

E(xemplum) s(acri) r(escripti).  
 Imp(erator) Caes(ar) Fl(avius) Constantinus  
 Max(imus) Germ(anicus), Sarm(aticus), Got(hicus), victor,  
 triumph(hator) Aug(ustus) et Fl(avius) Constantinus  
 5 et Fl(avius) Iul(ius) Constantius et Fl(avius)  
 Constans.  
 Omnia quidem, quae humani gene=  
 ris societate(m) tuentur, pervigilium cu=  
 rae cogitatione conplectimur, sed pro=  
 10 visionum nostrarum opus maximus  
 est ut universae urbes, quas in luminibus provin=  
 ciarum hac regionum omnium species et forma dis=  
 tinguitur, non modo dignitate(m) pristinam teneant  
 sed etiam ad meliorem statum beneficentiae nos=  
 15 trae munere probeantur. Cum igitur ita vos Tusci=  
 ae adsereretis esse coniunctos, ut instituto  
 consuetudinis priscae per singulas annorum vi=  
 ces a vobis [a]dque praedictis sacerdotes creentur,  
 qui aput Vulsinios Tusciae civitate(m) ludos  
 20 schenicos et gladiatorum munus exhibeant,  
 sed, propter ardua montium et difficultates iti=  
 nerum saltuosa(s), inpendio posceretis ut, indulto  
 remedio, sacerdoti vestro ob editiones cele=  
 brandas Vulsinios pergere necesse non esset,  
 25 scilicet ut civitati, cui nunc Hispellum nomen  
 est quamque Flaminiae viae confinem adque con=  
 tinuam esse memoratis, de nostro cognomine  
 opere magnifico nimirum pro amplitudinem  
 30 nuncupationis exsurgere(t) ibidemque his  
 sacerdos, quem anniversaria vice Umbria de=  
 disset, spectaculum tam scenicorum ludorum  
 quam gladiatorii muneris exhibere(t), manente  
 per Tuscia(m) ea consuetudine ut indidem cre=  
 35 atus sacerdos aput Vulsinios ut solebat  
 editionum antedictarum spectacula fre=  
 quentare(t), precationi hac desiderio vestro  
 facilis accessit noster adsensus. Nam civi=  
 tati Hispello aeternum vocabulum nomenq(ue)  
 40 venerandum de nostra nuncupatione conces=  
 simus, scilicet ut in posterum praedicta urbs  
 Flavia Constans vocetur, in cuius gremio  
 aedem quoque Flaviae, hoc est nostrae, gen=  
 tis, ut desideratis, magnifico opere pereici  
 45 volumus, ea observatione perscripta, ne ae=  
 dis nostro nomine dedicata cuiusquam con=  
 tagiose superstitionis fraudibus polluantur.  
 Consequenter etiam editionum in prae=  
 dicta civitate exhibendorum vobis  
 50 licentiam dedimus, scilicet ut, sicuti  
 dictum est, per vices temporis sollem=  
 nitas editionum Vulsinios quoque non de=  
 serat, ubi creati(s) e Tuscia sacerdotibus memo=  
 rata celebritas exhibenda est. Ita quippe nec  
 55 veteribus institutis plurimum videbitur  
 derogatum et vos, qui ob praedictas causas  
 nobis supplices extitistis, ea quae inpen=  
 dio postulastis, impetrata esse gaude=  
 bitis.

EDR - Epigraphic Database Roma ([edr-edr.it](http://edr-edr.it))

This inscription records an imperial response, a rescriptio, to the town of Hispellum  
 in Umbria, central Italy, from the emperor Constantine; it is an important, and much  
 65 debated source for what it reveals about Constantine's conservative attitude towards  
 pagan cults and cult practices even at the end of his life. The inscription is also  
 evidence for how the provincial towns of Italy responded to their lessening status  
 and importance in the empire, as focus shifted away from Rome towards the residences

of the tetrarchs, and under Constantine towards his new imperial city in the east. As imperial favour for Rome and the Italian cities was gradually withdrawn at the end of the 3rd and early 4th centuries, the inscription demonstrates how towns like Hispellum had to look for other ways to maintain their relationship with an increasingly distant emperor.

