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THE DATE OF THE CENSUS OF QUIRINIUS
AND THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE GOVERNORS OF THE PROVINCE OF SYRIA¹

The mention in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:1–5) of the census conducted during the reign of Augustus by Publius Sulpicius Quirinius², during which Jesus Christ was born, meant that in Christian tradition both these events were inextricably linked. Despite the chronological features of this mention, its reliability is challenged by scholars especially because other sources put the census at an entirely different time. Luke's report (as well as those of the other Evangelists writing about Jesus' childhood) states that this census took place during the life of Herod, but according to Josephus (*AJ* 17.355; 18.1–6) it was carried out in Judaea only after it joined the Roman Empire, which in turn was the result of Augustus' removing rule over Judaea from Archelaus, the son of Herod. The emperor was swayed in this decision by the ineptitude of Archelaus and general dissatisfaction with his rule, which the subjects expressed in numerous complaints sent to Rome (Josephus, *BJ* 2.111; *AJ* 17.342–344; Dio 55.27.6). After removing the native ruler, the emperor annexed Judaea to Syria, entrusting its administration to an officer of the province subordinate to the governor and bearing the title *praefectus* (Josephus, *AJ* 18.2).³ The first prefect of Judaea was Coponius (Josephus, *AJ* 17.355; 18. 2).⁴ The administrative changes were accompanied by a property census being conducted of the inhabitants of the province of Syria and the personal affairs of Archelaus being straightened out. Emperor Augustus entrusted both tasks to the then governor of the province of Syria, Quirinius (Josephus, *AJ* 17.355; 18.1–2).⁵ Since Archelaus vacated the throne in 6 AD, establishing the date of the census may appear to be a simple and obvious task. However, the differences in the dating of the event by Luke and Josephus mean that scholars have been trying for almost 200 years not only to explain the reasons for these contradictions, but also to ascertain whether the two authors are talking about the same census, or about different ones. To date, these efforts have not produced a satisfactory result.⁶

The difficulties involved in determining the actual date of the Census of Quirinius on the basis of the chronology of the facts available to us resulted fairly early on in leading scholars to look for other ways to solve the problem. One of these was analysis of prosopographical data, that is information on the lives and careers of the governors of the province of Syria who held the post in the last twenty years of Augustus' rule. Although this method has proven to be very helpful in many issues, in this particular one it did not bring the expected results, as the sources do not always contain information on the whole careers of these officials, but only on some of their roles. Often there are no chronological features to allow us to date those functions which are known. In addition, the bad state of preservation and fragmentary nature of some sources, espe-

¹ Abbreviations: *AE* – *L'Année Épigraphique*; *CIL* – *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*; *ILS* – H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin 1892–1916; *Insc. It.* – *Inscriptiones Italiae*; *PIR*² – *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, editio altera; *RE* – *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart 1894–1972; *SEG* – *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*. I thank Prof. Werner Eck, who provided valuable comments to a preliminary draft of this paper. I thank also Prof. Henry I. MacAdam for linguistic revision of this paper.

² *PIR*² S 1018; Groag 1931: 822–843, no. 90; Dąbrowa 1998: 27–30.

³ The status of Judaea after its annexation to the Roman state is the source of many misunderstandings. Many scholars believe that after 6 AD it became a province administered by prefects (some of them are mentioned by Ghiretti 1985: 751–754), cf. Schürer 1985: 441–446; Sasse 2004: 191; Labbé 2008: 229–240. The arguments presented by e.g. M. Ghiretti (1985: 754–766), H. Cotton (1999: 76–79) and W. Eck (2007: 23–37; 2008: 219–220) do not leave any doubt, however, that after 6 AD Judaea did not constitute an independent provincial unit, but was incorporated in the structure of the province of Syria. For the entitlements of the *praefectus Iudaeae*, see Ghiretti 1985: 758–761; Eck 2007: 39–43.

⁴ See *PIR*² C 1285; Stein 1900: 1214–1215, no. 2.

⁵ Pearson 1999: 264–265; Kennedy 2006: 112–113, 117. The conducting of the census by Quirinius is confirmed by an undated inscription referring to Apamea: *CIL* III 6687 = *ILS* 2683; Kennedy 2006: 113–117, 122. Cf. Eck 2007: 37–38; 2008: 226.

