

## 1. Correspondence between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan

*Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from A.D. 111-113. The following letter from him to the Emperor was preserved in Rome with a number of other letters on a variety of administrative and political matters.*

### **Pliny to the Emperor Trajan (Letters 10.96; written A.D. 111 or 112)**

Sollemne est mihi, domine, omnia de quibus dubito ad te referre. Quis enim potest melius vel cunctationem meam regere vel ignorantiam instruere?

Cognitionibus de Christianis interfui numquam: ideo nescio quid et quatenus aut puniri soleat aut quaeri. Nec mediocriter haesitavi, sitne aliquod discrimen aetatum, an quamlibet teneri nihil a robustioribus differant; detur paenitentiae venia, an ei, qui omnino Christianus fuit, desisse non prosit; nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini puniantur.

Interim, iis qui ad me tamquam Christiani deferebantur, hunc sum secutus modum. Interrogavi ipsos an essent Christiani. Confitentes iterum ac tertio interrogavi supplicium minatus; perseverantes duci iussi. Neque enim dubitabam, qualecumque esset quod faterentur, pertinaciam certe et inflexibilem obstinationem debere puniri. Fuerunt alii similis amentiae, quos, quia cives Romani erant, adnotavi in urbem remittendos.

Mox ipso tractatu, ut fieri solet, diffundente se crimine plures species inciderunt. Propositus est

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance?

I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them

libellus sine auctore multorum nomina continens. Qui negabant esse se Christianos aut fuisse, cum praeunte me deos appellarent et imagini tuae, quam propter hoc iusseram cum simulacris numinum afferri, ture ac vino supplicarent, praeterea male dicerent Christo, quorum nihil cogi posse dicuntur qui sunt re vera Christiani, dimittendos putavi. Alii ab indice nominati esse se Christianos dixerunt et mox negaverunt; fuisse quidem sed desisse, quidam ante triennium, quidam ante plures annos, non nemo etiam ante viginti. Hi quoque omnes et imaginem tuam deorumque simulacra venerati sunt et Christo male dixerunt.

Affirmabant autem hanc fuisse summam vel culpae suae vel erroris, quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem seque sacramento non in scelus aliquod obstringere, sed ne furta ne latrocinia ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depositum appellati abnegarent. Quibus peractis morem sibi discedendi fuisse rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum, promiscuum tamen et innoxium; quod ipsum facere desisse post edictum meum, quo secundum mandata tua hetaerias esse vetueram. Quo magis necessarium credidi ex duabus ancillis, quae ministrae dicebantur, quid esset veri, et per tormenta quaerere. Nihil aliud inveni quam superstitionem

with punishment; those who persevered I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. All of these also worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that

pravam et immodicam.

Ideo dilata cognitione ad consulendum te decucurri. Visa est enim mihi res digna consultatione, maxime propter periclitantium numerum. Multi enim omnis aetatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexus etiam vocantur in periculum et vocabuntur. Neque civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est; quae videtur sisti et corrigi posse. Certe satis constat prope iam desolata templa coepisse celebrari, et sacra sollemnia diu intermissa repeti passimque venire carnem victimarum, cuius adhuc rarissimus emptor inveniebatur. Ex quo facile est opinari, quae turba hominum emendari possit, si sit paenitentiae locus.

the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden secret societies. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but a perverse and extravagant superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have

begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

### **The Emperor Trajan to Pliny (Letters 10.97)**

Actum quem debuisti, mi Secunde, in excutiendis causis eorum, qui Christiani ad te delati fuerant, secutus es. Neque enim in universum aliquid, quod quasi certam formam habeat, constitui potest. Conquirendi non sunt; si deferantur et arguantur, puniendi sunt, ita tamen ut, qui negaverit se Christianum esse idque re ipsa manifestum fecerit, id est supplicando dis nostris, quamvis suspectus in praeteritum, veniam ex paenitentia impetret. Sine auctore vero propositi libelli in nullo crimine locum habere debent. Nam et pessimi exempli nec nostri saeculi est.

