

ANNA TATARKIEWICZ
(ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY, POZNAŃ)

CAENIS
AUGUSTA IN ALL BUT NAME¹

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SUMMARY: The paper analyses the life and position of Antonia Caenis, a former slave and a long-time concubine of emperor Vespasian.

In 1863, at via Nomentana – close to Porta Pia and Villa Patrizi – an altar made of lunian marble was discovered². At present, it is part of the collection held by Museo Storico della Caccia e del Territorio in Florence³. In 2009, it returned to Rome and became one of the jewels of the ‘Divus Vespasianus’ exhibition⁴. The inscription on the altar says that it was funded by the freedman Aglaus⁵ (with his children) for his *optume patronae* (best patron)⁶. There would be nothing interesting about the

¹ Title taken from the article by Weaver, Wilkins 1999: 241-244.

² Henzen 1864: 25-26.

³ Palazzo Bardini inv. no. A 231.

⁴ Nonnis 2009: 405.

⁵ Aglaus – his name suggests the Greek origin. He was likely to perform the role of *villicus* in Caenis’ house. About Caenis’ ‘family’: CIL VI 4057; CIL VI 20950; CIL VI 18358; Cristofani 1978: 6, ref. 7.

⁶ The altar made of lunian marble; parallelepiped on the base; total height 119 cm; foundation 72 x 88 cm. Inscription on the front; Three other walls are decorated with reliefs: at the back of the altar there are two laurel trees with *urceus* between them; the wall on the right side of the altar shows two cherubs riding on swans. The cherubs are holding two inverted two laurel twigs intervened at the bottom; The left side is de-

altar and inscription if not the fact that Antonia Caenis to whom it was dedicated was the mistress of the emperor Vespasian. This text is dedicated to her⁷.

Caenis spent her life in the center of political events and although a woman she was not just a passive onlooker but an active participant instead. Since she was not a leading figure and, as we may guess, she tried to avoid publicity, historians and biographers of the Flavius family did not devote too much attention to her and therefore our knowledge of her is rather poor⁸. It is believed that she was born sometime near the end of Augustus' reign, probably in 7 AD⁹. Some try to find information about her origin in what Suetonius said in *ex Histria reversae*¹⁰. The name – Caenis – points to the 'Eastern' origin¹¹. We know however that she was a slave of Antonia Minor, wife of Drusus and mother of emperor Claudius, one of the most influential women in Rome¹². Caenis' thorough education can be proved by the fact that she became a trusted secretary of Antonia¹³. Antonia asked Caenis to write a letter to Tiberius where she set forth accusations against Sejanus¹⁴.

corated with the cherubs holding a floral garland made of laurel. Cristofani 1978: 2-7, detailed 4-6, makes an iconographic analysis of the monument – compares the altar of Caenis with other monuments from that period.

⁷ CIL VI 12037: Dis manib(us) / Antoniae Aug(ustae) / l(ibertae) Caenidis / optumae patron(ae) / Aglaus l(ibertus) cum Aglao et Glene et Aglaide / filiis.

⁸ See the catalogue – a list of the text sources.

⁹ As per the Lex Aelia Sentia law from 4 AD, a slave at the time of manumission (freeing) had to be at least thirty years old. Antonia Minor died in 37 AD. It indicates, theoretically, that whether Caenis was freed still during her life or based on a legacy, she was probably born in 7 AD, i.e. she was at least two years older than Vespasian (Of course, there were exceptions to the Augustus regulation of the minimum age for a slave to be manumitted; see, e.g. Schumacher 2005: 279).

¹⁰ Suet. *Dom.* 13.

¹¹ Caenis is a latinized female form of a mythological name Caeneus – (καϊνεύς); Originally, Caeneus was a woman named Caenis. When Caenis became Poseidon's lover, she asked the god to be changed into a man and an invulnerable fighter. Poseidon made her wish come true. Already as Caeneus he fought with centaurs who not being able to kill him pounded him into the ground. Caeneus suffocated and, dying, turned back into a woman (Grimal 1997).

¹² Kokkinos 1992.

¹³ Kokkinos 1992: 57-58; 'Antoniae libertam et a manu' (Suet. *Vesp.* 3, 3).

¹⁴ Nicols 1975: 48-58. According to Nicols this fact should not be overestimated as we do not have enough information about the role of Antonia in denouncing Sejanus'

The description of the situation provided by Cassius Dio shows that she was truthful, loyal, discreet, had a strong, independent character, excellent memory and that she was exceedingly faithful¹⁵.

