
Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8276

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Oxford Classical Dictionary

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is a post print of a dictionary entry that has been accepted for publication by Oxford University Press in the Oxford Classical Dictionary by Kimberley Czajkowski, published January 2019. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8276

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Senatus Consultum Orfitianum

The Senatus Consultum Orfitianum is a senatorial decree enacted under Marcus Aurelius in 178 CE that gave children priority over other heirs in inheriting from an intestate mother (Ulpian, Reg. 26.7). The jurists Gaius and Paul wrote monographs on the decree, and the lengthy comments of Ulpian in the twelfth book of ad Sabinum are also preserved in the Digest (D.38.17.1).

Under the Twelve Tables, children did not inherit from an intestate mother (Paul, Sent. 4.10). This was due to the fact that, unlike men, women did not have power over free citizens and therefore could not have sui heredes, children who had been in the power of the deceased who became independent upon his death (Gaius, Lex Julia et Papia, Bk 10, D.38.16.13; Gaius, Inst. 3.14). They would also have only been in the third class (unde cognati) of the praetorian order of succession, fairly low down the line. The decree thus represented a significant shift, prioritizing children over others. Prior to the sc Orfitianum, children would only have had this position if the wife had been married cum manu, a form of marriage that brought the wife into her husband’s family, but was effectively obsolete in the imperial period.

The category of children included emancipated offspring and those who had been given away in adoption, meaning the significance of this change should not be underestimated. It also included illegitimate children (Ulpian, Sabinus, Book 12, D.38.17.1.2; Inst. 3.4.3; cf Paul, Sent. 4.10), and would have represented a large improvement in their chances of inheriting any property at all, since illegitimate children otherwise had no paterfamilias from whom they could inherit. The implications were also significant for children of freedwomen, who would have been superseded by the patron before the sc. For certain groups this was therefore a considerable improvement, though Justinian later excluded illegitimate children in cases where legitimate offspring survived, or the mother was of high rank (C.4.57.5).

The decree is typically discussed in conjunction with the earlier sc Tertullianum (Hadrianic era), which had raised a mother in the line of succession to her intestate children. However, while the sc Tertullianum applied only to women with the ius liberorum, the sc Orfitianum did not require women to possess the ius; it also applied to women of freed status (Ulpian, Sabinus, Book 12 D.38.17.1 pr). Furthermore, the sc Orfitianum included several restrictions that the earlier decree lacked: those condemned on a capital charge or professional gladiators (who had not had their status restored) were disqualified, as were sons in the potestas of men in these categories. These disqualifications were later relaxed (Ulpian, Sabinus, Book 12, D.38.17.1.6).

The sc by no means ensured that a woman’s estate would not ultimately end up in her husband’s hands, since children in power were included under the terms of the decree. In this case, the property would then become their father’s. If the aim of both these senatus consulta was to keep property in the close family, it would explain why this was not seen as a problem. This issue was not addressed until much later, when Constantine gave the father only a usufruct on property inherited from the mother’s side.

The sc Tertullianum and sc Orfitianum are typically discussed in the context of the developing shift from agnatic to cognatic ties in succession law. Meinhart 1969 remains the most comprehensive monograph on the senatus consulta; Koehn 2017 has recently re-examined the sc Orfitianum in the

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1 See Honoré 2010, 149 for possible corrections to the inscriptions to the jurists in D.38.17.5-9.
context of the older debate about the influence of philosophy on Marcus Aurelius’ legislative programme. Babusiaux 2015, 78-80 is an up to date discussion of the sources; Gardner 1998, 220-233 remains a good introduction in English to both senatus consulta.

References


Keywords

Roman law; succession; women; children; inheritance; property