
Review: The First (1996) Edition of the "Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre": A Review

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THE FIRST (1996) EDITION OF THE
SENATUS CONSULTUM DE CN. PISONE PATRE:
A REVIEW

EDWARD CHAMPLIN



WERNER ECK, ANTONIO CABALLOS, and FERNANDO FERNÁNDEZ, eds. *Das Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1996. xiv + 329 pp. 20 pls. Cloth, DM 142. (Vestigia 48)

CAN A COMMITTEE WRITE A REPORT? Yes and no. The question of authorship is relevant as much to the book under review as to the extraordinary text which it presents.

The document is a very long Latin inscription (176 lines) recording a decree of the Senate passed late in A.D. 20 after the trial, suicide, and posthumous condemnation of Cn. Calpurnius Piso, the former legate of Syria. Copies began to turn up, all within the boundaries of Roman Baetica, in the late 1980s, one virtually complete, one partial, and fragments of some four or five other versions. Appropriately, their first publication has appeared in two versions, the one under review here in German, the other in Spanish. Most of the material is shared by both volumes, but the German edition adds a concluding chapter on the political importance of the document, while the Spanish version has considerably more on the physical properties of the bronze tablets and on the Spanish historical context—and on it the authors' names are offered in alphabetical order. The German text scrupulously presents itself throughout as having three authors, and no hint is given as to who was responsible for which section. Let us speculate. The first three chapters, on the origins of the texts, on their physical condition, along with diplomatic transcriptions of each copy, and on the reconstruction and translation of the original text as received in Baetica, may represent the work of a team, but the subsequent chapters (4, prosopographical information; 5, the date of the trial; 6, commentary; 7, the transmission of the text to and within Baetica; and 8, the *senatus consultum* as political document) all bear the clear imprint of Werner Eck. That is, the prose is lapidary (Eck seems incapable of ambiguity or ellipsis); the erudition is

formidable; the argumentation is thorough, balanced, and imaginative; and the relative rapidity of publication is astonishing. Above all, Eck has made the book a work of truly international collaboration: between 1991 and 1996 he discussed the text at colloquia and at seminars in 38 universities (“among others”); some 60 scholars are thanked for help and criticism; and the notes are replete with specific acknowledgments to these and yet others for written and verbal comments and for pre-views of unpublished work. The result is a formidable edition, clearly setting out the terms for future debates. Thus, appropriately for a decree of the Senate, the book is the work of one author, or of three, or of scores: for convenience we will call the author(s) E.

As word of the *SCPP*'s discovery spread, scholarly excitement grew, for two reasons, one historiographical, one historical. Here is a contemporary version of a dramatic crisis familiar from the riveting account in Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.41–3.19): the bitter enmity between Tiberius' legate Piso and Tiberius' nephew and adopted son Germanicus Caesar, the suspicious death of Germanicus in 19, Piso's trial and suicide, the passions of the *plebs*, the tensions within the *domus Augusta* and the Senate, and the brooding ambiguity of the *princeps*. Hence we can perhaps peer over the shoulder of Rome's greatest historian in his study as he selects and shapes his material. At the same time, we are also offered a posed, but vivid and detailed, snapshot of power and ideology in the new principate at a time when the roles of the partners in government—that is, the *princeps*, his colleague (if any), and the Senate—are still being defined and the threat of civil war is still a real terror. And beyond these the document is a trove of information, constitutional, administrative, legal (both private and criminal), economic, linguistic, religious, prosopographical, topographical. To take but one instance, light is cast on several words in the evolving vocabulary of power, for here we find the earliest use of the word *donativum* in the sense of special gift to soldiers (line 55), the earliest use of *fiscus* as the private patrimony of the *princeps* (55, a significant addition to an old debate), a clear visualization of the status, extent, hierarchy, and attributes of the *domus Augusta* (123–51; cf. 33–34, where Piso's neglect of *maiestas domus Aug.* is paired with his neglect of *ius publicum*, and in that order), the earliest use of *statio* to represent the special situation of the *princeps* (129), and much more, all used in contexts that illuminate them.

