received such a diploma either during their period of service or upon their discharge



PLATE 1 (Side A): *Constituto* for M. Herennius Polymitas, front external text. The decree on this bronze plate, issued by the Roman emperor Trajan in the year AD 109, awards citizenship and other honors to retiring soldiers who had served in the conquest of Dacia (modern day Romania). A similar plate was posted in the temple of Minerva in Rome to give public notice of this imperial edict. Actual size. Photograph by Mark Pollei ©. Used by permission.



PLATE 1 (Side B): Copy of first half of *constituto*, interior text. The text on sides B and C is a duplicate copy of the exterior text on side A. If a dispute should arise over the reading of the main text on the front of plate 1, a judge could resolve that uncertainty by breaking open the seal impressions and untying the sealing wire to consult this sealed portion of the record. Photograph by Mark Pollei ©. Used by permission.



PLATE 2 (Side D): Seven witnesses, back external text. On the back side of plate 2, the names of seven witnesses or officials are given. They authenticate this decree and give it legal force and effect. Through the two corner holes, small rings bound the plates together. A wire, laced through the two center holes, was twisted to hold the plates snugly together. Marks can be seen where the box was attached to protect the witnesses' seals. Photograph by Mark Pollei ©. Used by permission.

from military duty, scholars believe that military diplomas were also given, under particular circumstances, as a reward for extraordinary service. Maxfield argues that the awarding of citizenship evolved as the Roman army gradually changed from being a “part-time, non-professional Republican army” to “a full-time professional army,” meaning that the majority of the soldiers were foreigners employed by the Roman Empire. Roman officials needed some form of award for these soldiers, and the grant of citizenship would seem “most appropriate . . . for a man who had spent a quarter-century or more protecting Rome’s empire and absorbing her mores.”⁴⁵ Collingwood notes, however, that diplomas were sometimes issued to soldiers still in active duty, which meant it was not necessarily a discharge certificate. Beginning in the early second century, however, these plates were issued “almost wholly to veterans, on completion of a fixed term of service.”⁴⁶ Geza Alföldy charts a gradual shift over the years AD 50–178 from diplomas issued to active soldiers to those issued almost exclusively to retired soldiers.⁴⁷ That trend buttresses the argument that these diplomas were not necessarily given as a reward for special military heroics or bravery in combat but essentially were issued in recognition of the completion of an honorable career of service.

Awards for military merit were typically given as block awards to entire units, not to individual soldiers.⁴⁸ In the case of the plates given to Marcus Herennius, the *constituto* granted citizenship to certain members of the nineteen units listed on the plates—three cavalry brigades and sixteen cohorts.

In the case of diplomas given upon retirement, which for auxiliary soldiers occurred after twenty-six years of service,⁴⁹ the diploma became a treasured reward. It also provided a standardized system of rewards. “One of the fundamental characteristics of the systems of reward is that they were equitable; that is not to say that equal treatment was given to all—it most certainly was not—but that equal treatment was given to equal people within like groups.”⁵⁰ Provincial governors were required to regularly send lists to Rome of soldiers with special privileges. These names and information were presumably gathered and centralized in a specialized military archive.⁵¹

The Ancient Pattern of Backing Up Documents

Several legal systems in the ancient world used doubled or duplicated documents to back up and to preserve important texts. Doubled, sealed, witnessed documents are found written in Akkadian, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, on clay, papyrus, parchment, and metal plates.⁵²

The Babylonians, as early as 2000 BC, used such a system in writing legal contracts, deeds, and business transactions. Scribes recorded the transactions in cuneiform on clay tablets, many of which are still legible “thanks to the protection of desert gravel and sand.”⁵³ Witnesses would “seal” the document by rolling a “personal seal, usually in the form of a small stone cylinder uniquely engraved with religious scenes and/or the person’s name,” across the wet clay of a document before it dried. The tablet was then wrapped in a “thin sheet of clay, thus forming a ‘case’ or ‘envelope.’ The text of the contract was repeated verbatim on the outside of this envelope.”⁵⁴ Finally, the witnesses impressed their seals on the outer portion as well. This way if the outer portion were ever destroyed or tampered with, “a judge could remove the outer envelope and reveal the original tablet.”⁵⁵ This practice made forgery or alteration virtually impossible, because multiple witnesses were involved and because both tablets had to dry together to prevent the outer envelope from cracking.⁵⁶

Similarly, the Israelites recorded legal documents on papyrus scrolls that were then rolled tightly and sealed, with the text being repeated on an open portion of the scroll.⁵⁷ In the case of a dispute over the contents of the contract, a judge could break the seals and unroll the original document. Evidence of this practice is found in Jeremiah 32:6–16, a text that was not clearly understood until examples of such Hebrew texts were discovered at Elephantine.⁵⁸ In purchasing a plot of land from his cousin around 590 BC, Jeremiah reported:

And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed *it*, and took witnesses, and . . . I took the evidence of the purchase, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open: And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch . . . in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison (Jer. 32:10–12).⁵⁹