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it--that is, by worshiping our gods--even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

## **2. Christians and the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64**

### **Tacitus, *Annals* book 15 ch. 44 (circa A.D. 117)**

Et haec quidem humanis consiliis providebantur. Mox petita dis

So far, the precautions taken were suggested by human

piacula aditque Sibyllae libri, ex quibus supplicatum Volcano et Cereri Proserpinaeque, ac propitiata Iuno per matronas, primum in Capitolio, deinde apud proximum mare, unde hausta aqua templum et simulacrum deae perspersum est; et sellisternia ac pervigilia celebrare feminae, quibus mariti erant. Sed non ope humana, non largitionibus principis aut deum placamentis decedebat infamia, quin iussum incendium crederetur. Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus Christianos appellabat. Auctor nominis eius Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursum erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocitas aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. Igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud perinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt. Et pereuntibus addita ludibria, ut ferarum tergis contacti laniatu canum interirent, aut crucibus adfixi aut flammandi, atque ubi defecisset dies, in usum nocturni luminis ureretur. Hortos suos ei spectaculo Nero obtulerat et circense ludicrum edebat, habitu aurigae permixtus plebi vel curriculo insistens. Unde quamquam adversus sontis et

prudence: now means were sought for appeasing deity, and application was made to the Sibylline books; at the injunction of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons, first in the Capitol, then at the nearest point of the seashore, where water was drawn for sprinkling the temple and image of the goddess. Ritual banquets and all-night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state. But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision

novissima exempla meritos  
miseratio oriebatur, tamquam  
non utilitate publica, sed in  
saevitiam unius absumerentur.

accompanied their end: they  
were covered with wild beasts'  
skins and torn to death by dogs;  
or they were fastened on  
crosses, and, when daylight  
failed were burned to serve as  
lamps by night. Nero had  
offered his Gardens for the  
spectacle, and gave an  
exhibition in his Circus, mixing  
with the crowd in the habit of a  
charioteer, or mounted on his  
car. Hence, in spite of a guilt  
which had earned the most  
exemplary punishment, there  
arose a sentiment of pity, due to  
the impression that they were  
being sacrificed not for the  
welfare of the state but to the  
ferocity of a single man.

### 3. Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs (A.D. 180)

*The Scillitan Martyrs were condemned and executed at Carthage on the 17th July, A.D. 180. The martyrs belonged to Scili, a place in that part of Numidia which belonged to proconsular Africa.*

1. Praesente bis et Claudiano  
consulibus, XVI Kalendas  
Augustas, Karthagine in  
secretario inpositis Sperato,  
Nartzalo et Cittino, Donata,  
Secunda, Vestia, Saturninus  
proconsul dixit: Potestis  
indulgentiam domini nostri  
imperatoris promereri, si ad  
bonam mentem redeatis. 2.  
Speratus dixit: Numquam  
malefecimus, iniquitati nullam  
operam praebuimus; numquam  
malediximus, sed male accepti  
gratias egimus, propter quod  
imperatorem nostrum  
observamus. 3. Saturninus  
proconsul dixit: Et nos religiosi

1. When Praesens, for the  
second time, and Claudianus  
were the consuls, on the  
seventeenth day of July, at  
Carthage, there were set in the  
judgment-hall Speratus,  
Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata,  
Secunda and Vestia.  
Saturninus the proconsul said:  
Ye can win the indulgence of  
our lord the Emperor, if ye  
return to a sound mind. 2.  
Speratus said: We have never  
done ill, we have not lent  
ourselves to wrong, we have  
never spoken ill, but when ill-  
treated we have given thanks;  
because we pay heed to our