Maybe these features of Caenis' character attracted Vespasian so much to her. Vespasian was not married yet when he started his love affair with Caenis who was a slave then¹⁶. It is likely that they met at the house of Antonia Minor¹⁷. A lot seems to confirm that as Antonia dies at the beginning of Caligula's reign when Vespasian begins his political and social career. As a paradox – those were Caenis' connections which helped young Vespasian open many doors at the court of the last emperors from the Julio-Claudian dynasty¹⁸. He marries during Caligula's reign and afterwards he is not much in Rome¹⁹.

We can presume that despite a different social position of the lovers, Vespasian's marriage to Flavia Domitilla and his frequent absences from the City, it was not a short-lived affair. According to Suetonius, after the death of his wife²⁰, before he became emperor, Vespasian resumed his relations with Caenis²¹. Due to legal requirements the relationship could not end with a formal marriage, yet they lived as virtual husband and wife. Father's concubine was treated with disrespect by

plot (p. 57). Cassius Dio, for example, does not mention any connections between Antonia and detection of Sejanus' plot in books concerning the Julio-Claudian dynasty but in Flavian books. Therefore, Nicols believes that Cassius Dio focused on the figure of Caenis and this history 'helped' him to emphasize the significance and description of influences the emperor's concubine had.

¹⁵ Castritius 2002: 165.

¹⁶ Inscription on the altar – Antonia Caenis – indicates that probably she was manumitted in 37 AD; ref. 6.

¹⁷ Vespasian knew L. Vitellius (L. Vitellius – Tac. *Hist.* 3, 66) well, an influential man, a friend of Emperor Claudius who boasted of a long-lasting friendship with Antonia (Tac. *Ann.* 11, 3). Vespasian's another friend was Narcissus (Narcissus – Suet. *Vesp.* 4), Claudius' freedman, who began his career in the house of Claudius and Antonia; Nicols 1975: 56; Waters 1964: 53.

¹⁸ Jones 1992: 5; Castritius 2002: 165.

¹⁹ Levick 1999: 14-42. Here further literature.

²⁰ The exact date of her death is unknown. We know that she died before 69 AD.

²¹ We speak of the love affair renewal as formally marriages in Rome were monogamous and relationship with a concubine over the marriage life would equal bigamy. Yet, it happened that emperors after the death of their lawful wives lived in official concubinages, in particular when the woman of one's choice came from a lower social class (Dig. 25, 7, 1-3); see also: Rawson 1974: 288.

Vespasian's sons. Suetonius writes that when Caenis returned from Istria and bended her head down to kiss Domitian, he held out his hand²².

In the common opinion, Caenis was certainly perceived as emperor's concubine (i.e. she was a potential 'channel' to reach him) and Vespasian himself demonstrated not only emotional favor with her. It is likely that both these factors allowed her to amass great wealth²³, though in our times her activity would be clearly associated with corruption. She received vast sums from selling e.g. governorships, procuratorships, generalships and priesthoods, and in some instance even imperial decisions. Cassius Dio voices common suspicions that Vespasian raised money through Caenis and Vespasian willingly allowed her to do as she did²⁴.

Vespasian outlived his mistress by five years²⁵. Most likely, Caenis died in early 75 AD²⁶. Undoubtedly, their love was very strong if their relationship lasted so long. When they met they were over twenty years old and when they resumed their relationship after years, they were both mature people. Though Suetonius thinks that after the death of Caenis, Vespasian had 'many concubines' (*accubante plurimas*)²⁷, yet he did not get involved in any regular or formal relationship.

We do not know whether Vespasian was fascinated with the character of Caenis as described by Dion or with her beauty. After all, we do not know what she was like. None of her portraits survived to this day. Although Vespasian treated her as his lawful wife – *paene iustae uxoris loco* – she never became a part of official commemoration²⁸, no statues

²² Suet. *Dom.* 12.

²³ Cass. Dio. 14, 3; Demandt 1997: 105.

²⁴ Cass. Dio. 14, 3-4.

²⁵ Suet. *Vesp.* 21: 'defunctae Caenidis'.

²⁶ Nonnis 2009: 405. Most frequently, the years 71-75 are given which is connected with information contained in Dio's writings.

²⁷ Suet. *Vesp.* 21.

