

WHO WAS L. LICINIUS SURA, HISPANUS, ON A CURSE TABLET FROM SISCIA?

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ABSTRACT

A lead tablet found in the Kupa River at Siscia (Pannonia, present-day Sisak) is a unique judicial curse tablet, in which the river god Savus was invoked to harm the adversaries of the authors of the text. The inner side bears the names of their opponents involved in a lawsuit. Three adversaries are listed first: G. Domitius Secundus, Lucius Larcius, and Valerius Secundus, probably all from Cibalae (Pannonia, present-day Vinkovci). Other names include P. Caetronius and G. Corellius from Narbo (Narbonne) in Gallia and L. Licinius Sura from Hispania, as well as Lucilius Valens, who was very likely from Siscia, where the Lucilii are well documented. It is argued in the article that L. Licinius Sura should not be identified with the Roman senator from Tarraco and Trajan's adviser and friend, but should rather be regarded as a homonymous person of a lower social standing, whose parents gave him the name Sura, considering it to be a good omen.

KEYWORDS: Roman period, Siscia, Pannonia, river god Savus, *defixio*, L. Licinius Sura.

QUI VA SER EL L. LICINI SURA, HISPÀ, PRESENT A UNA DEFIXIO DE SISICIA?

RESUM

Una tauleta de plom trobada al riu Kupa a Siscia (Pannonia, actual Sisak) és la única tauleta de maledicció jurídica en la qual el déu fluvial Savus és invocat per a perjudicar als adversaris dels autors del text. La cara interior presenta els noms dels oponents involucrats a la denúncia. Hi ha tres: G. Domitius Secundus, Lucius Larcius, i Valerius Secundus, tots, possiblement, de Cibalae (Panònia, actual Vinkovci). Altres noms inclouen P. Caetronius i G. Corellius de Narbo (Narbonne) a la Gàllia i L. Licinius Sura d'Hispania, així com també a Lucilius Valens, que possiblement fou oriünd de Siscia, on es documenten els Lucilii. L'article discerneix com L. Licinius Sura no pot ser identificat amb el senador romà de Tàrraco, amic i conseller de Trajà. En canvi, ha de ser identificat amb un personatge homònim d'una classe social més baixa a qui els pares van nomenar Sura en senyal de bon auguri.

PARAULES CLAU: època romana, Siscia, Panonia, déu fluvial Savus, *defixio*, L. Licinius Sura.

1. A CURSE TABLET ADDRESSED TO THE RIVER GOD SAVUS

A small lead tablet was found in 1913 at Sisak among material dredged in the previous year from the Kupa River (the Roman-period *Colapis*); there is

hardly any doubt that it was deliberately deposited in the river.¹ It is kept in the Archaeological Museum at Zagreb (*fig. 1a-b*). The tablet represents a peculiar case of a unique judicial curse tablet, in which the river god Savus was invoked to harm the adversaries of the authors of the text. The authors appear to be in plural, since they refer to “our adversaries”, thus they must have been more than just one. This is the first known *defixio* in the western part of the Roman Empire in which a river deity is called upon to do harm.² The inner side bears the names of the opponents in a lawsuit, as well as the imprecation that was to prevent them from saying anything against the authors of the tablet. It ends with an appeal to Muta Tagita, an ancient Roman divinity Tacita Muta, the goddess of silence, dwelling in the lower world;³ she should make adversaries speechless. *Adversarius* is the usual term to denote an opponent in a legal process.⁴ The end of the text is illegible.

The curse was also inscribed on the exterior side and addressed to the god Savus, but without the names of the opponents. It had first been briefly discussed in *Antike Inschriften aus Jugoslawien* by Viktor Hoffiller, based on the reading of Josip Brunšmid,⁵ and has been studied in detail by Francisco Marco Simón and Isabel Rodà de Llanza, who have proposed an emended reading and offered an excellent philological commentary.⁶ However, the tablet has recently been examined by Andrea Barta; her reading was based on autopsy, resulting in additional emendations.⁷ The curse is most interesting from various points of view: first and foremost because Savus was asked to silence the opponents, probably by sinking them.⁸ The text was written in vulgar Latin, which is indicated, in addition to other linguistic features, by the doubling of the sibilants (*adverssar(i)o(s) nostro(s)*, *(H)isspan(us)*, *Ssecundo(s)*), liquids (such as *Vallente*), and double *c* (*Luccilius*); *e* is used instead of *i* (*Dometiū* instead of *Domitius*).