sumus, et simplex est religio nostra, et iuramus per genium domini nostri imperatoris et pro salute eius supplicamus, quod et vos quoque facere debetis. 4. Speratus dixit: Si tranquillas praebueris aures tuas, dico mysterium simplicitatis. 5. Saturninus dixit: Initianti tibi mala de sacris nostris aures non praebebo; sed potius iura per genium domini nostri imperatoris. 6. Speratus dixit: Ego imperium huius saeculi non cognosco: sed magis illi Deo servio, quem nemo hominum vidit nec videre his oculis potest. Furtum non feci; sed si quid emero, teloneum reddo: quia cognosco dominum meum, regem regum et imperatorem omnium gentium. 7. Saturninus proconsul dixit ceteris: Desinite huius esse persuasionis. 8. Speratus dixit: Mala est persuasio homicidium facere, falsum testimonium dicere. 9. Saturninus proconsul dixit: Nolite huius dementiae esse participes. 10. Cittinus dixit: Nos non habemus alium quem timeamus, nisi dominum Deum nostrum qui est in caelis. 11. Donata dixit: Honorem Caesari quasi Caesari; timorem autem Deo. 12. Vestia dixit: Christiana sum. 13. Secunda dixit: Quod sum, ipsud volo esse. 14. Saturninus proconsul Sperato dixit: Perseveras Christianus? 15. Speratus dixit: Christianus sum; et cum eo omnes consenserunt. 16. Saturninus proconsul dixit: Numquid ad deliberandum spatium vultis? 17. Speratus dixit: In re tam iusta nulla est deliberatio. 18. Saturninus

Emperor. 3. Saturninus the proconsul said: We too are religious, and our religion is simple, and we swear by the genius of our lord the Emperor, and pray for his welfare, as ye also ought to do. 4. Speratus said: If thou wilt peaceably lend me thine ears, I can tell thee the mystery of simplicity. 5. Saturninus said: I will not lend mine ears to thee, when thou beginnest to speak evil things of our sacred rites; but rather swear thou by the genius of our lord the Emperor. 6. Speratus said: The empire of this world I know not; but rather I serve that God, whom no man hath seen, nor with these eyes can see. I have committed no theft; but if I have bought anything I pay the tax; because I know my Lord, the King of kings and Emperor of all nations. 7. Saturninus the proconsul said to the rest: Cease to be of this persuasion. 8. Speratus said: It is an ill persuasion to do murder, to speak false witness. 9. Saturninus the proconsul said: Be not partakers of this folly. 10. Cittinus said: We have none other to fear, save only our Lord God, who is in heaven. 11. Donata said: Honour to Caesar as Caesar: but fear to God. 12. Vestia said: I am a Christian. 13. Secunda said: What I am, that I wish to be. 14. Saturninus the proconsul said to Speratus: Dost thou persist in being a Christian? 15. Speratus said: I am a Christian. And with him they all agreed. 16. Saturninus the proconsul said: Will ye have

proconsul dixit: Quae sunt res in capsula vestra? 19. Speratus dixit: Libri et epistolae Pauli viri iusti. 20. Saturninus proconsul dixit: Moram XXX dierum habere et recordemini. 21. Speratus iterum dixit: Christianus sum; et cum eo omnes consenserunt. 22. Saturninus proconsul decretum ex tabella recitavit: Speratum, Nartzalum, Cittinum, Donatam, Vestiam, Secundam et ceteros ritu Christiano se vivere confessos, quoniam oblata sibi facultate ad Romanorum morem redeundi obstinanter perseveraverunt, gladio animadverti placet. 23. Speratus dixit: Deo gratias agimus. 24. Nartzalus dixit: Hodie martyres in caelis sumus: Deo gratias. 25. Saturninus proconsul per praeconem dici iussit: Speratum, Nartzalum, Cittinum, Veturium, Felicem, Aquilinum, Laetantium, Ianuarium, Generosam, Vestiam, Donatam, Secundam duci iussi. 26. Universi dixerunt: Deo gratias. 27. Et ita omnes simul martyrio coronati sunt, et regnant cum Patre et Filio et Spiritu Sancto per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.