²⁸ This an excellent example showing that frequency of the presence of an image/portrait is often not dependent on the political power and role (as regards women, in particular). Though our knowledge about Caenis is rather limited, we know about her more than about some 'official empresses'. – 'Those of the Flavian women who exerted a certain a political influence – at least according to the written sources – such as Vespasian's freedwoman and concubine Caenis, a former secretary of Antonia Minor (Suet. *Vesp.* 3), were not part of official commemoration, whereas those who had no or little influence because of an early death such as Flavia Domitilla or Iulla Titi con-

were erected to glorify her nor coins were minted with her image. We only know the altar with a brief inscription, and still she survived in the memory as ‘Augusta in all but name’²⁹.

CATALOGUE – A LIST OF THE TEXT SOURCES

a. CIL VI 12037

DIS MANIBUS / ANTONIAE AUG / L CAENIDIS / OPTUME PATRON

AGLAUS L CUM AGLAO / ET GLENE ET AGLAIDE / FILIIS

b. Suet. Vesp. 3, 3

Post uxoris excessum Caenidem, Antoniae libertam et a manu, dilectam quondam sibi revocavit in contubernium, habuitque etiam imperator paene iustae uxoris loco.

c. Suet. Vesp. 21

postque decisa quaecumque obvenissent negotia, gestationi et inde quieti vacabat, accubante aliqua pallacarum, quas in locum defunctae Caenidis plurimas constituerat.

d. Suet. Dom. 12

Ab iuventa minime civilis animi, confidens etiam, et cum verbis tum rebus immodicum, Caenidi patris concubinae, ex Histria reversae osculumque ut assuerat offerenti, manum praebuit.

e. Cass. Dio LXV 14, 1-4

τότε δὲ καὶ Καινίς ἢ τοῦ Οὐεσπασιανοῦ παλλακὴ μετήλλαξεν. ἐμνημόνευσα δὲ αὐτῆς ὅτι τε πιστοτάτη ἦν καὶ ὅτι μνήμης ἄριστα ἐπεφύκει. πρὸς γοῦν τὴνδέσποιναν τὴν Ἀντωνίαν τὴν τοῦ Κλαυδίου μητέρα, κρύφα τι δι’ αὐτῆς τῶ Τιβερίῳ [2] περὶ τοῦ Σεΐανοῦ γράψασαν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἀπαλειφθῆναι εὐθύς, ὅπως μηδεὶς αὐτοῦ ἔλεγχος ὑπολειφθῆ, κελεύσασαν, ‘μάτην, ὧ δέσποινα,’ ἔφη ‘τοῦτοπροσέταξας: πάντα γὰρ καὶ ταῦτα, καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα ἂν ὑπαγορεύσης μοι, ἐν τετῇ ψυχῇ ἀεὶ’

stituted a crucial part of the public image of the imperial house’, Alexandridis 2010: 196, ref. 19.

²⁹ Weaver, Wilkins 1999: 241-244.

[3] φέρω καὶ οὐδέποτε ἐξαλειφθῆναι δύναται. τοῦτό τε οὖν αὐτῆς ἐθαύμασα, καὶ προσέτι ὅτι καὶ ὁ Οὐεσπασιανὸς αὐτῇ ὑπερέχαιρε, πλεῖστόν τε διὰ τοῦτο ἴσχυσε, καὶ πλοῦτον ἀμύθητον ἤθηροισεν, ὥστε καὶ νομισθῆναι ὅτι δι' αὐτῆς ἐκείνης ἐχρηματίζετο: πάμπολλα γὰρ παρὰ πολλῶν ἐλάμβανε, τοῖς μὲν ἀρχᾶς τοῖς δὲ ἐπιτροπείας στρατείας ἱερωσύνας, ἤδη δὲ τισὶ καὶ ἀποφάσεις [4] αὐτοῦ πιπράσκουσα. ἀπέκτεινε μὲν γὰρ Οὐεσπασιανὸς χρημάτων ἔνεκα οὐδένα, ἔσωσε δὲ πολλοὺς τῶν διδόντων: καὶ ἢ μὲν λαμβάνουσα ἐκείνη ἦν, ὑπώπτευετο δὲ ὁ Οὐεσπασιανὸς ἐκὼν αὐτῇ ἐπιτρέπειν τοῦτο ποιεῖν ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων ὧν ἔπραττεν, ὧν ὀλίγα δείγματος ἔνεκα διηγῆσομαι.

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