Discussion of the text takes three forms: larger questions, or matters requiring greater space, are posed in separate chapters (as noted above); the commentary proper (chapter 6, more than half the book)

contains essays on the content of each section of the text; and these essays are each followed by detailed comments on individual words, phrases, or passages in that section. A brief review can barely touch on the riches contained here. Full indices lead the reader to individual items in the commentary. Here I concentrate on the other chapters.

Chapter 4 thoroughly discusses all the named participants in the affair (with the exception of the members of the *domus Augusta*), tracing their careers and adding new information. It is a foolhardy reviewer who questions E on matters of prosopography, but readers should note that the date of Piso junior's quaestorship is far from secure, and not necessarily held in his father's absence (pp. 77–78); that the first witness may indeed be the consul of 20, and not his homonymous father (pp. 88–89); and that the Calpurnia Cn. Pisonis filia whose *dos* and *peculium* are so strikingly provided for by the Senate (lines 104–5), should be the daughter of the condemned man rather than his granddaughter, despite E's careful argument to the contrary (pp. 83–87).

Chapter 5 considers the question of the date of the trial. In brief, the *senatus consultum* summing up the trial and its results is dated 10 December A.D. 20. But Tacitus reports immediately after his account of the trial that Tiberius' other son, Drusus, entered the city to celebrate an ovation for his victories in the Balkans, and under the year 20 the *Fasti Ostienses* give the date of the ovation as 28 May, that is, six months before the date of the *senatus consultum*. Did the trial take place in late November/early December (E's view, cogently argued pp. 109–21)? In that case, Tacitus must be convicted either of error or of manipulation of his material for dramatic effect (neither of which should cause much surprise). Or was the trial held in May? As E demonstrates convincingly (pp. 254–64; but note the uncertainties raised by A. J. Woodman and R. H. Martin in their edition *The Annals of Tacitus: Book 3* [Cambridge, 1996] 70 n. 2; and now Talbert, Flower, this issue), the *senatus consultum* at hand is in fact a composite document summarizing some seven or eight decrees representing separate decisions on different individuals condemned or absolved, separate acts of thanks to different groups, and instructions for publication. Hence some time may well have elapsed between trial and final report. In that case we should assume that intervening events, specifically popular unrest, impelled the Senate to issue the synoptic *senatus consultum* with careful instructions for wide distribution (for a thoughtful statement of the case see M. Griffin in *JRS* 87 [1997] 259–60, 254–55). December or May: both interpretations raise further chronological questions, both involve brave use of the subjunc-

tive mood in their reconstructions of motives and events, and particularly in explaining a problematic delay, either between a May trial and the December *senatus consultum*, in the same year; or between Germanicus' death in October A.D. 19 and a trial in December A.D. 20. I prefer December, but a more cautious response must be "Non liquet."

Chapter 7 addresses the questions of distribution and publication in Baetica. Of particular interest is an answer to the old question of why multiple copies of a text sent from Rome throughout the empire turn up in only one province, be it the *Res Gestae* of Augustus in Galatia-Pisidia, Diocletian's Price Edict in Caria-Phrygia, or this *senatus consultum* in Baetica. As E shows convincingly by elimination, the phenomenon really should be ascribed to the zeal of the individual governor.

