

M. OBELLIUS M.f. FIRMUS, POMPEIAN DUOVIR¹

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An inscription from a tomb recently excavated outside the Porta Nola of Pompeii throws additional light on M. Obellius Firmus. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reading of the inscription and to relate it to existing evidence, epigraphical and archaeological, on M. Obellius Firmus. The inscription has been published by Prof. de Franciscis.² My reading of the text is as follows:

M. OBELLIO. M. F. FIRMO. AEDILI
II. VIR. I. D. HVIC. DECVRIONES. LOC
SEPVLTVRAE. ET. IN. FVNER. HS. I)). CENSVER. PAGANI
THVRIS. P. XXX. ET. CLVPEVM. MINISTR. EOR. IN. ODORIB
HS ∞. ET. CLVPEVM

Prof. de Franciscis' reading differs from mine in the last line where he reads MINISTR. FOR, which he takes as 'Ministri Fortunae, collegio ben noto a Pompei'. Inspection of the stone shows clearly that the letter he reads as an F, must be an E.³ This point is significant because no *Ministri Fortunae* are known from Pompeii, only *Ministri Fortunae Augustae*.⁴

The honours conferred on M. Obellius Firmus by the *decuriones* are substantial—HS 5000 for his funeral, whereas otherwise in Pompeii the sum is HS 2000.⁵ The *pagani* give thirty pounds of frankincense which,

¹ I should like to thank Miss J. M. Reynolds for suggestions and encouragement, and my friend Paul Halstead for improving my English. I should like to thank the Soprintendenza Archeologica delle Province di Napoli e Caserta for permission to publish my slide of the inscription. Cf. Pl. I, No. 1.

² *Cronache Pompeiane* 2, 1976 p. 246 sqq. With a description of the tomb.

³ Miss J. M. Reynolds, who kindly looked at my slide, also thinks she sees an E.

⁴ For them, see P. Castrén, *Ordo Populusque Pompeianus. Polity and Society in Roman Pompeii*. Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae. Vol. VIII. Rome, 1975. pp. 76–77, 105–106, 108, 123, 276.

⁵ R. P. Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire. Quantitative Studies*, Cambridge, 1974. pp. 127 sqq. gives a lucid discussion of the costs of tombs and burials in Italy, with the references.

if we can believe Pliny (N.H. XII 65), was worth between HS 360 and HS 720. I think these pagani are members of a collegium pagi. The first thing that points in this direction is the fact that they have ministri.⁶ Also, on several funerary inscriptions we find 'paganus', which is rather meaningless if they were simply inhabitants of a, or the, pagus.⁷ There are some parallels for pagani acting as they do in this inscription.⁸ The clipeus may also have been of some value—C.I.L. XI 4417 (restored) and XI 6481 record silver clipei weighing one hundred roman pounds.⁹ Finally, the ministri of the pagani (probably slaves) also decide to give, separately, HS 1000, for unspecified perfumes, and a second clipeus.¹⁰ They seem to have been slaves of important gentes. In C.I.L. X 924 we find among others Dama pup. Agrippae (sc. servus). I suppose these slaves could expect to be manumitted, and perhaps hope for careers as augustales.¹¹ They must also have had a sizeable peculium.

Fortunately this is not the only evidence about M. Obellius Firmus. But first we must face an awkward problem, i.e. there are two persons with the same name, a father and a son, and it is in most cases difficult to decide with which of the two we are dealing. C.I.L. IV 3828 encourages 'Obelli cum Patre' to favour Ti. Claudius Verus, duovir candidate for AD 61/62: 'fave, scis Vero favere'. And in Iucundus' tablet 81 a p, for p(atris) is added to the name.¹² In that tablet the M. Obellius Firmus

⁶ F. Bömer, *Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven im Griechenland und Rom. I* in: *Abhandlungen Akademie Mainz. Geistes und Sozialwissenschaftliche Klasse* 1957. nr 7 p. 35 sqq. L. Robert has shown that giving frankincense was a Roman, and not a Greek habit. *R.E.A.* 1960, p. 337 sqq. My thanks to Riet van Bremen for the reference.

⁷ C.I.L. X 1027–1028, N.S. 1894, p. 15, C.I.L. X 1030, plus an unpublished one from Porta Nocera, E 9a–d on Eschebach's map; see Castrén-p. 193. The only Pompeian pagus that we know by name is the Pagus Augustus Felix suburbanus, so perhaps it is more prudent to assume that there was only one pagus.

⁸ C.I.L. X 944, from 14 AD, an unpublished funerary inscription for Cn. Alleius Eros, referred to by Castrén, *op. cit.*, ad nom., and I.L.S. 6376, if the expansion of the abbreviation is correct.

⁹ For clipeus see: *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. s.v. clipeus. It may be that those in our inscription are less valuable. At least, no value is mentioned.