a space to consider? 17. Speratus said: In a matter so straightforward there is no considering. 18. Saturninus the proconsul said: What are the things in your chest? 19. Speratus said: Books and epistles of Paul, a just man. 20. Saturninus the proconsul said: Have a delay of thirty days and bethink yourselves. 21. Speratus said a second time: I am a Christian. And with him they all agreed. 22. Saturninus the proconsul read out the decree from the tablet: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Vestia, Secunda and the rest having confessed that they live according to the Christian rite, since after opportunity offered them of returning to the custom of the Romans they have obstinately persisted, it is determined that they be put to the sword. 23. Speratus said: We give thanks to God. 24. Nartzalus said: Today we are martyrs in heaven; thanks be to God. 25. Saturninus the proconsul ordered it to be declared by the herald: Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, Laetantius, Januaria, Generosa, Vestia, Donata and Secunda, I have ordered to be executed. 26. They all said: Thanks be to God. 27. And so they all together were crowned with martyrdom; and they reign with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, for ever and ever. Amen.

## 4. Christians Accused of Cannibalism and Perversion

### **Minucius Felix, *Octavius* ch. 9 (2nd or 3rd century).**

*The author attributes the following words to a certain heathen, Caecilius, in a debate with the Christian Octavius.*

And now, as wickedness multiplies more quickly, corrupt ways of life are spreading day by day throughout the world, and those most abominable sanctuaries of impious assemblies are growing. This conspiracy must be absolutely eradicated and accursed. They recognize each other by secret marks and signs, and they love one another almost before they become acquainted. Everywhere they mingle together in a kind of religion of lust, indiscriminately calling each other brothers and sisters, with the result that ordinary debauchery, by means of a sacred name, is converted into incest. Thus their vain and demented superstition (*vana et demens superstitio*) glories in its crimes.

If there were not an underlying basis of truth, shrewd Rumor would not spread about them such a great variety of charges that can hardly be mentioned in polite company. I hear that persuaded by some absurd idea, they consecrate and worship the head of an ass, the lowest of animals. A religion worthy of the sort of practices that gave it birth! Some say that they worship the genitals of their own leader and priest, revering the sexual parts of their own parent. I do not know whether it is false, but certainly a suspicion is attached to secret rites performed at night. Whoever calls the objects of their rituals a man punished with death for his crime and the deadly wood of the cross assigns proper altars to such corrupt and wicked people, with the result that they worship what they deserve.

Now the story about the initiation of novices is as disgusting as it is well known. An infant covered with flour, in order to deceive the unwary, is placed before the one who is to be initiated into their rites. The novice, encouraged by the surface of flour to strike without harm, kills the infant with unseen and hidden wounds. The infant's blood - oh horrible! - they lap up thirstily; its limbs they parcel out eagerly. By this victim they ally themselves with one another; by their complicity in this crime they pledge themselves to mutual silence. These rites are fouler than any sacrifice.

And what happens at their banquets is well known; it is spoken of everywhere. The speech of our friend from Cirta testifies to it. On an appointed day they gather for a feast with all their children, sisters and mothers, people from both sexes and of every age. There after much feasting, when the banquet has inflamed them and they are burning with the drunken heat of incestuous lust, they provoke a dog tied to a lamp to leap forward by tossing a scrap of food beyond the length of the rope to which it is tied. The light, which would have been a witness, is thus turned

over and extinguished, and in the shameless darkness, connections of unspeakable desire take place with the uncertainty of chance. All are equally defiled, if not by the deed, nevertheless by their complicity in it, since the will of everyone desires whatever acts might happen to be committed by individuals.

## 5. Christians as Scapegoats for Every Misfortune

**Tertullian, *Apology* 40.1-2 (A.D. 197)**

On the contrary, *they* deserve the name of faction who conspire to bring odium on good men and virtuous, who cry out against innocent blood, offering as the justification of their enmity the baseless plea, that they think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, "Away with the Christians to the lion!"

