

What does the following inscription tell us about people's *cursus honorum*?

from Bejaia / SALDAE in Mauretania Caesariensis: *CIL*
VIII 8934 (add. p 973) = *ILS* 1400).

*Sex(to) Cornelio / Sex(ti) f(ilio) Arn(ensi) Dextro /
proc(uratori) Asiae iuridico Ale/xandreae proc(uratori)
Neaspo/leos et Mausolei praef(ecto) / classis Syr(iacae)
donis milita/rib(us) donato a divo Hadri/ano ob bellum
Iudaicum / hasta pura et vexillo / praef(ecto) alae I
Aug(ustae) gem(inae) co/lonorum trib(un) leg(ionis)
VIII Aug(ustae) / praef(ecto) coh(ortis) V Raetorum /
praef(ecto) fabrum III patrono / coloniae / P(ublius)
Blaesius Felix |(centurio) leg(ionis) II Trai/{i}an(ae) /
Fort(is) adfini piissimo / ob merita.*

CIL VIII 8934 is an inscription in Latin, which appears to be an epitaph. It is in the format commonly used for epitaphs. It begins with the full name, parentage and tribe of the deceased, and lists his accomplishments. The deceased was Sextus Cornelius Dexter, son of Sextus, of the Arnensis voting tribe.¹ The tripartite name and the identification of his Roman voting tribe show that he is Roman. It names the person who commissioned this inscription as Publius Blaesus Felix, centurion of the *Legio II Traiana Fortis*. The last phrase, *ob merita*, comments on the purpose of the memorial; “for his merits”.

The *CIL* website does not confirm what this inscription was, nor is there any image I can use to identify it further. However, an epitaph would have been inscribed on a tombstone in the Imperial Roman style. Trismegistos believes it was inscribed in stone, which corroborates this.²

CIL VIII 8934 was found in the ancient port city of Saldae, on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. This is modern day Bejaia in Algeria.³ Saldae was in the part of the province of Mauretania Caesariensis which would become Mauretania Sitifensis c. AD 228.⁴

Trismegistos gives a date range of AD 50 - 284 for *CIL* VIII 8934.⁵ The inscription itself does not give a date. However, there are terms in the inscription which can narrow it down. The *legio II Traiana Fortis* was founded in AD 105 by the Emperor Trajan.⁶ Thus, this inscription cannot predate AD 105, so a date range of AD 105-284 is preferable.

¹ Galsterer 2006

² Trismegistos [undated].

³ Trismegistos [undated].

⁴ Huß 2006a, Huß and Niemeyer 2006b

⁵ Trismegistos [undated].

⁶ Campbell 2006

The ending, where the person who commissioned the inscription is identified, is a common feature of Roman epitaphs. It is related to Roman inheritance law, as the testament often mandated an epitaph. *CIL* VIII 8934 does not mention *testamento*, and Felix's connection to Dexter is not given. This suggests that he is neither related nor heir to the deceased. Thus, the inscription was not made for legal purposes or family sentiment. The phrase *ob merita* suggests that this was a display of the respect Felix had for the deceased. It is unclear how the two men knew each other, but their shared links with the Roman military suggest it may have been as part of their professional lives.

Dexter's birthplace, age, and any surviving family are unmentioned on the epitaph, which suggests disregard of or unfamiliarity with personal details.

It was common in Roman epitaphs to list the achievements of the deceased. This was generally in the form of job titles listed in reverse chronological order, from most recent to oldest. If the deceased was of the appropriate class, this would show the *Cursus Honorum*.⁷

The *cursus honorum* was a complex legal framework describing the path needed to 'reach the highest senatorial rank'.⁸ In a more social sense, it was a widely recognised career path, with advancement on that path a marker of success which was listed as part of their life achievements on their gravestone.

The progression of roles here, while fitting the format used to record the *Cursus Honorum* on a patrician epitaph, is not a standard example of such. There is an old Roman patrician family called Cornelius, but Dexter is Equestrian. Many of Dexter's positions were exclusive to Equestrians, including *tribuno legionis*. The military awards listed in the epitaph are almost exclusively held by members of that class.⁹ The patrician *Cursus Honorum* required the ability to sit in the Senate, which the *ordo equestris* could not do.¹⁰

Equestrians often followed a similar but unstructured route, from low ranked civil or military positions to more prestigious and more highly paid ones. None of the positions held have known term requirements. There was one semi-formalised route of Equestrian career progression: the *Tres militiae*.¹¹

The *tres militiae* consisted of three steps. These were *praefectus cohortis*; *tribunus militum*; and *praefectus alae*, commanding a cavalry unit of 500. A fourth step was established under Trajan and Hadrian; the *praefectus alae milliariae*, commanding a cavalry unit of 1000.¹²

