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A stamp with Latin inscription from Sobata/Shivta in the Negev

Werner Eck and Yotam Tepper

Abstract: A stamp with two lines of a Latin inscription was found in Shivta (Sobata) in the Negev. The text mentions the owner Clemens and a Comicus, his born slave, who was as manager responsible for the product which was marked with the stamp. The stamp belongs to the second/third century.

Keywords: Bronze stamp; Latin inscription; Sobata/Shivta; Negev.

In Shivta, the ancient Sobata, a bronze stamp was found in one of the rooms of a house¹ near the southern water reservoir of Shivta during the excavations in the year 2018. It was lying on a floor paved with stones. The house belongs to the late antique period of the settlement, the 5th-6th century AD. Already in the 7th century the house was abandoned. Remains of a few installations and garbage dumps from the Early Islamic period were excavated.

The object is a small bronze plate, approx. 2 cm high, approx. 8.1 cm wide and approx. 5.6 mm thick. On the front side there is a two-line inscription with letters in relief (fig. 1 and 2). The back is now completely smooth; however, two circular stains show that something was placed there (fig. 3). These should be the places where the handle was fixed, which was necessary for the use of the object. It is a device with which other objects could be marked, i.e. a stamp.

¹ The house, No. 86 according to Hirschfeld's survey, is one of 170 large dwelling houses, which were built at the site during the Byzantine period. See: Y. Hirschfeld, Social aspects of the Late Antique village of Shivta, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 16, 2003, 395–408; during the 2015/6 excavation season held by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, two of its rooms were partly excavated, see: Y. Tepper – T. Erickson-Gini – Y. Farhi – G. Bar-Oz, *Probing the Byzantine/Early Islamic Transition in the Negev: The Renewed Shivta Excavations*, 2015–2016, Tel Aviv 45, 2018, 120–152. The whole structure (Area A) was excavated in the season of 2018-2019 on behalf of Haifa University and the National Parks Authority. See: Y. Tepper and G. Bar-Oz, Shivta, preliminary Report. Excavation and Surveys in Israel 132 (2020) (Hebrew-English). https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25825&mag_id=128. The Excavations were funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (648427) and the Israel Science Foundation (340-14). Research was conducted under licenses from the Israel Antiquities Authority (G-87/2015, G-4/2016, G-82/2018, G-5/2019). The authors would like to thank the external reviewers for suggestions and Gabriel Danzig for correcting the English.

As with almost all stamps, the letters are arranged retrograde, so that the imprint on an object could be read immediately *recte*. The inscription offers no difficulty in deciphering. In line 2, a rather large triangular separating point is inserted twice. The reading is:

CLEMENTIS

COMIC·V·V

The stamp was either pressed into a soft object or reproduced with ink on a surface. In many stamps of this type, a name appears in the genitive, which either expresses that the object is the property of this person or that the person bearing the name produced the object on which the imprint was to be read. In our case Clemens would thus be either the owner or the producer.

In the second line, there is another person with the name Comic(us); the abbreviation, however, does not make it clear in which Casus the name appears. But the abbreviations V V that follow it have to be connected with the name.

The name Clemens is part of the Latin nomenclature, but Comicus is a Greek name.² Both are attested for free people as well as for slaves, but in very different frequency.³ Clemens is found in Latin inscriptions far more than a thousand times for freeborn persons, only relatively rarely for slaves. Comicus or the female form Comice is far less common in Latin inscriptions. Of the 22 testimonies of the name from the city of Rome, more than half refer to slaves or freedmen, none clearly to a freeborn person.⁴ Thus Comic(-) should also refer to a slave in this inscription. This makes it very likely that the text should be understood in this way: *Clementis* refers to a free man whose name in the genitive identifies him as the owner of the object on which the stamp was placed. But this makes it clear that *Comic(-)* can only be named as the one who produced the object, so the name should be in the nominative: *Comic(us)*.

This understanding is best suited to what the two letters V V probably mean. Excluded a priori of course are quite frequent references in which V V stands for meanings like *v(irgo) V(estalis)* or *V(aleria) V(ictrix)* as the epithet of *legio XX* or *V(lpia) V(ictrix)* for *legio XXX*. Also *v(ivus) v(ivis)* or *v(iva) v(ivo)* or similar combinations. Rather, the abbreviation must have been connected with the activity that the probable slave Comicus carried out. Clemens must then have been his master. In epigraphic texts in which slave owners and their dependents appear, one often finds words beginning with V, namely *v(ilicus)* and *v(erna)*. Both can also be abbreviated to just the first letter.

On stamps like this one, as far as can be seen, the designation as *vilicus* is hardly found,⁵ *verna* obviously not at all; occasionally a slave is called *actor* or *dispensator*.⁶

² That this could be the also attested nomen gentile Comicius (CIL IV 1321; X 5984; AE 1978, 306; 2013, 290; 291), can probably be excluded, since after a cognomen written out in full, an abbreviated nomen gentile would hardly have been used.

³ Checked with the help of EDCS.

⁴ H. Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom*, Rom 2003, 2. Band 1102. Only in CIL VI 14156 and XI 3211 could they be freeborn persons.

⁵ AE 1980, 230.

⁶ See for example CIL IX 6083, 48. 130; X 8059,154; XIII 10022, 6.

But the connection *verna vilicus* is quite common, especially in the case of imperial slaves, for example on an inscription from the Alpes Poeninae:⁷

Acaunensiae fil(iae) Amaranthus Aug(usti) n(ostri) ver(na), vil(icus) XL Galliarum et Chelidon parentes posuerunt.