⁶ The bibliography on the date of the Census of Quirinius is very extensive. For a list of the most important publications and a presentation of the main positions of scholars on this topic see Schürer 1985, I: 489–523; Boffo 1994: 182–203; Alföldy 1997: 199–208; Pearson 1999: 269–282; Smith 2000: 278–293; Labbé 2008: 228–243.

cially epigraphical ones, makes for significant difficulties in correctly interpreting their contents. An excellent example of these problems is provided by the so-called *Titulus Tiburtinus*. This is part of an inscription found in 1764 near Tivoli (the classical Tibur) containing a partially preserved *cursus honorum*, that is a list of positions held by an anonymous senator from the time of Augustus. Based on the preserved section of the inscription, we can state that this senator belonged to the highest echelons of the Roman political elite. This is shown by the functions he occupied and honours he was awarded after leading a victorious martial campaign. He was proconsul of Asia as well as governor of Syria, probably around the end of the 1st century BC.⁷ In the inscription the title associated with the latter position is preceded by the word *iterum*.⁸ Since the text is incomplete it can be interpreted in various ways.⁹ In the context of debates over the date of the Census of Quirinius, the Tivoli inscription is often cited as proof of the reliability of Luke as a source, as according to a significant group of scholars this document contains the *cursus honorum* of Quirinius and testifies to his two stays in Syria as its governor: the first time during Herod's lifetime, and the second after Augustus' annexation of Judaea. The state in which the document is preserved, however, does not permit any certainty as to the correctness of the identification of this senator (a sizable group of scholars argues that this inscription refers to other governors of Syria) or to the reconstruction of the course of his career.¹⁰

In spite of all the difficulties attached to the attempts to interpret the *Titulus Tiburtinus*, Leah Di Segni recently presented a set of arguments which she believes allows the Census of Quirinius in Syria and Judaea to be dated to a period earlier than 6 AD. This hypothesis is accompanied by a series of other findings on various aspects of the history of Judaea and Syria,¹¹ of which most interesting for us are her suggested changes in the chronology of the governors of the province of Syria occupying this position in the last years of the 1st century BC.¹² Acknowledging that all Di Segni's conclusions and hypotheses are correct would require a revision of previous views on the character of Herod's relations with Rome and the form of the administration of the Roman province of Syria at the end of the first century BC. Di Segni bases all her conclusions on an interpretation of the content of the inscriptions on an ancient artefact published by her and probably found on the territory of contemporary Israel.¹³ This find, rare and of great historic importance, was identified by Di Segni as part of the classical weight standard,¹⁴ and is in the form of a bronze ring, originally surrounded by the spout of a measuring vessel. Two inscriptions in Greek can be found on it: one on its cylindrical part, directly on the vessel (a), and the other on the ring which closes its neck (b):

(a) Μάρκου Τιτίου σύμβλημα: μοδίου τέταρτον¹⁵

(b) Ἔτους βα(σιλέως) δλ' μηνὸς Ξανδικοῦ vac. δκ' vac.¹⁶

⁷ *CIL* XIV 3613 = *ILS* 918 = *Insc. It.* IV,1,130. The history of the discovery and later fate of this monument, as well as a full bibliography of its edition and interpretation, is given by Alföldy 1997: 199–200.

⁸ *CIL* XIV 3613 = *ILS* 918 = *Insc. It.* IV,1,130: ... [*leg(atus) pro pr(aetore)*] / *Divi Augusti iterum Syriam et Ph[oenicen] optinuit*] ...

⁹ For the various interpretations of the meaning of the word *iterum* in this inscription see Alföldy 1997: 200–202, 203.

¹⁰ A review of the proposed identifications and arguments in their favour is given by Alföldy 1997: 201–203, 204–208; Smith 2000: 279–282.

¹¹ Di Segni 2005: 23: "... their implications range very far, touching on provincial administration, regional history, and even on one of the thorniest questions of Christian research, namely, the date and circumstances of Jesus' birth and the trustworthiness of historical statements in the Gospel".

¹² Cf. Di Segni 2005: 28–34. The conclusions made in this article were repeated in a paper given in Lugano (Il censimento di Quirinio: un nuovo contributo dell'epigrafia) in a seminar on March 5, 2010 as part of the conference *La Terra Santa tra fonti scritte e dati archeologici*.

