



[Altar for Sohaemus, King of Emesa \(CIL III, 14387a\)](#) [1]

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Honorific

Original Location/Place: Unknown, Heliopolis (Baalbek, Syria).

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): In loco.

Date: 54 CE to 69 CE

Physical Characteristics: Stone altar, now fragmented into multiple parts. The inscription is in large, well-cut letters on the front panel of the altar, beneath the lintel.

Material: Stone (?)

Measurements: Unknown.

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:

CIL III, 14387a

Commentary: This inscription records the dedication of an altar in honour of a client king, Sohaemus, who ruled the kingdom of Emesa, close to modern Homs in Syria. Although there is little archaeological or epigraphic evidence for the dynasty from which he descended, he is known from the literary record as an ally of the Flavians, to whom he provided military support in their campaign in Judea and against the kingdom of Commagene. The inscription of the altar attests to Sohaemus's alliance with Rome and his Roman citizenship, whilst also maintaining the honorific titles local to the region. More significantly, the inscription is a rare instance in which material evidence proves the existence of an individual known from ancient texts; according to Tacitus and Josephus, Sohaemus was a crucial ally of Vespasian during the Jewish War and was responsible for sending troops from his own army to support the Roman campaign.

There is little in the epigraphic, literary or archaeological records of the early history of 'Emesa'. Although it occupied a key strategic point connecting the coast to central Syria, and later famous as the hometown of Julia Domna (the wife of Septimius Severus) and the city in which the Severan emperor Elagabalus was worshipped in the form of a black stone (Herodian, *History of the Empire*, V.2.3-7), little is known of its origins, nor does there appear to have been a Hellenistic settlement (Kropp, "Earrings, *nefesh* and *opus reticulatum*," p. 200). Its earliest reference can be found in Strabo's *Geography*, in which he describes 'chieftains' of the Emiseni as the allies of Caecilius Bassus, who killed the governor of the province of Syria and besieged the city of Apameia in 45 BCE with their support (*Geography*, XVI.2.10). Andreas Kropp has noted that Pliny the Elder also refers to the *Emesenes* in a list of tribes from Northern Syria (*Natural History*, V.81), and has thus concluded that the city of Emesa did not exist until perhaps the end of the 1st century BCE, and was named after the tribe that founded it ("Earrings, *nefesh* and *opus reticulatum*", p. 201). The chiefs of the tribe from which Sohaemus descended appear to have become allies of Rome during the late Republic, and confirmed as a client kingdom under Augustus who reinstated a monarchy there in 20 BCE following the murder of one of their kings around the time of the Battle of Actium (Plutarch, *Antonius* 66). Following their support of Vespasian in the Jewish War and in the annexation of Commagene in 72 CE, the dynasty disappeared from the historical record, suggesting that it too may have been annexed by Rome and absorbed into the province under Roman governorship (Kropp, *Images and Monuments*, p. 26). With the exception of a handful of inscriptions, a golden seal ring depicting one of the kings and a now-lost royal tomb, there is almost no physical trace for the existence of the city or its rulers (for a full discussion of the material evidence, see Kropp, "Earrings, *nefesh* and *opus reticulatum*", p. 199-216).

The inscribed altar dedicated in honour of Sohaemus does not come from Emesa, but was rather dedicated in the colony of Heliopolis (modern Baalbek), over which he is stated to have been appointed patron (*patronus coloniae*). The inscription begins by naming Sohaemus as "great king" (*rex magnus*). This appears to have been an honorific title specific to Syria; his father, Samsigeramus, is also named as such in the inscription and a second inscription from Heliopolis attributes the same title to Agrippa I of Judea (*IGLS* 6.2759). The inscription reveals that as a client king of Rome, Sohaemus had been awarded Roman citizenship, and had taken on the *tria nomina* naming system: *Gaius Iulius Sohaemus*, the *praenomen* and *nomen* of which – Gaius Julius – indicating that citizenship was awarded under the Julio-Claudians. This choice of name fits with the dating given by Josephus's reference to the dynasty, in which he states that Sohaemus had become king in 54 CE (*Jewish Antiquities*, 20.158; Kropp, *Images*



and Monuments, p. 26). As well as being awarded citizenship and being given the status of patron of Heliopolis, the inscription also reveals that Sohaemus had been granted *ornamenta consularia* (consular insignia) and reached the position of *quinquennalis*, the most prestigious office of local government in Roman colonies. However, the most interesting description of the king is found in lines 4-6 of the inscription, in which he is described as *philo/caesari et philo/romaeo*: 'friend of Caesar and friend of the Romans'. These two titles originated in the Greek east and were used to signify the privileged status of the relationship between certain foreign dynasties and Rome (see Braund, *Rome and the friendly king*, p. 105-107). *Philoromaioi* (?????????) – 'friend of the Romans' – was a title first awarded to Ariobarzanes I, the king of Cappadocia from 95 BCE to c. 62 BCE in recognition of Rome's support for his rule, and became a common legend on the coinage that commemorated local officials in Asia in the first century CE (Chancey, *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus*, p. 183, n. 83). Although typically used as an indication of an alliance between Rome and eastern dynasts, in this particular case we can attribute the precise reason for which the friendship existed. Josephus relates that in 66 CE Sohaemus supplied the Roman governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, with 4000 men (cavalry and archers) to assist his suppression of the growing revolt in Jerusalem (*Jewish War*, 2.500; 3.68), and in 69 CE he swore allegiance to Vespasian (Tacitus, *Histories*, II.81). Tacitus states that Sohaemus was again willing to lend military support to the Flavian campaigns when Titus took over in 70 CE (*Histories*, V.1.4), and from Josephus we discover that two years later, in 72 CE, he sent further troops to assist in the Roman invasion of Commagene (*Jewish War*, VII.219). As Anthony Barrett has noted, "thus we have a distinguished client-king...involved in a number of vital military undertakings" ("Sohaemus," p. 155); Sohaemus's loyalty to Rome, and particularly to the Flavian campaign in Judea emphasised the necessity of successful client-kingdoms for the government of the empire; they acted almost as garrisons, maintaining order and a visible Roman presence, whilst ensuring the support of the local aristocracy through the rewards of citizenship, official roles and honorific titles – such as *philocaesar* and *philoromaioi* – that carried particular weight in their respective provinces. However, such alliances and rewards were not guaranteed to last; following Sohaemus's assistance in the Flavian annexation of Commagene there is no further mention of the King nor his descendants in the historical record, leading to suggestions that the kingdom of Emesa was probably annexed too and added to the province of Syria towards the end of Vespasian's reign (Kropp, *Images and Monuments*, p. 26). In spite of their sustained and generous contribution to Rome's war effort, the management of the empire was more important than continued rewards for loyalty.

Keywords in the original language:

- [rex magnus](#) [2]
- [philocaesar](#) [3]
- [philoromaeus](#) [4]
- [honoratus](#) [5]
- [ornamentum](#) [6]
- [patronus](#) [7]
- [colonia](#) [8]

Thematic keywords:

- [Sohaemus](#) [9]
- [Vespasian](#) [10]
- [Titus](#) [11]
- [First Jewish Revolt](#) [12]
- [Jerusalem](#) [13]
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- [client king](#) [15]
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- [Josephus](#) [18]
- [Tacitus](#) [19]
- [military campaign](#) [20]
- [patron](#) [21]
- [friend of Rome](#) [22]
- [provincial loyalty](#) [23]



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