Or in a text from Ostia:⁸

Dis Manibus. T(ito) Flavio Botryoni et Ianuario Caes(aris) ser(vo) vern(ae) vil(ico), coniug(i) suo Caesetia Lanthanusa bene merentibus patri et fil(io) fecit.

Occasionally the two designations appear also with non-imperial slaves, so in an inscription from Porolissum:⁹

[--] Cleopa[tr]ae filia(e), [quae] vixit [an]n(os) VII m(enses) [--]. Ma[r]tin(us) ver(na) et vil(icus) b(ene) [m(erenti) --].

It is therefore reasonable to understand the two letters in the same way, given the concrete context of the stamp. If this assumption is correct, the text should be understood in this way:

Clementis / Comic(us) v(erna) v(ilicus). = “(property/product) of Clemens, Comicus, (his) house-born slave and manager (was responsible)”.

Comparable stamps are known from other provinces, e.g. on a piece from Pompeii,¹⁰ in ancient Israel we know only a single similar stamp. It comes from Iamnia and bears the following text: *Onesimi / N(--) Br(--) act(oris)*.¹¹

This epigraphic testimony on a stamp is so far the only one in Latin language known from Sobata. There are quite a few Greek inscriptions from there,¹² but all of them come from Late Antiquity, which fits in with the fact that the settlement, which is still preserved to an astonishing extent today, dates from Late Antiquity (4th-7th centuries).¹³ Although architectural remains of the high imperial period were not yet found at the site, some isolated finds indicate that an earlier settlement must have existed in this area.

This inscription cannot come from late antiquity. The use of the Latin language speaks against this. It belongs, as one must assume from the general conditions in the province, to the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. From the beginning of the 4th century, both in Syria

⁷ D 9035

⁸ CIL XIV 198.

⁹ AE 2010, 1367 = AE 2011, 1069.

¹⁰ CIL X 8058, 66. CF. CIL XIII 10022, 89; XV 8407. 8530.

¹¹ W. Eck - P. Eich, Ein neues römisches bronzenes *signaculum* aus Yavneh-Yam (Israel), ZPE 171, 2009, 253-260 = CIIP III 2273. We know stamps on which a military unit and the person who was involved are mentioned (ex. gr. CIIP I 755. 757; but they are not completely comparable.

¹² A. Negev, The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev, Jerusalem 1981, = SEG 31, 1425-1454; L. Di Segni, Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods, unpubl. PhD Thesis, 1997. - The texts will be assembled in vol. VI of the CIIP.

¹³ Y. Hirschfeld, Social aspects of the Late Antique village of Shivta, Journal of Roman Archaeology 16, 2003, 395-408; Y. Tepper – T. Erickson-Gini – Y. Farhi – G. Bar-Oz, Probing the Byzantine/Early Islamic Transition in the Negev: The Renewed Shivta Excavations, 2015–2016, Tel Aviv 45, 2018, 120–152

Palaestina and in Arabia, to which Shivta belonged before,¹⁴ Latin was no longer used for inscriptions. Therefore the text must belong to an earlier time, i.e. the 2nd/3rd century, when Latin was still in use in both provinces. However, apart from the majority of the population in the two Roman colonies in Syria Palaestina, Caesarea and Aelia Capitolina, and Bostra in Arabia, only a few groups used Latin in inscriptions, almost exclusively persons more closely connected with the Roman rule. These were all people who belonged to the Roman provincial administration, or who were connected with the Roman army in all its divisions. So if one assumes that Clement, as the owner of the stamp, lived in this area in the 2nd/3rd century or, more important for understanding the stamp, produced there something, then it is a realistic possibility that Clement was a veteran who, after his discharge from the army, either settled in this area or at least acquired property on which something was produced for whose identification the stamp was necessary.

It is assumed that a military unit was stationed in Sobata in late antiquity.¹⁵ This was at least deduced from some inscriptions found in Shivta. According to these texts, two sons of one Ἰωάννης βικάριος were buried there.¹⁶ Of course it is by no means certain that βικάριος in the seventh century refers to a military person. However one might understand this designation, it has no relevance for the understanding of the stamp and the interpretation of the inscription. For the stamp can only be dated several centuries earlier, it cannot belong to this late period of Roman rule in Sobata.

Perhaps further excavations in the once existing settlement from the first three centuries will provide further insights.

Köln (Eck)
Haifa and the Israel Antiquities Authority (Tepper)

¹⁴ To see the recently published milestones from the Severan period, in which the governors of the provincia Arabia still appear on milestones: n. C. B. David – B. Isaac, Six milestone stations and new inscriptions discovered in the Negev along the Petra-Gaza Incense Route, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2019.1694789>.

¹⁵ See A. Negev, *The Greek inscriptions from the Negev*. Jerusalem 1981, 88-91 = SEG 31, 1429. 1435. 1444. 1453 ; and cf. L. Di Segni, *Dated Greek inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine periods*, PhD Jerusalem. 1997, passim.

¹⁶ SEG 31, 1429. 1435. How far this John can or must be connected with the vicarius John, who is mentioned in SEG 31:1444 and 1453 (from Sobata), need not be discussed here. - For the general presence of army units in the late Central Negev see A.S. Lewin. *The late Roman Army in Palestine and Arabia*, in: *The Impact of the Roman Army (200 BC – AD 476)*, L. de Blois – E- Lo Cascio, Leiden 2007, 468-471, B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, Oxford (Revised edition) 1998, 161-219.



fig. 1



fig. 2: Mirror view



fig. 3