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Design & layout:  
*Petru Ureche*
‘I HAD A DREAM...’ - THE DEDICATION OF AN EQUES OF THE ALA I DARDANORUM IN THE SURROUNDINGS OF TROESMIS AND THE PROBLEM OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN NORTHERN MOESIA INFERIOR

Abstract: Within the framework of multidisciplinary investigations, under the ongoing Troesmis-project, the basic topographic features of the Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine settlement of Troesmis (Turcoaia, Tulcea County, RO) were clarified. The decisive result was the localisation of the approximately 16 ha legionary camp and the approximately 30-35 ha civilian settlement around it. It was possible not only to postulate the boundaries of the ancient settlement, but also to register for the first time numerous new sites in the surroundings. The central settlement of Troesmis is embedded in a dense network of roads and rural settlement sites of different types. Additionally, for older accidental finds of stone monuments (inscriptions, sculpture etc.) it was possible to recover, at least at hypothetical level, the initial context of display and to correlate the archaeological data with the epigraphical evidence. This paper presents the case of the votive altar ISM V 218, dedicated, following a dream, to the divine power of Liber Pater by M. Antistius Caecina, eques of ala I Dardanorum Antoniniana. Its provenance also provides the opportunity for short comments on the Roman rural estates and settlements in the Northern Moesia Inferior.

Keywords: Liber Pater, ala I Dardanorum, Antistii, Troesmis, Roman rural settlements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the provenance and initial display of the majority of inscriptions from Northern Moesia Inferior. Therefore, the rare examples of monuments that have not been reused as building material in later periods are of great importance. In the case of Troesmis (Turcoaia, Tulcea County), the fortress of legio V Macedonica and later municipium, the common situation is that the epigraphical evidence was uncovered within the two Late Roman/Byzantine fortifications still dominating the landscape (Fig. 1). Besides the recently elucidated case of the stela of Eutycus, verna of the eques Romanus Terentius lunior, there are also a few other examples in the

\(^1\) ALEXANDRESCU 2021.
surroundings of Troesmis, which seem to have been found in or near their initial place of display\(^2\).

Under the ongoing Troesmis-project carried out by an international team since 2010, non-invasive prospections enabled the localization of the legionary fortress (of about 16 ha) and its adjacent infrastructure (water supply, marching camps etc.), settlements and necropolis areas\(^3\). Both survey and geomagnetic prospections were also carried out in the surroundings of the ancient centre\(^4\). While processing the data and corroborating the results with the documentation on the finds of inscriptions and other stone monuments, it was clear that a certain votive altar\(^5\) was reportedly found\(^6\) nearby a rural settlement nucleus (called “Turcoaia 1") localized during the survey and prospection works on the southwest slope of the Priopcea Hill (Fig. 2). The site lies north of the main Măcin-Cerna road, which was one of the main communication axes in Antiquity as well.

Two other topics, significant yet little approached by previous research, are of interest to the present discussion:

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\(^2\) For a few examples, see ALEXANDRESCU 2019. – The systematic holistic documentation of the Roman stone monuments from the northern part of the province is the object of the present project (PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1031).  
\(^3\) For the detailed reports of the project, see ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH 2016.  
\(^4\) The results are summarised in ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH/GRABHERR (forthcoming) and will be included in the second volume of the Troesmis monographic series.  
\(^5\) ISM V 218; COATU 1930 (on the situation of the monument after its finding). – The monument is now hosted by Complexul Muzeal Național Moldova Iași, Muzeul de Istorie a Moldovei, inv. no 1264.  
\(^6\) “at the foot of the Priopcea Hill, near the road Cerna – Măcin” – NICORESCU 1915; COATU 1930.  
ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH/GRABHERR (forthcoming).
the evidence on the 2nd-3rd century settlements in the Troesmis area and the problem of rural settlements in the northern part of the province. Although it is not possible to completely clarify the matter or even systematically approach it, due to the state of research, this paper provides and highlights the possible correlation between the available archaeological and epigraphical evidence.