During the excavation of the fourth century BC city Dura-Europos, located in today’s Syria, Greek parchments were found that evidence the same practice of doubled legal documents.⁶⁰ Archaeologists found there “the remains of a registry roll of copies made from the originals kept by the principles.”⁶¹ Later Jewish texts prescribe in detail the way in which doubled, sealed, witnessed documents should be configured in order to qualify as valid legal records. Talmudic law required three witnesses to make the document indisputable.⁶²

Many of these same features are present in the case of the Roman military diplomas. Being inscribed on metal plates, these Roman decrees were durable and tampering was unlikely. Merchants and soldiers were given metal documents instead of wooden diptychs because they moved around

more than the general population and needed documentation that would last.⁶³ In addition, the text was duplicated and backed up by the sealed interior copy of the text, and seven witnesses sealed each set of plates. The Romans added the additional safeguard of posting a copy of the decree in a public place in Rome. If a soldier were to lose his plates or if they were stolen, he always had his proof of citizenship documented in Rome.

How Common Are Such Plates?

It is difficult to say exactly how many plates like these have survived, but there is a vast amount of scholarship available. In a growing bibliography available on the BYU Studies web site, there are over 150 entries of scholarly books and articles on Roman military diplomas that document more than 1,000 discoveries of plates or fragments.⁶⁴ The complete pair of plates acquired for donation to BYU is rare, however, considering that most of the published diplomas are only small fragments of one plate and are not well preserved.

Are These Plates Authentic?

All evidence strongly supports the authenticity of these plates. Eisenberg and Swingler examined them over several months and determined them to be an authentic Roman military diploma from AD 109. Determining factors included dimensions, thickness, textual engravings, casting technique, chisel engraving technique, style of text copy, natural metallic patination and oxidation patterns, varying corruptions on external and internal plate faces, and general design and configuration. Their authenticity report concludes: “It is our professional opinions that these two bronze Roman Military Diploma Plates dated by their inscription to October 14, AD 109, are ancient, and undeniably genuine.”⁶⁵ The results of the metallurgical testing by Dorais and Hart and the historical details encountered in the epigraphic study and translation of the Latin text by John Hall fully corroborate that conclusion.

What Particular Significance Do the Plates Have for Latter-day Saints?

Beyond the fact that these plates offer one of the finest examples found anywhere of ancient writing on metal plates, several specific similarities evoke comparisons between these Roman bronze plates and the gold plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.

The Roman plates are a little less than five inches by seven inches. Based on statements by various witnesses who saw or handled the gold

plates, the individual leaves were estimated to be six to six and a half inches wide and eight inches long, close to the same size.⁶⁶

The Roman plates are about one sixteenth of an inch thick, slightly thicker than the Book of Mormon plates, which Joseph Smith described as “not quite so thick as common tin,” and Emma Smith called “pliable like thick paper.”⁶⁷

Roman bronzes were alloyed to make them rust resistant and durable. Likewise, the gold plates were not likely pure gold but may have been made of tumbaga, an alloy of copper and gold, perhaps gilded with a higher percentage gold that would give them their gold luster but would increase the legibility of the characters when engraved through to the higher percentage copper layer beneath.⁶⁸

Pairs of Roman military diplomas were typically put together with two rings, one in each of the two corners on the right-hand side of the first plate. The plates of Mormon consisted of a large stack of plates and thus were bound together through the back with three large rings.⁶⁹

In both cases, one part of the text was open and the other sealed, although in different ways. The Roman plates were sealed to each other by a wire running through holes punched down the middle of the plates. The lower section of the Book of Mormon plates was sealed securely together and appeared to some to be as closed as a block of wood.⁷⁰

In each case, witnesses authenticated the records. The Romans used seven witnesses, whose names appear at the end of the document. Nephi envisioned that three witnesses would “testify to the truth” of the Nephite record (2 Ne. 27:12), consonant with biblical and Jewish law (Deut. 19:15).

In addition, the legal typology shared by these records anticipates that these texts would be used in judicial settings. Doubled, sealed, witnessed documents were created against the eventuality that a backup copy of the text might be needed some day in a judicial or official proceeding. Likewise, the angel told King Benjamin that the words that he revealed “shall stand as a bright testimony against this people, at the judgment day” (Mosiah 3:24). Moroni’s final declaration asserts, “The time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God” (Moro. 10:27), and his written words shall be authenticated through God’s declaration and perhaps even through documentary attestation.

More than any single factor, the totality of this specific and multifaceted pattern makes these second-century AD Roman plates relevant to the fourth-century AD Book of Mormon plates, especially given the fact that this pattern surfaces in several civilizations and is implemented in various media.

What Was Known of Such Plates in the 1820s?

Of the vast number of plates or fragments of plates discovered in the last two hundred years, very few were found before 1829.⁷¹ Because the majority of known plates have been discovered in the last one hundred years, most serious scholarship on Roman bronze military diplomas could not have begun until the twentieth century—making these artifacts virtually unknown in Joseph Smith’s day. While Jahn’s 1823 *Biblical Archaeology* mentions writing on tables of lead (Job 19:24) and tables of brass (1 Macc. 8:22; 14:20–27) and states that “the Hebrews went so far as to write their sacred books in gold” (citing Josephus and Pliny),⁷² nothing in that reference work hints at the manner in which any such records might have been configured, witnessed, or sealed.

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