The inscription records Constantine's response to a petition sent by the inhabitants of Hispellum. The inscription is 55 lines long, but there are reasons to believe that it was a slightly shortened, or edited version of the original response; the date of the rescript – a factor insisted upon by Constantine in order to confirm the validity of edicts and constitutions (see Codex Theodosianus I.I.I, issued in 322 CE) – is omitted, as are the titles of Constantine's sons, Constantine, Constantius and Constans. As a result, there has been much debate as to when the rescript was issued and the inscription actually set up. Jacques Gascou's pioneering article on the subject was troubled by the lack of imperial titles awarded to the Caesars, and therefore proposed that the rescript was issued in the very last days of Constantine's reign, or in the interregnal period following his death, but that the inscription itself was set up after 337 CE, when all three of his sons were declared Augusti. The inhabitants of Hispellum did not know how to treat the titles of the sons, and so omitted them entirely (Gascou, "Le rescrit d'Hispellum," p. 617-623). Kayoko Tabata, however, suggests that the text was inscribed at the earlier date of late 333 CE, before Constans was made a Caesar; he interprets the blank space on the stone at the end of line 6 as a deliberate gap left by the stone cutter, in which the identical titles of all three sons were intended to be inserted once Constans was officially elevated to the same position as his brothers. He also proposed that the original petition had been made in 326 CE, to be timed with Constantine's celebratory visit to Rome on the twentieth anniversary of his reign (Tabata, "The Date and Setting of the Constantinian Inscription of Hispellum," p. 371-386). This latter rationale seems most sensible, but whatever the actual date of the petition and the inscription of the response, it is clear that at Hispellum it was decided to record only the parts of the response that were most relevant to the city, and appears to have omitted the more "official" details like the date.

The text can be divided into five sections: lines 1-6 name the authors of the rescript, namely Constantine and his sons; lines 7-15 are a kind of introduction, in which the emperors state the importance of the cities of the empire, and the care with which they approach their requests and behaviours, "but of all our attentions the most important is that all the cities, whose form and shape embellish them in the radiance of the provinces and of the regions" (sed pro/visionum nostrarum opus maximus / est ut universae urbes, quas in luminibus provin/ciarum hac regionum omnium species et forma dis/tinguitur), in order to ensure their continued prosperity: "but also shall be promoted to a better state by the working of our beneficence" (sed etiam ad meliorem statum beneficentiae nos/trae munere probeantur). Lines 15-37 discuss the petition, and reiterate the different demands that the inhabitants of Hispellum had made. The main issue was that the city of Hispellum requested that they might celebrate an annual festival independently of the town of Volsinii in Tuscia (modern Bolsena), with whom they had traditionally shared it: "as you affirm that you are connected with Tuscia in a manner that, by the institution of an ancient custom, every year a sacerdos should be elected from you and the people above mentioned and they, at Volsinii, a town of Tuscia, is to present the theatrical entertainments and gladiatorial shows" (Cum igitur ita vos Tusci/ae adsereretis esse coniunctos, ut in/instituto / consuetudinis priscae per singulas annorum vi/ces a vobis adque praedictis sacerdotes creentur, / qui apud Vulsinios Tusciae civitate(m) ludos / schenicos et gladiatorum munus exhibeant). It seemed that a priest from Hispellum was forced to make the difficult journey over the mountain pass between the towns in order to participate in the festival, which Hispellum felt was unreasonable (sed, propter ardua montium et difficultates iti/nerum saltuosas). In return for being allowed to celebrate the festival and games independently of Volsinii, Hispellum proposed changing the name of the town to that of the cognomen of the emperor, as well as the setting up of a new shrine to Constantine and his sons (de nostro cognomine / nomen daremus, in qua templum Flaviae gentis...exsurgeret), which would be "magnificently appropriate for the dignity of its name" (opere magnifico nimirum pro amplitudinem / nuncupationis). Hispellum asks that they might elect their own priest to perform the rituals for the theatre entertainments and gladiator games that form part of the festival (ibidemque his / sacerdos, quem anniversaria vice Umbria de/disset, spectaculum tam scenicorum ludorum / quam gladiatorii muneris exhiberet), but that Tuscia reserved the right to continue their ancient custom by electing their own priest at Volsinii, as had always been the case, to perform the festival rites in