¹³ This object was presented to the Israel Museum and is currently kept there. The available information shows that it is almost certain to come from the local area: Di Segni 2005: 23. According to P.-L. Gatier (2008: 750, on no. 555) Syrian origin cannot be entirely ruled out.

¹⁴ Di Segni 2005: 23–25. The function of this artefact is not questioned by any scholar who has expressed a view on this subject.

¹⁵ Di Segni 2005: 24 = *AE* 2005, 1589a = *SEG* 55, 1723A.

¹⁶ Di Segni 2005: 26–27 = *AE* 2005, 1589b = *SEG* 55, 1723B.

The first bears the name of a Roman official, Marcus Titius,¹⁷ as well as information on the size of the standard, and the other bears the year and month of the local era, counted according to the years of rule of the unnamed king. This date shows that the standard in question was established in the 34th year of his rule.¹⁸ The place from which the artefact comes and the year of rule allows Di Segni to assume that this date may refer to Herod, king of Judaea.¹⁹

The function of the artefact and the text inscribed on it give rise to important questions of a historical nature, and the answer to these, according to Di Segni, casts an entirely new light not only on the status of Herod as a ruler dependent on Rome, but also on the question of the dating of the Census of Quirinius. One of the questions she asks concerns the reason for the use of Roman weight standards in the Herodian state. She claims that the presence of the name of the governor of Syria on the artefact may show that Herod's kingdom was to a larger degree in economic and political terms dependent on Rome than has previously been supposed.²⁰ The origin of the standard apparently proves that the inhabitants of Judaea were compelled to pay taxes to Rome, and the amount of these dues must have been determined on the basis of the results of the property census conducted by the Romans on the territory of the kingdom of Herod. This fact leads Di Segni to reject the generally accepted view that the Roman property censuses did not apply to subjects of the vassal rulers. This also allows her to draw a much more important conclusion: since such censuses took place, this find makes it possible to reconcile the sources of Luke and Josephus with reference to the census carried out by Quirinius.

Before we embark on an evaluation of these arguments, we should first refer to the question of the use of the Roman standard in Judaea. Contrary to Di Segni's view, the fact that this standard probably derived from the area of the Herodian state cannot be treated as irrefutable proof of his dependence on Rome, permitting the Roman provincial administration to act practically unhindered on the territory of Judaea. This standard may in fact have been used for its purpose, but without any connection to the activities of the Roman authorities; it may simply have been adapted to the needs of the fiscal administration of the Herodian state. Putting the name of a Roman official on it constituted a kind of guarantee of the reliability of the measure in the case of any transactions among the inhabitants of Judaea, but above all in their material dues to Herod himself. Such a function appears to be clearly suggested by the content of the second inscription. We should recall here that Herod was happy to use Roman models if they helped to strengthen his power and improve the workings of his state. The size of the financial and material resources accumulated by the king must have been known to the officials who served him, and their management was without doubt kept under close control. In order to pursue an efficient financial policy in his own country as well as beyond its borders, Herod had to have at his disposal an organised fiscal system, as the effectiveness of its actions and of enforcing debts owed was key to the realisation of his numerous investment plans and the possibility to be generous to his Roman friends as well as the Greek towns. Therefore, the hypothesis that the working of this system might have been based on the Roman model and that one of its methods was the periodical operation of property censuses does not seem to be without basis.²¹ In this context it is hard to treat the use

¹⁷ According to L. Di Segni this official is synonymous with the governor of Syria, M. Titius (*PIR*² T 261; Hanslik 1937: 1559–1562, no. 18; Dąbrowa 1998: 18–20). But this identification is not as obvious as it seems at first glance. So far as we know, matters related to taxes were the responsibility of a procurator, not the governor. We don't know any reason why this rule would be broken in this specific case.

¹⁸ The inscription gives, alongside the date according to the era of the ruler, the name of the month Xanthikos and the number 24. L. Di Segni (2005: 27) justifies the presence of the name of the month by the fact that this was the month when Herod assumed power, which designated the start of the next year of his reign, while the second group of numbers is seen as a date according to another era, counted from the battle of Actium. This hypothesis is difficult to accept without reservations, though, as no other example is known of such double dating being used in the lands of Judaea during the time of Herod, cf. Goodblatt 2009: 127–154. Also opposed is P.-L. Gatier (*AE* 2005, p. 560, commentary on no. 1589), who suggests that the number 24 refers to the day.

