



## Dedication to Septimius Severus and Caracalla at Lugdunum (CIL XIII, 1754)

### Lugdunum Altar (CIL XIII, 1754)

[1]

**Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.):** Honorific

**Original Location/Place:** Cemetery, Lugdunum.

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):** Lyon, Archaeological Museum. Inventory no.: A.D.1.8.

**Date:** 197 CE May 4th to 197 CE May 7th

**Physical Characteristics:** Stone altar, inscribed on the front. The right and left sides are decorated with a *harpè* (a kind of sword or sickle), with a bull's and ram's head below with ribbons. The *harpè* on the left side has been lost. A rectangular section has been cut out of the top left corner of the altar, and the bottom of the inscribed surface has suffered some damage. Traces of red paint remain in the lettering.

**Material:** Stone (?)

**Measurements:** Height: 145 cm

Width: 47 cm

Depth: 43 cm

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Publications:**

*CIL XIII, 1754*

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**Commentary:** This inscription was dedicated in honour of a sacrifice made for the health and safety of Septimius Severus in 197 CE, in the Colonia Copia Claudia Augusta Lugdunum (modern Lyon) in Gaul. It is an important statement of the loyalty of the community to the imperial household, and evidence for the use of cult activity in the promotion of particular political assertions.

The inscription opens with a plea for the safety of the emperor Septimius Severus (*Pro salute / Imperatoris Luci Septimi / Severi Pii Pertinacis Augusti*), and for his son Caracalla, who is referred to here as *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, following his re-naming in 195 CE when Septimius Severus proposed his family's 'self adoption' into the Antonine dynasty (see [Septimius Severus claims Antonine heritage](#) [2]). The dedication is also made for the safety of the emperor's wife, Julia Domna, known here as *Iulia Augusta*, the 'mother of the camps' (*mater castrorum*), which honoured her special popularity with the military across the empire. Finally, the safety and security "of their whole divine house" (*totius domus divinae / eorum*) is invoked, in order to note the deification of the emperor's ancestors. The sacrifice was also performed for the security, or 'existence, state' (*ex statu*) of the place itself, the *Colonia Copia Claudia Augusta Lugdunum*. Unusually, the sacrifice and dedication were instituted by two women, who are named in the text as Septicia Valeriana and Optatia Siora, and who offered it "in fulfilment of a preceding vow" (*ex voto / praeunte*).

The sacrifice that is referred to in the inscription is the *taurobolium*, which originated in Asia Minor and was, by the mid-second century BCE, associated with cult of the Magna Mater, or the 'Great Mother'. The cult's centre was Rome, and it did not reach the provinces until the first century CE, during which time it was supplemented by worship of the Phrygian cult of Cybele and Attis (Spickermann, "Initiation," p. 216). It involved the sacrifice of a bull, and is first attested in an inscription recording a sacrifice that was performed in Puteoli in 134 CE (*CIL X, 1596*; for a synthesis of the origins of the *taurobolium* sacrifice, see Duthoy, *The Taurobolium*). Much has been made of a chapter in Prudentius, which suggested the *taurobolium* to be a kind of "blood baptism" associated with initiation into the cult of Cybele, but the detailed work of Robert Duthoy and Jeremy Rutter have put paid to these theories, and the rite is now better understood as a cult that, by the time this inscription was dedicated, was well-connected with public institutions (Prudentius, *Romanus contra gentiles*, 1006-85; Duthoy, *The Taurobolium*; Rutter; "The



Three Phases of the Taurobolium,” p. 226-249; Spickermann, “Initiation,” p. 216).