2. THE VOTIVE ALTAR ISM V 218

The tall altar (Fig. 3) is carved in a Turonian sandstone block, slightly irregular in shape, and measures 150-159 cm in height, with a width of 47 cm (top) – 36 cm (shaft) – 42 cm (bottom) and a depth of 36-41 cm. It is complete and in good state of conservation. The block is differently carved, according to the use of the parts: the lower part of 40 cm is only roughly worked, as it was supposed to fix the altar into the ground; the rear side is also only roughly carved, most probably with the point chisel and the sculptor’s pick. The fact that the altar, with profiled moulding and plinth, features mouldings only on the front and lateral sides hints at its display in front of a wall. The front top part of the altar is decorated with two schematized acroterai with a small leaf starting from the bottom of each acroterion. In this decoration, as well as in the mouldings and about one centimetre of the shaft, there are visible the fine shaping and smoothing with the flat and tooth chisel and eventually with the scraper (Fig. 6). The sides and the front of the altar bear traces of the tooth chisel, visibly finer on the front, where

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9 Stone provenance was determined by dr. Albert Baltres.

Fig. 2. The hinterland of Troesmis, with the spot of Turcoaia 1 site (after ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH (eds.) 2016, Fig. 178).
Fig. 3. ISM V 218, front side (© the author).

Fig. 4. ISM V 218, right side (© the author).
the inscription had to be carved (Fig. 4 and 5).

The dedication (Fig. 5) is carved just below the moulding, being displayed on eleven lines covering the entire width of the shaft, without any frame or delimitation of the inscription, and reads as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{NVMINI} \\
\text{LIBERIS} \\
\text{PATRIS} \\
\text{M·ANTIS} \\
\text{TIVS·CAE} \\
\text{CINA-EQ} \\
\text{ALAE·I·DA} \\
\text{RDANO·ANTO} \\
\text{NINIANAE} \\
\text{EX VISO·} \\
\text{POSVIT}
\end{align*}
\]

Numini/Liberis/Patr/Is(M/rus) Antisiu/s Cae/cina eq(ues)/alae I Da/rdan(orum) Anto/ninianae/ex viso /posuit.

The letter height varies - lines 1-10: 5-5.20 cm; line 11: 3.8-4 cm. There is a ligature in line 8, NT, while the following letter O is smaller, 2.5 cm. A triangular interpunct is used in the lines 4, 5-8 and 10. The letters carved with serifs are of good quality, but only the last line is almost centred.

The dating of the monument after 212 and up to 217 A.D. is based on the mentioned surname of the \( \text{ala I Dardanorum} \), \( \text{Antoniniana} \). The unit was part of the army of Moesia Inferior since the end of the first century A.D., as attested by the military diplomas as \( \text{ala I Vespasiana Dardanorum} \). One of the latest testimonies of the unit in the third century (2.08.241 A.D.) is a dedication to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Deus Sabazios put in Rome by 14 equites singulares Augusti recruited from the \( \text{ala prima Dardanorum provinciae Moesiae inferioris} \). The garrison of this \( \text{ala} \) is considered to have been in Arrubium (Măcin, Tulcea County), about 13 km to the north from Troesmis. As the \( \text{legio V Macedonica} \) left Troesmis around 168 A.D., partially for the campaigns in the East and finally dislocated to Dacia, the \( \text{ala I Dardanorum} \) was one of the military units on this sector of the limes, supporting the detachments of \( \text{legio I Italica} \). The mobility of the persons and detachments along the limes sector and within the province was quite high, being also supported by the functional road network.

### 3. M. ANTISTIUS CAECINA AND THE ANTISTIA FAMILY IN THE TROESMIS AREA

The Antistia family, originating in Ancyra, in Asia Minor, was of great interest to the epigraphic studies, as its members are attested in Moesia Inferior over a hundred years. P. Nicorescu pointed out the importance of the altar ISM V 218 when attesting the Antistii in the Troesmis area. Among the five members of this family attested there, two were active in the army (recruited most likely on the occasion of the Parthian wars of Trajan) and settled in the surroundings of the ancient centre, as veterans. Four inscriptions - the monumental base with the discharge list for the year 134 A.D. (ISM V 136), two epitaphs (ISM V 174 and 175) and one small honorary inscription (ISM V 148) - were reused as building material in the late fortifications