¹⁹ Di Segni 2005: 27–28. According to P.-L. Gatier (2008: 750) it is doubtful whether this assumption is correct.

²⁰ The merit of this view is supposed to be shown by the fact that the standard is matched to the unit of measurement (*modius*) used by the Romans, while the local population mostly used Greek measures: Di Segni 2005: 26.

²¹ Cf. Pearson 1999: 265–269.

of Roman standards of weight or measurement in Judaea as irrefutable proof of the absolute dependence of its ruler on Rome. If that dependence did indeed exist, then almost every major financial decision of the king of Judaea would require consultation with, and the consent of, Roman officials, which is not confirmed by any sources.

All the conclusions of a historical nature drawn by Di Segni spring from her interpretation of the content of the inscriptions on the standard. She places particular emphasis on the second one, claiming that it dates the first, as both were made at the same time.²² However, a careful analysis of photographs and copies of the inscriptions does not provide such certainty.²³ Both the cut of the letters in the first inscription, which contains the name of Marcus Titius, and the care taken over it, distinguishes it from the other inscription, which features chronological details. Even if we take into consideration the fact that the inscription on the outer surface of the standard was exposed to greater use, leading to wearing of the metal surface and a certain deformation of the letters, it is still difficult to resist the impression that it was made by a different, less skilled hand. Further evidence of the limited experience of the engraver who prepared the template of the inscription might be the rather careless planning of the text on the surface of the ring. The conclusion arises that the standard in the shape we know was based on one delivered only with the name of the alleged governor of Syria. The second inscription may have been added later, when a standard was being cast for use by somebody else, which would explain the differences in the shape of the letters. Technically this may have meant creating a template from the original of the standard with the name of Marcus Titius, which before the cast of the copy was made, had the contents of the second inscription added. Taking this possibility into account, we must remain very wary in drawing conclusions about the dating of the governorships of Syria by M. Titius and by his successor, C. Sentius Saturninus.

Further arguments also suggest that we should err on the side of caution in this matter. Di Segni points out that Josephus, writing about the activities of C. Sentius Saturninus in Syria and his contacts with Herod, does not always describe him using a title that is an unambiguous confirmation of his status as a governor (Josephus, *BJ* 1.577; *AJ* 16.277, 280, 344–345, 368; 17.6, 24). Based on this she concludes that, before assuming the role of legate of Syria, for a certain period of his stay in the province he held a function of a lower rank. She believes that the senator, at the time when M. Titius was governor of Syria, was in charge of one of the administrative districts of the province bordering with Judaea, and as a result was able to monitor the events in Herod's kingdom.²⁴ She invokes here examples of such practice known from the period of Augustus' successors, and possibly initiated even by this emperor himself. It is important to stress here that this only affected officials from the equestrian order.²⁵ According to Di Segni, assigning this function to C. Sentius Saturninus provides a satisfactory reason for the presence in Syria of the former consul before he became governor of the province. In fact, we do not know any case of such practice. And for this reason we must demand restraint against such speculation.

It is hard to approve this hypothesis without reservations, however. M. Titius held the consulate (*cos. suff.*) in 31 BC, i.e. significantly earlier than C. Sentius Saturninus, *cos.* in 19 BC. However, they held different types of this function. More prestigious was the office of C. Sentius Saturninus (*cos. ordinarius*); incidentally, he carried out his duty for much of the year independently, without a colleague, working effectively on behalf of ensuring public order.²⁶ For this reason alone we can recognise his being sent to Syria by Augustus as proof of great trust and recognition on the part of the emperor. While the system of provincial administration created at the time by the emperor may have contained certain anomalies, it seems unlikely to suppose that C. Sentius Saturninus received an inferior position from Augustus, entrusted to representatives of the equestrian order or to freedmen. There is no evidence of the existence in Syria at the time we are interested in of extraordinary circumstances justifying such a situation. If even Josephus,

²² Di Segni 2005: 23.

²³ Cf. Di Segni 2005, 24, fig. 2 and 26, fig. 3.

²⁴ Di Segni 2005: 30–31.