¹ *AIJ* 557 = *HD027805*; Vetter 1960 (cf. Šašel Kos 1999: 100–101); Kropp (2008: 8.1.1); Marco Simón, Rodà de Llanza (2008) (*AE* 2008, 1080); cf. *AE* 2010, 109; Barta (2017). I would very much like to thank Olli Salomies for his valuable comments on my paper.

² Marco Simón, Rodà de Llanza (2008: 173).

³ The name of the goddess also appears on two recently found curse tablets from Aquincum: Barta (2017: 37–38), as well as in plural on a curse tablet from Cambodunum, cf. Scheid (2017: 20).

⁴ Marco Simón, Rodà de Llanza (2008: 172–176).

⁵ Brunšmid (1919) (= *AE* 1921, 95).

⁶ Marco Simón, Rodà de Llanza (2008).

⁷ Barta (2017). Her article appeared after mine had already been submitted and was ready to be printed. For any further philological study, however, it is still necessary to compare both transcriptions, that of Marco Simón, Rodà de Llanza (2008) and Barta’s (2017).

⁸ This meaning is not entirely certain, perhaps he should have driven them insane, see Barta (2017: 31).

The text as copied and edited by Andrea Barta reads:

Exterior:

a1 Ma(n)data, data s(upra)s(cripta)
 2 Savo: cura<m> aga<s>,
 3 depr'i=E'ma<s> adver<s>ar<i>o<s>
 4 nos{s}tro<s>, omut{u}<escant> ne
 5 contra n[os] l[o]qu=CVI'a(ntur)
 b1 Data depr'i=E'menti

Inner side:

1 Advers{s}ar<i>o<s> nos{s}tro<s>:
 2 G(aius) Dom'i=E'tiu<s> Secundus
 3 et Lucius Larci'us=O'
 4 et Secun<d>'us=O' Val'e=A'r<i>us
 5 Ciba(lis) et P(ublius) C'ae=I'troni'us=Λ'
 6 G(aius) Corelliu<s> Narbone
 7 et L(ucius) Lic'i=C'inius Sura <H>is{s}pan(ia)
 8 et Luc{c}il{l}ius
 9 Val{l}ente (!). Ne possi<nt>
 10 contra s{s}e(!) facer'e=I'.
 11 Avertat illo<s> ame<n>te<s>,
 12 contra l'o=V''qu=CV'i ne AM
 13 LI illoru'm=S' mut'um=O' o<s> fac(iat?)
 14 G(aius) Dom<i>tius S{s}ecund'us=O'
 15 et Lucius La<r>ci'us=O' {L}? 'Cib=GID'a(lis)
 16 M[u]ta Ta'c=G'ita [-]
 17 [--]NA illoru[m----]

Translation by the same author (p. 28):

Exterior side:

The above-mentioned [names] entrusted and given to Savus:
 take care and force our opponents down, in order they become mute and
 they cannot speak against us.
 given to the one who forces down

Inner side:

Our adversaries Gaius Domitius Secundus and Lucius Larcius and
 Valerius Secundus from Cibalae and Publius Caetronius, Gaius Corellius
 from Narbo and Lucius Licinius Sura from Hispania and Lucilius Valens.
 May they be unable to act against them (i.e. against the *defigentes*; or
 against us).
 May she turn them as insane away.
 May they not ... to speak in opposition.
 May she make their mouth mute.
 Gaius Domitius Secundus and Lucius Larcius from Cibalae.

Muta Tacita... their...

2. WHO WERE THE ADVERSARIES?

The names of the adversaries are most intriguing, since they shed light on the heterogeneous and changeable population of Siscia and the lively commercial activities in the city. The town enjoyed an outstanding strategic position in antiquity, having become well known ever since it had been a central Pannonian *emporium* in the second and first centuries BC. It was favourably located on the Sava River, along the navigable “route of the Argonauts”, which began at the Danube and continued along the Sava, ending at the settlement of Nauportus, at the Nauportus River. Segesta/Segestica, in the close proximity of Siscia, was well protected by two rivers, the Colapis and the Savus. It was the main logistic and military post during Octavian’s Illyrian War and was regarded as the best starting point to conquer Dacia (Strabo 7.5.2 C 313; App., *Illyr.* 22.65).⁹ It may also have retained part of this role during Domitian’s and Trajan’s Dacian Wars. Later, in the Augustan reign, when roads were being constructed in the newly conquered provinces, Siscia was situated on the main and only direct continental route linking the Apennine and Balkan peninsulas, i.e. Italy with Thrace, Macedonia, and the East. Consequently, in terms of international traffic and logistics, its importance remained unchanged.