Chapter 8 on the *senatus consultum* as political document is splendid. E points out that this is not just a record of a trial and judgment but also one of handling a crisis amid rumors that the popular Germanicus had been poisoned by Piso (that allegation is mentioned only once and indirectly in the text) and that Tiberius and his mother Julia Augusta (Livia) were involved. Piso's suicide delivered Tiberius from a terrible dilemma: it clearly demonstrated the villain's guilt, absolved most of the other actors in the drama, and allowed for a grand show of unity among the survivors. Accordingly, Piso is blackened at every turn, his *nefaria consilia* are pilloried, his *scelera*, his *pessimus animus*, his *feritas morum*, he is the arch-plotter of foreign and civil war, he is depicted repeatedly as acting against Tiberius' wishes or orders, and, as in any good Roman prosecution, many irrelevant iniquities are piled on (lines 23-70). At the same time the document is a paean to *pietas* and *consensus*, a large part of it an act of thanks to all concerned (lines 123-65, which pick up earlier themes). Tiberius is a model of *aequitas* in seeking a fair trial and of *patientia*, virtues shared by his family. His *pietas* to Germanicus is so great that the Senate must beg him to cease his mourning and think of the living. The twinned themes of intense sorrow and moderation in that sorrow are repeated for all the *domus Augusta*, and indeed the knights, the plebs, and the army are all drawn into the great public display of consensus in *fides* and *pietas*. As E concludes (p. 303), not everyone accepted this "constructed truth," least of all Tacitus (who is, we should note, if not more "truthful," at least more balanced): "Above all, in comparison with this s.c. his work makes us realize just how much the Senate sought to manipulate historical reality with this political document."

That brings us to the heart of the matter. What does the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* tell us that we didn't know before? We already knew how Tacitus shapes his annalistic material, how he can mislead intentionally, how he occasionally makes mistakes, all in the service of a profound insight into the realities of the principate. We also already knew on the one hand how the role of the *princeps* and the imperial family developed—the document tells us more about *maius imperium*, about the *fiscus*, about *maiestas*, it confirms the truly astonishing power of Julia Augusta (which has often been doubted), but it does not fundamentally alter our conception of them—and, on the other hand, how the Senate accommodated itself to the monarchy.

The greatest value of this document lies in its nature as a literary text, one which weaves a complex of related themes into a vision of the Roman commonwealth. It is unique, unlike any other decree of the Senate. In comparison with the stolid decree introducing the posthumous honors voted to Germanicus, familiar now from the Tabula Hebana and the Tabula Siarensis, it is a marvel of composition. The closest analogue in its subtle mixture of praise and exhortation, in its anxious signaling of a political message wrapped up in a formal document, is Pliny's address of thanks for his consulship to the emperor Trajan, delivered before the Senate eighty years later. With tremendous concision the actions of all participants in the affair are wrapped in Roman national myth. Piso is the monster of specifically un-Roman vice. He flouts the authority of superiors, corresponds with the enemy, raises the specter of civil war so recently subdued "by the *numen* of the divine Augustus and the virtues of Tiberius Caesar Augustus" (line 46), executes citizens illegally, corrupts military discipline, openly rejoices at the death of an enemy. Only suicide saved him from a harsher penalty, and his two *maleficiorum socii ac ministri* are dealt with summarily. But there the damage is to end. Piso's family is elaborately pardoned and praised wherever praise is possible, and what was confiscated from the estate of the father is ceremoniously returned to the children, who acted properly, as an act of grace (lines 90–105). No one else suffers, not Piso's relatives or his officers, not the soldiers who followed the criminal, calling themselves Pisoniani (they were forced or seduced by him), not the plebs who came near to lynching him (but virtuously returned to obeying the *princeps*). Piso and his two henchmen are driven into the wilderness, and the community reunites in a festival of national consensus, loyalty, and moderated grief. This Official Version of a very murky affair may indeed be redolent of the "disgusting flattery" of

“men so ready to be slaves,” but it is more: it is also a hymn to harmony and reconciliation, and a guide and exhortation to proper Roman behavior.

Cynical or naif, or something else again, the synoptic *senatus consultum* was to spread this message of solidarity far beyond the circle of those affected by the affair (lines 170–73): 301 senators silently assented to it, seven senators are formally named as witnesses. Who (one man, two, more?) framed the final version of the charges against Piso, compact and intricate (lines 23–70), or the elaborately formal vote of thanks to just about everyone else (123–65), or the synopsis of seven or eight decrees into one, we shall never know. But somebody produced something of a masterpiece. We should thank E for producing an edition worthy of the anonymous author(s).

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