²⁵ Cf. Isaac 1998: 313–320; Eck 2007: 36–37.

²⁶ Vell. Pat. 2.92,1–5.

describing some of the events in which C. Sentius Saturninus participated, does not mention anything about his occupying the role of legate of Syria, it is certainly not possible to see this as an argument confirming the hypothesis that this did not take place at the time.²⁷ Moreover, we possess many other examples showing that using the official names of Roman offices was not Josephus' strong suit. His work features a great variety of terms which he uses to describe Roman administrative and military positions.²⁸ This also results from his style of writing, as well as his use of various sources which he adapted and applied for his aims. We know that, in using these more or less freely, he did not display excessive attention for the internal cohesion of his own works or care and consistency in the terminology he used. The hypothesis about C. Sentius Saturninus acting first as consular legate administering only part of Syria, and later the whole province, remains contrary to the practice we know to have been applied in Roman provincial administration in Syria at the time of emperor Augustus' rule.

It is also difficult to agree with Di Segni's assertion about the date of C. Sentius Saturninus' governorship of Syria. In the new chronology of legates of this province which she suggests for the years c. 13–7 BC, the period in which he filled this position is restricted to around a year and a half. This results from the assumption that M. Titius remained in Syria until spring of 7 BC, yet M. Quinctilius Varus, the successor of C. Sentius Saturninus, began to perform his duties in the second half of 6 BC.²⁹ If we take into account the fact that the average length of time imperial legates remained at the head of the province during Augustus' rule was at least a few years, the case of C. Sentius Saturninus would have to be considered exceptional. Such brief government in a province could happen only for two reasons. The first was the death of a legate during his time in office in the province. In the case of Syria at the time of the empire, we know at least a few such cases confirmed in sources, and in general these deaths were caused by illnesses brought on by tough climatic conditions.³⁰ The second reason was a shortened period of office as the result of the legate being dismissed from the position by the emperor. Such a dismissal could be caused by abuse of the position, justified suspicions of the ruler about the disloyalty of the legate, and fears about him starting an armed rebellion, or his being entrusted with a special mission in another part of the empire.³¹ Bearing in mind the fact that C. Sentius Saturninus continued his senatorial career in the service of Augustus³² at a later time, a disciplinary dismissal is out of the question. In accordance with accepted practice,³³ Saturninus received the next appointment in his career only a few years after his stay in Syria. This was the role of legate at the side of Tiberius at the time of the campaign in Germania in around 4–6 AD. For the part he played in this he received military honours,³⁴ which unambiguously confirmed his high position in the circle of power. The chronology of the career of C. Sentius Saturninus which we know today does not give any grounds to believe that there were any particular reasons for his dismissal from the province before the designated time. In this case we can state that, in spite of the doubts over this, all mentions by Josephus of this senator's stay in Syria concern his work as legate of the province.

Contrary to the conviction and arguments of Leah Di Segni, the chronological elements contained in the inscriptions from the standard do not offer a significant change in our knowledge of the status of Judaea under the rule of Herod as a vassal state of Rome. Neither do they give grounds for questioning the correctness of the accepted chronology of the Roman governors of Syria who administered the province around

²⁷ W. Eck (2008: 221–222 and note 18) has not any doubt in this matter.

²⁸ Cf. Saddington 1995: 53–55; Di Segni 2005: 29–30; Eck 2008: 218–226; Toher 2009: 65–77.

²⁹ Di Segni 2005: 28–31.

³⁰ Syme 1981: 125–144 (= Syme 1984: 1376–1392). Cf. Szramkiewicz 1975, I: 363–366.

³¹ Cf. Szramkiewicz 1975, I: 366–376.

³² For more on the subject of this senator and his career: *PIR*² S 393; Groag 1923: 1511–1526; Dąbrowa 1998: 20–22.

³³ Cf. Szramkiewicz 1975, I: 358–361.

³⁴ Vell. Paterc. 2.105.1–2; 109.5; 110.2; Dio Cassius 55.28.6.

the end of the 1st century BC,³⁵ or provide any new and certain reasons allowing us to settle the debate held by historians and theologians on the date of the Census of Quirinius.

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³⁵ The maintenance of this is supported by P.-L. Gatier in his commentary on the inscription from the standard (*AE* 2005, p. 560).