Six individuals are named as the opponents of the authors of the curse tablet; those who composed the curse (or perhaps only one author) must most probably have been local residents.¹⁰ Three adversaries are listed first: G. Domitius Secundus, Lucius Larcius, and Valerius Secundus; the first two are mentioned twice in the text. After the name Valerius Secundus, *origo* is noted, which should be explained as *Ciba(lis)*; it is repeated in line 15 after the name Lucius Larcius. Apparently, it refers at least to these two individuals, but most probably to all three. They came from Cibalae, present-day Vinkovci. Cibalae grew on the territory of the Breuci and after the division of Pannonia under Trajan belonged to Pannonia Inferior; the town became a *municipium* under Hadrian and *colonia Aurelia* under Caracalla.¹¹ If the proposed date of the *defixio* in the reign of Trajan were correct, the town would not have yet possessed the status of a *municipium* at that time; however, this is far from certain and may be regarded as unlikely.

Domitii are numerous in the Celtic-speaking western provinces, and notably also in northern Italy, as well as in Dalmatia and Pannonia,¹² and the family is also well represented at Siscia, both in inscriptions on stone and on the recently published *tesserae* used in the textile industry, recovered from the Kupa

⁹ Šašel Kos (2005: 437–442); Škrkulja, Tomaš Barišić (2015).

¹⁰ Marco Simón, Rodá de Llanza (2008: 176–177).

¹¹ Iskra-Janošić (2004).

¹² *OPEL* II 105–106.

River.¹³ Domitius Crescens is known from an epitaph on a sarcophagus from Siscia,¹⁴ and L. Domitius Constitutus, a soldier of the legion *X Gemina* and a *beneficiarius consularis*, from an altar to Mars and Victoria.¹⁵ Larcius is a *gentilicium*, attested to a few times in northern Italy, Dalmatia, and Pannonia;¹⁶ however, it is more numerous in Rome and the rest of Italy.¹⁷ Valerii, the most wide-spread non-imperial family name generally, are very well documented in Pannonia and also at Siscia, as members of upper and middle classes and as soldiers.¹⁸ The last person mentioned is Lucilius Valens, the only one without an *origo*. Lucilius is a rather common *gentilicium*, frequent in northern Italy and Gallia Narbonensis, but also in Dalmatia and Pannonia.¹⁹ He could have been from Siscia, where the Lucilii are attested to three or four times on stone monuments, and are also well represented on the *tesserae*.²⁰ Valens is a common name, and was highly popular also at Siscia, as is clear from the tags.²¹ The three persons mentioned before Valens are P. Caetronius and G. Corellius from Narbo in Gallia²² and L. Licinius Sura from Hispania. The *gentilicium* Caetronius occurs frequently in Italy, but elsewhere it is very rare,²³ while Corellius is well documented in Italy, but very sporadically in the provinces, except at Salonae in Dalmatia.²⁴ The two men from Narbo must have been of Italian descent.

3. WAS L. LICINIUS SUR A ROMAN SENATOR AND TRAJAN'S FRIEND?

According to a recent interpretation, L. Licinius Sura should most probably indeed be identified with the Roman senator from Tarraco, whose family had very likely originated from Celsa.²⁵ He was three times consul (*ordinarius* in AD 102 and 107)²⁶ and a close friend and adviser of Trajan. He took part in both of Trajan's Dacian Wars, in AD 101–102 and 105–106;²⁷ he may

¹³ Radman-Livaja (2014).

¹⁴ *CIL* III 3974 = *lupa* 4310; Migotti (2005); Migotti (2013: 183–187 fig. 4); cf. Buzov (2002: 176–177).

¹⁵ *CIL* III 15180 = *CBI* 306 = *HD072020*.

¹⁶ *OPEL* III 19.

¹⁷ Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss / Slaby; Epigraphic Database Roma.

¹⁸ Šašel Kos (2018: 273–274; 297).

¹⁹ *OPEL* III 35; also attested as a cognomen; in Siscia documented both as a *gentilicium* and cognomen.

²⁰ Radman-Livaja (2014: 224).