¹⁰ For the ministri pagi see: Castrén, *op. cit.* p. 72–73, 75. F. Bömer, *op. cit.* I, p. 105 sqq. We do not find magistri pagi in this inscription. c.f. F. Bömer, *op. cit.* I, p. 109.

¹¹ cf. Castrén, *op. cit.* p. 78.

¹² These tablets have been published in C.I.L. IV, suppl. pars I.

signs third, while in tablet 8, dated 8 May(?) 54 AD, the M. Obellius Firmus signs first—without a p—and is presumably the son, since in 61/62 the son is already an important person. This makes the argument that in 54 AD the son was still too young for a distinction to be necessary, an implausible one.¹³ C.I.L. IV 3828 may indeed mean that only the son achieved office, in which case it is the son's tomb that has been excavated.¹⁴ It would have been strange to refer the father to the minor position he occupies in C.I.L. IV 3828, if he had been a magistrate. Perhaps the higher rank as a witness for the name without a p reinforces this picture of a son who achieved higher status than his father.¹⁵

Additional information is available in the form of a house identification suggested by M. Della Corte.¹⁶ This makes it possible to place the epigraphy more fully in its archaeological context. The house is III, (14), 2.4.b., not very far away from the tomb. It is interesting that it is a double house, comprising a large and a small one.¹⁷ The identification is primarily on the basis of three graffiti in the house, C.I.L. IV 8970 (M. Obellius), C.I.L. IV 8971b (Firmus), and in the small companion house C.I.L. IV 8996 (Obellius). We find an election poster, 'M. Obelium', on the house itself (C.I.L. IV 7806). On houses very nearby we find others, C.I.L. IV 3829 and 6621, while C.I.L. IV 3828 is also close. The identification seems to be one of the better ones, and the house is indeed very large and distinguished.

¹³ Although Castrén, *op. cit.* ad nom., maintains that both t. 8 and t. 81 refer to the father.

¹⁴ This is also Prof. de Franciscis' opinion.

¹⁵ J. Andreau, *Les affaires de Monsieur Iucundus*. Collection de l'école française de Rome. t. 19. Rome, 1974. p. 200 reaches—obviously apart from the new inscription—the same conclusions, although he is rightly cautious. Some care is necessary with the argument about positions in individual tablets, because obviously these depend on the status of the other persons in the tablets as well. But in t. 81 the first (L. Sevius Rufus) and the second (C. Gavius Firmus) witness are unknown as magistrates, although they may very well have been so. Another element is that the status of witnesses in one tablet need certainly not be as high as that of those in another.

¹⁶ M. Della Corte, *Case e Abitanti di Pompei*. Naples, 1965². p. 13 sqq. It should be added that a substantial number of Della Corte's identifications seem sheer fantasy to me.

¹⁷ But in R. Ling, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: Recent Research and Future Prospects*. in: B.A.R. Suppl. Ser. 41(i) 1978. p. 161. it is argued that such a combination may in origin, and perhaps still at this later day, have been a single two-atrium complex of the Samnite type.

Maiuri remarks that the restoration of the house had not yet been completed in 79 AD.¹⁸ It is interesting to speculate where the duovir Obellius Firmus resided in the period between the earthquake and his death. Perhaps on a country estate?¹⁹ A further point that Maiuri makes is that the new wall decorations that were being painted were of very poor quality. This brings us to the problem of who owned the house at the time of the restorations. By the time of the eruption the father was probably dead, and we have argued above that the tomb is probably the son's. Perhaps a freedman had taken over—we don't know of a grandson. The above cited graffiti are on the original wallpaintings that were being painted over. If both Obelii were dead in 79 AD this throws an altogether different light on Maiuri's observation that it was the lararium that was first restored. He writes 'Il proprietario, colpito anch'egli dal tremendo prodigio del terremoto, vittima se non nella sua persona nella sua casa, volle che i lavori di restauro e di riattamento si iniziassero con la riconsacrazione del Larario'.²⁰ But F. Bömer has stressed that by this time slaves had become very important in the cult of the lares of the house.²¹ So here we have perhaps some support for the hypothesis that it was a freedman of the family who was in possession at the time of the eruption. But firm conclusions cannot be reached on the basis of this shaky evidence.

Della Corte's assumption that the house had always been owned by the same family because the gentilicium is Oscan, the house Samnite, and because an Oscan alphabet was found in the house, seems too hypothetical.

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¹⁸ A. Maiuri, *L'Ultima Fase Edilizia di Pompei*. 1942. p. 131 sg.

¹⁹ cf. J. Andreau, *Histoire des séismes et histoire économique. Le tremblement de terre de Pompéi (63 ap. J.-C.)*. in: *Annales E.S.C.*, 28, 1973 p. 369 sqq.

²⁰ A. Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

²¹ F. Bömer, *op. cit.* I, p. 52 sqq.