In Lugdunum, the *taurobolium* was a popular sacrifice, with six altars dedicated in its honour between 160 CE - following the introduction of the cult of the Magna Mater to Gaul by Antoninus Pius - and 217 CE, although four of these were dedicated between 190-199 CE (CIL XIII, 1752-1754 and 1756). However, although the *taurobolium* is named in the inscription, a reference to the cult of the Magna Mater has been omitted, indicating that the celebration of the goddess was not the primary function of the dedication. Indeed, a *taurobolium* altar had been dedicated in 194 CE, which expressed the loyalty of the *colonia* of Lugdunum to Septimius Severus as the new emperor, and to Clodius Albinus, the newly declared Caesar, most likely due to Severus's role as governor there in 187-188 CE (Spickermann, “Initiation,” p. 219). However, following the power-struggle that emerged in the following years, Lugdunum declared its support for Clodius Albinus, for which the city and its population were duly punished, with plunder and partial destruction, following the defeat of Albinus there just three months before the altar's dedication (Spickermann, “Initiation,” p. 219). The ‘state’ of the city prayed for in the inscription (*statu coloniae*) can therefore justifiably be translated as ‘preservation’, according to Lothar Wierschowski, who believed it referred to both the physical damage wrought upon the city as well as the sanctions that will have been placed on its financial activity (Wierschowski, “Fremde,” p. 306). This altar was therefore dedicated in order to emphasise the loyalty of the community to the victorious emperor, and should be taken as a “proclamation of fealty...highlighting the newly emerging dynasty and integrating the dedication into the new, expanded imperial cult” (Spickermann, “Initiation,” p. 219). The altar appears to be a private one, offered by two women, but with the cooperation of the town council who contributed the plot of public land on which it was to be set up (*locus datus decreto decurionum*), meaning that the inscription should also be read as a political statement, to which the town council positively consented (Spickermann, “Women and the cult of the Magna Mater,” p. 152). Although the use of the formula *pro salute imperatoris* (‘for the safety of the emperor’) further emphasises the “official character” of the dedication, its origin as an independent initiative by Septicia Valeriana and Optatia Siora is indicated by *ex voto*, suggesting the private nature of the two women's veneration of the imperial house. However, the inclusion in the inscription of the names of the priest and priestess, Aelius Anthus and Aemilia Secundilla, as well as the flautist Flavius Restitutus and the *apparator* – a kind of special official connected only with the cult of the Magna Mater –, Vireius Hermetionis, is indicative of the elaborate ceremony that the *taurobolium* required, and the very public nature of its performance. With that in mind, the dedication of the altar by two women – even if they were members of the municipal elite – is unusual. Wolfgang Spickermann has suggested that perhaps the women of Lugdunum undertook such a public role in this case due to the problematic aftermath of the city's support of Clodius Albinus; the male quotient of the city's elite may well have been supporters of Albinus, after whose defeat they may not have wanted to draw attention to themselves in such a public manner (Spickermann, “Initiation,” p. 221). It was safer for the women to perform the duty of public donor, which in the case of the altar presented here also boosted their standing within the cult community (*ibid*).

One final point should be noted in the text of the inscription; Caracalla is termed *Imperator destinatus* (‘destined Emperor’) here, perhaps in recognition of the ancestral inheritance claimed by Septimius Severus as part of the Antonine dynasty. It was also in 197 CE that the Senate formally adopted the Severans into the *gens Aelia*, and so the suggestion of Caracalla's future as one that is now ‘destined’ may indicate how that message had been received by provincial communities. In one such as Lugdunum, which had opposed Septimius Severus in favour of his rival, it was perhaps even more necessary to demonstrate the degree to which his role, and that of his successor, in this divinely sanctioned lineage was recognised and understood. The altar dedicated in 197 CE was, therefore, imbued with deeply political significance; it honoured the imperial house in the traditional way, asking for the safety and security of the emperor and his family, but with an underlying sense of political action that aimed at communicating the loyalty of Lugdunum to the Severans.

Keywords in the original language:

- [salus](#) [3]
- [Septimius Severus](#) [4]
- [Caesar](#) [5]
- [destinatus](#) [6]
- [lulia](#) [7]
- [Augusta](#) [8]
- [mater](#) [9]
- [domus](#) [10]



- [divinus](#) [11]
- [colonia](#) [12]
- [taurobolium](#) [13]
- [sacerdos](#) [14]
- [inchoatus](#) [15]
- [sacrum](#) [16]
- [decretus](#) [17]
- [decurio](#) [18]

Thematic keywords:

- [sacrifice](#) [19]
- [taurobolium](#) [20]
- [Septimius Severus](#) [21]
- [Caracalla](#) [22]
- [Julia Domna](#) [23]
- [Lugdunum](#) [24]
- [altar](#) [25]
- [Imperial family](#) [26]
- [imperial dynasty](#) [27]
- [safety](#) [28]
- [health](#) [29]
- [loyalty to Rome](#) [30]

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Inscription

## [Altar for Augustus in Tres Galliae \(CIL XIII, 1664\) \[37\]](#)

- [Read more about Altar for Augustus in Tres Galliae \(CIL XIII, 1664\) \[37\]](#)

Inscription

## [Altar vowed for the safety of the empire \(CIL XIII, 7844\) \[38\]](#)

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