²¹ *OPEL* IV 139–140; Radman-Livaja (2014: 277).

²² Previous reading (P. Citronius Cicorellius) plausibly emended by Bence Fehér (Barta 2017: 35).

²³ *OPEL* II: 21; Alföldy (1969: 70).

²⁴ Alföldy (1969: 78); Barta (2017: 35).

²⁵ Rodà (2014: 22–23; 31).

²⁶ Tarraco: Rodà (2014: especially 31); consul: Eck (2009: 168; 173).

²⁷ Rodà (2014); Eck (1970: 144 no. 137; 150; 152); Eck (1985: 155–156); Caballos (1990: 183–193 no. 103); cf. Alföldy (1975: no. 930 (“Arco de Bará”: *Ex testamento L. Licini L. F. Serg(ia) tribu*)

have died soon after his third consulate.²⁸ Not much is known of his life, and the epigraphic evidence that could shed more light on his career is also very limited.²⁹ He possessed a house on the Aventine Hill and had estates in the areas of Tarraco, Barcino, and Auso;³⁰ his governorship of Germania should most probably be dated to AD 97–98.³¹ As is mentioned in the *Roman History* of Cassius Dio, Trajan, who had always regarded him as a trustworthy friend, honoured him with a public funeral and had a statue erected in Rome in his memory (68.15.3²).

Although Siscia must have undoubtedly been a most significant city in terms of international trade and exchange, it nonetheless seems highly unlikely that a Roman senator, who had twice been *consul ordinarius*, would have been mentioned in the company of two or three persons from Cibalae, a man who may have been from Siscia, and two from Narbo, all in all representing a group of rather insignificant individuals.³² According to the text of the curse, they should have been prevented from speaking against the authors of the *defixio*, implying that they should have appeared in person in a kind of lawsuit; it is hard to imagine that Trajan's adviser and friend would have personally been involved in a legal dispute at Siscia.

The final argument to identify L. Licinius Sura from Hispania in the curse tablet with the famous L. Licinius Sura is equally weak, as it is based on a wrong question of how to otherwise explain the presence of two Licinii Surae in the Danubian provinces at the same time.³³ However, the date of the *defixio* is actually not known, the second century AD seems plausible, but the text contains no indication that could help establish it more precisely. The date in the reign of Trajan has arbitrarily been proposed merely on the basis of the supposed identification of Sura with Trajan's friend. E. Vetter suggested a date between the reign of Hadrian and the outbreak of the Marcomannic Wars (118 to 167 AD), since during this period the town attracted people from various parts of the Roman Empire.³⁴ Guglielmo Bartoletti, in contrast, proposed a date in the first half of the first century AD, basing his argument on paleographic

Surae consecratum); Bennett (1997: 88); Strobel (2010: 236–301: on both Dacian wars; on Sura: *passim*, particularly 158–163); Eck (2017: 5 and 6).

²⁸ Syme (1980: 22) suggested “epidemics in the train of two Dacian wars, those of Domitian and of Trajan”.

²⁹ Rodà (2014).

³⁰ Rodà (2014).

³¹ Eck (1985: 155–156).

³² Thus, also Jones (1970: 100 n. 30): “The *Lic(i)nius Sura Ispan(us)* named in a *defixio* from Siscia in Pannonia Superior (V. Hoffiller – B. Saria, *Antike Inschriften aus Jugoslawien I* (1938), no. 557) is evidently a person of low degree”.

³³ Rodà (2014: 23).

³⁴ Vetter (1960: 132).

features of the *defixio* that can rarely be regarded as reliable.³⁵ The date is evidently uncertain; most recently the third century has been proposed.³⁶ Licinius Sura from the curse tablet presumably belonged to a period later than the reign of Trajan.

A clue to understanding his name should very likely be sought in the habit of giving names of famous individuals to children of middle and lower classes, but also of the municipal elite (such as the Cornelii Scipiones in Brixia),³⁷ which is characteristic for every epoch, and not least for the Roman Empire.³⁸ Moreover, it is also very well attested in Hispania; Heikki Solin noted several names of famous men, which had later been borne by citizens of various Hispanic towns and social standing, such as M. Fabius Maximus from Tarraco and a man with the same name from Saguntum.³⁹ Among other names mentioned in his list are L. Aemilius Paullus, Cn. Cornelius Cinna, L. Cornelius Lentulus, M. Iunius Brutus, M. Licinius Crassus, M. Porcius Cato, and M. Postumius Albinus.⁴⁰ It should be added that the *gentilicium* Licinius is by far the best documented in Hispania;⁴¹ several families of the *gens* Licinia are well attested in Hispania ever since the Augustan age, when M. Licinius Crassus, consul in 14 BC, governed Hispania Citerior between 13 and 10 BC.⁴²