For the first step, Dexter's inscription reads "*praefecto cohortis V Raetorum*"; Prefect of the Cohort, Fifth Raetorum. This was a minor officer in control of a group of soldiers, who all usually came from one area – such as Raetorum, modern Raetia in Switzerland. This may also indicate that Dexter himself originated there. Raetorum was a part of the Empire and therefore accorded *civitas* to its people. This would fit Dexter, who is clearly shown as a Roman citizen following Roman customs.¹³

⁷ Gizewski 2006

⁸ Gizewski 2006

⁹ Le Bohec 2006b

¹⁰ Lintott, 2006, Gizewski 2006

¹¹ Eck 2006d

¹² Eck 2006d

¹³ Eck 2006b, Eck 2006d, Schön and Waldherr 2006

For the second step, the inscription reads “*tribuno legionis VIII Augustae*”. *Tribunus militum* and *tribunus legionis* being equal. Dexter was tribune of the legion for the Eighth Legion Augusta, a relatively low position in the wider empire but important and highly respected within the legion.¹⁴ The position of military tribune came to be a preliminary step in the *cursus honorum* during the imperial period.¹⁵

For the third step, the inscription reads “*praefecto alae I Augustae geminae colonorum*”. Dexter was prefect of a cavalry division of unspecified number.¹⁶

Thus, Dexter follows the three steps of the *Tres militiae*. He does not seem to follow the fourth, which could be one of three things. It could be deliberate diversion from the usual path; or that the change came about after Dexter had passed this point. The exact date of change is unclear. The combination of the two cavalry roles into one is the least likely possibility, given the otherwise high level of detail in the inscription.

Dexter never reached the highest points; Praetorian Prefect or Prefect of Egypt.¹⁷ Dexter’s career peaks at Procurator of Asia. This was a prestigious position controlling the finances of the province, as an independent governor.¹⁸

In his career Dexter has been very successful and has come repeatedly to the emperor’s notice.

Iuridicus of Alexandria; representative of the Prefect of Egypt, in charge of dispensing justice in Egypt. This position was directly appointed by the Emperor.¹⁹ He was also Procurator of Neapoleos and the Mausoleum of Augustus, a position which may have been appointed by the Emperor.²⁰

Dexter was prefect of the Syrian fleet and received military honours from Hadrian (AD 117-138) for service in the Jewish War.²¹

There were many Jewish Wars, but only two where Hadrian could have awarded honours. Dexter was Prefect of the Syrian Fleet during either the AD 132-135 Bar Kochba revolts, or the AD 115-117 Diaspora revolts.²² This means the earliest possible date for the inscription is AD 117 or 135, and Roman men have been known to live for more than 60 years, which gives a range of creation for this inscription of AD 117 – 195.

Dona militaria are military honours. Two are mentioned: *hasta pura*, a wooden spear with possible ritual use, and *vexillo*, a cavalry decoration attached to the *hasta pura*.²³

Prefect of the *fabrum*²⁴ is an unclear position. It was occasionally an honorary title. It could indicate an agent of the Emperor, prefect of the army engineers, officer in charge of arms making, head of

¹⁴ de Libero et al, 2006, Eck 2006d

¹⁵ Gizewski 2006

¹⁶ Eck 2006b - *praefectus alae*

¹⁷ Lintott, 2006

¹⁸ Eck 2006c

¹⁹ Schieman 2006

²⁰ Eck 2006c

²¹ Eck, 2006b; Eck, 2006a

²² Gerber 2006

²³ Le Bohec, 2006a

²⁴ Eck 2006b

the civil office in charge of fabrication. From its place in the list it came early in his career, before military offices, and as such was probably not held in a military context.

Dexter was named Patron of the Colony. There is no named colony, but is most likely to be Saldae, where the inscription was erected.

An inscription would most likely be commissioned soon after news of the death arrived. However, news travelling by boat or messenger could take some time to arrive. This inscription was found in Northern Africa, whereas Dexter's last position was Procurator of Asia. Additionally, Felix's unrelated status may make him unlikely to receive the news immediately.

This can be narrowed down using some of the details in the inscription. To put Dexter as Prefect of the Syrian Fleet is around 30 years old (and thus approaching the peak of his career), he would have been born between AD 80-110. but estimating two different terms as procurator as a decade seems reasonable. This would give a death date between AD 120-150 if he lived to forty, or to AD 170 at the furthest if he lived to sixty.

CIL VIII 8934 is a very good example of the career procession of an Equestrian. It shows that the *cursus honorum* concept was not held only by the higher class but was paralleled in the lower classes. following a similar beginning of military service followed by increasingly prestigious command roles. This tells us that people were familiar with the concept of the *cursus honorum*, and that it was a shared indicator of status across multiple classes.

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