## 6. The Diocletian Persecution

**Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, book VIII. (A.D. 324)**

*Eusebius (263-340) was an eyewitness to many martyrdoms in Caesarea during the persecution commenced by Diocletian in 303. This persecution lasted 10 years and was ended by Constantine's Edict of Milan (313).*

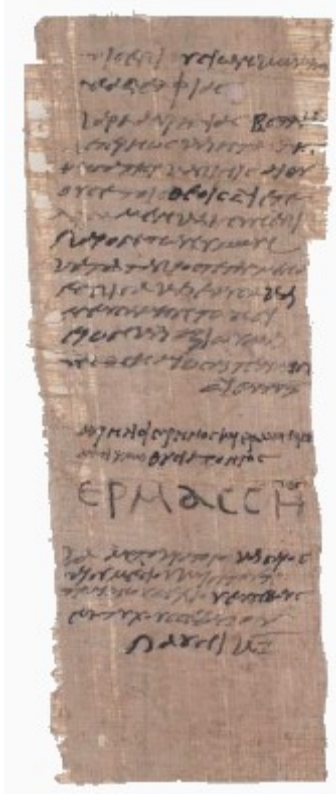
...This persecution began with the brethren in the army. But as if without sensibility, we were not eager to make the Deity favorable and propitious; and some, like atheists, thought that our affairs were unheeded and ungoverned; and thus we added one wickedness to another. And those esteemed our shepherds, casting aside the bond of piety, were excited to conflicts with one another, and did nothing else than heap up strifes and threats and jealousy and enmity and hatred toward each other, like tyrants eagerly endeavoring to assert their power. Then, truly, according to the word of Jeremiah, "The Lord in his wrath darkened the daughter of Zion, and cast down the glory of Israel from heaven to earth, and remembered not his foot-stool in the day of his anger. The Lord also overwhelmed all the beautiful things of Israel, and threw down all his strongholds." And according to what was foretold in the Psalms: "He has made void the covenant of his servant, and profaned his sanctuary to the earth, - in the destruction of the churches, - and has thrown down all his strongholds, and has made his fortresses cowardice. All that pass by

have plundered the multitude of the people; and he has become besides a reproach to his neighbors. For he has exalted the right hand of his enemies, and has turned back the help of his sword, and has not taken his part in the war. But he has deprived him of purification, and has cast his throne to the ground. He has shortened the days of his time, and besides all, has poured out shame upon him." All these things were fulfilled in us, when we saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the Divine and Sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the midst of the market-places, and the shepherds of the churches basely hidden here and there, and some of them captured ignominiously, and mocked by their enemies. When also, according to another prophetic word, "Contempt was poured out upon rulers, and he caused them to wander in an untrodden and pathless way." But it is not our place to describe the sad misfortunes which finally came upon them, as we do not think it proper, moreover, to record their divisions and unnatural conduct to each other before the persecution. Wherefore we have decided to relate nothing concerning them except the things in which we can vindicate the Divine judgment. Hence we shall not mention those who were shaken by the persecution, nor those who in everything pertaining to salvation were shipwrecked, and by their own will were sunk in the depths of the flood. But we shall introduce into this history in general only those events which may be useful first to ourselves and afterwards to posterity. Let us therefore proceed to describe briefly the sacred conflicts of the witnesses of the Divine Word. It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, [A.D. 303] in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, that royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.

## 7. Libelli

The *libelli* were documents notarized by Roman authorities to certify that someone has offered sacrifice to their idols. In times of persecution these documents were accepted as proof that someone was not a Christian. Many of these *libelli* have been discovered in excavations in Egypt.

### **A Libellus of the Decian Persecution (A.D. 250)**



To those in charge of the sacrifices of the village Theadelphia, from Aurelia Bellias, daughter of Peteres, and her daughter, Kapinis. We have always been constant in sacrificing to the gods, and now too, in your presence, in accordance with the regulations, I have poured libations and sacrificed and tasted the offerings, and I ask you to certify this for us below. May you continue to prosper.

(2nd hand) We, Aurelius Serenus and Aurelius Hermas, saw you sacrificing.

(3rd hand) I, Hermas, certify.

(1st hand) The 1st year if the Emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Pauni 27.