their part of Tuscia (manente / per Tuscia(m) ea consuetudine ut indidem cre/atus  
sacerdos apud Vulsinios ut solebat / editionum antedictarum spectacula  
fre/quentaret).

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In the fourth part of the text, lines 37-54, the emperors agree to this request  
(precationi hac desiderio vestro / facilis accessit noster adsensus), but they also  
add their own conditions to it. Firstly, Constantine awarded the name of Flavia  
Constans to Hispellum, naming it after the imperial house in a demonstration of his  
145 positive approbation of their petition (Tabata, "The Date and Setting of the  
Constantinian Inscription of Hispellum," p. 370). Constantine's father - known most  
frequently as Constantius Chlorus - bore the full name "Marcus Flavius Valerius  
Constantius," after whom nearly successive emperors of the late empire were similarly  
named. The emperors also agreed to the construction of the shrine to the gens Flavia,  
150 but "on the condition that a temple dedicated to our name shall not be polluted with  
the frauds of contagious superstition" (ea observatione perscripta, ne ae/dis nostro  
nomine dedicata cuiusquam con/tagiose superstitionis fraudibus polluantur). This  
condition is the best known and most discussed feature of the Hispellum inscription,  
and has often been interpreted as a ban on blood sacrifice, which Constantine is  
155 known to have personally avoided, but the meaning and implications of this condition  
are not immediately obvious. As Raymond Van Dam has rightly noted, Constantine and  
sons do not respond here using overtly Christian terminology - the shrine is  
described very traditionally as an aedis - nor is a specific ban of sacrifice  
actually stated (Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, p. 30). Although these  
160 lines have often been given as evidence for Constantine's imperial and religious  
policy towards pagan cult, there is no outright ban on blood sacrifice stated here.  
Had Constantine truly wished to ban blood sacrifice, it is likely that he would have  
said so explicitly; in 325 CE he had passed a law that banned gladiators and "their  
bloody spectacles" (Codex Theodosianus 15.12.1) and at Mamre in Palestine he had  
165 cleansed the shrine of pagan images and "impure sacrifices," linking the restrictions  
with the construction of a new Christian church (Aurelius Victor, *On the Caesars*,  
40.28; Optatus, *Appendix*, 10.36b). Had his primary concern been to limit pagan cult,  
Constantine could easily have refused the petition from Hispellum and suggested that  
in the place of a temple to the imperial family, the town build a Christian church  
170 instead (Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, p. 33).

Indeed, Constantine's primary concern appears to have been the welfare of the cities  
of Hispellum and Volsinii, as he had declared was the primary objective of the  
imperial house in the introductory passage of the text (lines 10-13). By allowing  
175 Hispellum the right to celebrate their own festival and games and the construction of  
a new temple, as well as naming the city after his own gens, Constantine ensured that  
the status of Hispellum would "be promoted to a better state by the working of our  
beneficence" (ad meliorem statum beneficentiae nos/trae munere probeantur). The  
prestige of Volsinii would likewise remain intact by continuing to allow the citizens  
180 there to celebrate according to tradition (Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of*  
Constantine, p. 34). The inscription concludes with Constantine's hope for the  
preservation of old institutions: "in fact the old institution will not seem to have  
been excessively modified" (ita quippe nec / veteribus institutis plurimum  
videbitur / derogatum). The point of the rescript to Hispellum was not, therefore,  
185 concerned with the right to blood sacrifice, but rather about the civic life of the  
cities of the empire and the maintenance of ancestral traditions. Just as many of the  
emperors who had preceded him, Constantine aimed at presenting his reign as one that  
upheld the longstanding traditions of the Roman imperial house, including the  
establishment of a dynasty. Rather than imposing a "new Christian future" on the  
190 towns of Italy, Constantine's primary concern was to advertise the hereditary  
succession that would follow his death, in the form of his sons, and to reiterate his  
support of the traditional importance of the Italian cities; given the foundation of  
his new capital in Constantinople, and the support that Maxentius had shown to Rome  
and her surroundings, it was perhaps more important than ever to appeal to old  
195 customs and visions of empire, and to "cloak his policies and innovations in the  
shroud of tradition and antiquarianism" (Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of*  
Constantine, p. 34).