In the territory of Cales in Campania, a tombstone commemorates one C. Sempronius and his wife Gavena. Their son was Q. Sempronius Graccus, his cognomen evoking the famous senatorial Ti. Sempronii.⁴³ In a recently published military diploma from the years between AD 151/152 and 154, a prefect of the *ala Antiana Gallorum et Thracum*, Cn. Domitius Corbulo, is mentioned.⁴⁴ He bore the name of the greatest general under Nero, who had successfully fought against the Parthians, and whose achievements were described by Tacitus (*Ann.*, books 12–15) and Cassius Dio (books 60–63). His daughter Domitia Longina was married to Domitian.⁴⁵ There is no doubt that the father of the prefect wilfully gave the son the cognomen Corbulo, regarding it a good omen.

³⁵ Bartoletti (1990: 34); cf. Marco Simón, Rodá de Llanza (2008: 72).

³⁶ Barta (2017: 39).

³⁷ *CIL* V 4462 = *EDR*090251; cf. Camodeca (2017: 95 n. 38), for several others.

³⁸ Solin (2001); Solin (2015: 31); see also, *mutatis mutandis*, Broux, Clarysse (2016), who studied the occurrence of the names Arsionoe, Berenike, Kleopatra, Laodike, and Stratonike in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

³⁹ *CIL* II² 14. 1134 = *EDCS*-05503245; *CIL* II² 14. 641a = *EDCS*-09100682.

⁴⁰ Solin (2015: 31).

⁴¹ *OPEL* III 26–27, with 186 cases, compared to Gallia Narbonensis with 101 or Pannonia with 22 cases; see also Marco Simón, Rodá de Llanza (2008: 179).

⁴² Alföldy (1969: 8–9); Rodà (2014: 22).

⁴³ Camodeca (2017: 92–95).

⁴⁴ Eck, Pangerl (2016). This and previously mentioned reference were kindly brought to my attention by Olli Salomies.

⁴⁵ *PIR*² D 142; Syme (1970 [1979]).

The Latin cognomen Sura,⁴⁶ which is rather rare, does occur a few times in Italy and Hispania.⁴⁷ It does not seem at all surprising that some Hispanic Licinii would have chosen the name Sura for their son,⁴⁸ particularly after the famous Sura had already died. Perhaps they would have been descendants of Sura's freedmen.

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⁴⁶ Solin, Salomies (1994: 409).

⁴⁷ OPEL IV 101; Rodà (2014: 22–23).

⁴⁸ Sura seems to have been a relatively rare name; according to OPEL IV 101, it is attested, e.g., four times in northern Italy and three times in Hispania.

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Abbreviations

- AIJ = Hoffiller, V. and Saria, B. (1938), *Antike Inschriften aus Jugoslavien*, Heft I: *Noricum und Pannonia Superior*, Zagreb (re-print Amsterdam 1970).
- CIL = *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*.
- CBI = Schallmayer, E., Eibl, K., Ott, J., Preuss, G., and Wittkopf, E. (1990), *Der römische Weihebezirk von Osterburken I. Corpus der griechischen und lateinischen Beneficiärer-Inschriften des Römischen Reiches* (Forschungen und Berichte zur Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Baden-Württemberg 40), Stuttgart.
- EDCS = *Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss / Slaby*.
- EDR = *Epigraphic Database Roma*.
- HD = *Epigraphic Database Heidelberg*.
- lupa* = F. und O. Harl, www.ubi-erat-lupa.org (Bildatenbank zu antiken Steindenkmälern).
- OPEL = Lőrincz, B., *Onomasticon provinciarum Europae Latinarum*, Vol. I: *Aba – Bysanus*, Budapest 2005²; Vol. II: *Cabalicius – Ixus*, Wien 1999; Vol. III: *Labareus – Pythea*, Wien 2000; Vol. IV: *Quadratia – Zures*, Wien 2002.
- PIR² = *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* (second edition).



Caption: AIJ 557 = HD027805 (exterior and inner side): photographs enhanced with PhotoShop to improve legibility.