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The historic importance of the imperial cult in provincial societies was also likely  
behind Constantine's conservative attitude towards its preservation. Although often  
considered the mechanism through which provincial communities expressed their loyalty  
to the empire, the imperial cult served, more importantly, a key administrative  
function in civic life; whether the religion of the emperor was pagan or Christian,  
it was almost impossible to de-tangle it from the culture, politics and day-to-day

205 life of the Roman empire, into which it was interwoven (Tabata, "The Date and Setting  
of the Constantinian Inscription of Hispellum"). In such a context, the imperial cult  
existed as series of acts and rituals which were aimed at the emperor in a "moving  
210 dialectic of power," and which "founded the institutional architecture of the  
principate" (Van Andringa, "Rhetoric and Divine Honours," p. 10). It did not take  
long after its inauguration at Actium for the imperial cult to place the figure of  
the emperor at the centre of public religion, with his political expression  
necessarily underwritten and understood as an expression of the will of the gods.  
Whether or not Constantine intended his vague prohibition of rituals that might  
"pollute" the new shrine to the gens Flavia there to mean blood sacrifice, or indeed  
215 any offering or behaviour of any kind that might celebrate pagan gods, it is clear  
that celebration of the imperial family itself was impossible to prevent. In spite of  
Constantine's own preference for Christianity, and his refusal to participate in cult  
sacrifices to the pagan gods, he could not deny that worship of the imperial  
household and the emperor was a means by which the cities of the Roman provinces  
220 might conceptualise and negotiate with imperial power; even in a Christian empire,  
the political prowess exerted by Rome could still be understood as the working of  
divine power through the figure of the emperor. Honouring the emperor and his  
household in the form of cult activity was, then, a crucial way for provincial  
communities to express their own status, as well as that of their relationship with  
225 the ruling power; to forbid such communities from doing so would be to deny the  
connection between emperor and subject.

In the case of the Hispellum inscription, the main aim of this Umbrian city was to  
ensure their civic right to celebrate a festival in the way that best suited them,  
230 but it was also a way for them to affirm their new association with Constantine and  
his emerging dynasty, by renaming the city after his family. Where previously the  
imperial cult had made Roman rule both accessible and acceptable to provincial  
cities, who faced an "otherwise unparalleled intrusion of authority into their  
world," Hispellum and the other Italian cities that surrounded Rome faced the  
235 opposite problem; imperial power was now being withdrawn from Italy, and with it also  
the favour that these cities had historically enjoyed (quote from Price, *Rituals and  
Power*, p. 247; Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, p. 57). A shrine  
dedicated to the imperial house, along with the guarantee of a festival and its  
associated priesthods, as well as a new name for the city that was directly drawn  
240 from the emperor himself would serve as evidence for Hispellum's close and  
significant relationship with Constantine and his sons, as well as ensuring the  
positive reception of the new dynasty in a region that had begun to feel the burden  
of being treated like any other of the empire. It was a request for imperial  
patronage, but also an acknowledgment of the shifting balance of power away from  
245 Italy in the early 4th century CE (Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine*, p.  
57).