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10 MATEI-POPEȘCU 2010, 169-172 (with literature).
11 CIL VI 31364.
12 ISM V 251 (building inscription carved in a marble slab). – See also MATEI-POPEȘCU 2010, 170 (with literature).
13 The unit is attested at Histria during the barbarian attacks around 170 A.D. - MATEI-POPEȘCU 2010, 171.
15 NICORESCU 1915, 41.
from Troesmis. As the epitaphs also mention other members of the family of the veterans (wives and especially C. Antistius Zoticus, mentioned as heres of his father, but also on his own epitaph, ISM V 175), it is obvious that the entire family settled in the more or less immediate surroundings of Troesmis. Significant is that the two Antistii setting up the honorary inscription ISM V 148 for M. Ulpius Marcianus, former singularis and veteran of the ala I Dardanorum, and duumvir quinquennalis of the municipium Troesmis, also fulfill administrative duties in the same urban centre: M. Antistius Rufus as pontifex and M. Antistius Domitius, as aedil and quaestor. The detailed investigation of the prosopography and family relations between the epigraphically attested Antistii were published on several occasions by I. Mihailescu-Bîrliba and his co-authors. The epitaph of Antistia Firmina, most probably from the same family, was found in the southern part of the province, in Odessos (Varna). Her husband, Malius Secundus, was a beneficiarius consularis.

4. LIBER PATER AND THE ARMY

M. Antistius Caecina dedicated the impressive altar to Liber Pater following a dream (ex viso). It has been observed that among the dedications made to Liber Pater, several are the result of a direct demand of the god expressed in a dream. Therefore, they were considered a quite private matter and used as argument for the private character of the cult, respectively for the customized and inner communication with the divinities. In the present discussion, in the absence of any further information on the special attribution of M. Antistius Caecina, the altar ISM V 218 can be considered a personal dedication, made with no (declared) connection to an official function or the profession of the dedicatee. P. Nicorescu expressed the two possibilities, namely that the altar was put near or within a country estate of the Antistii near Troesmis or that the dream/vision happened in the area. Both situations might have happened and the need for the benevolence of Liber Pater in such a region is self-evident. According to the investigation of N. Zugravu, the expression ex viso would indicate a dream during the sleep and not an apparition with premonitory value, respectively an express order of the god.

Liber Pater and his companion Libera were originally a pair of Italic gods responsible for human, animal, and plant fertility, and also for the harvest and wine trade. In the time of the Roman Republic Liber Pater was seen as corresponding to the Greek god of wine Dionysus/Bacchus, with whom he is considered to have later merged completely. Libera, in turn, was equated with Kore/Persephone, and rarely with Ceres. Liber Pater, in turn, was considered to have later merged completely. Libera, in turn, was equated with Kore/Persephone, and rarely with Ceres. The possible syncretism with local, Thracian or Illyrian deities, needs to be taken into consideration, for example with Sabazios or Silvanus.

The great popularity of Liber Pater in Dacia has been highlighted by special dedicated studies. It is interesting the dedication from Apulum (Alba Iulia, Alba County) of an optio praetorii of legio V Macedonica to Liber and Libera, also ascribed to a dream (visus monitus). However the possible connection with these deities as result of the former garison of the legion cannot be put forward, given the popularity of Liber Pater in Dacia, especially in the military environment.

In this discussion, it is possible to highlight only some facts. The altar reused in the Western fortification from Troesmis (ISM V 162) bears a dedication to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Liber Pater, but no detail on the dedicatee. Further on its right side, it shows a grape, which can be understood as a Bacchic element, but can be also just the symbol of one of the traditional attributes of italic Liber Pater, as a protector of vine, viticulture and wine trade.

South of Troesmis, in the area of the camp from Berec (Fâgărașu Nou, Tulcea county), there was reported the accidental find of two marble votive plates, bearing a complex yet common depiction of Bacchus/Dionysus. One of them has in the lower register a winemaking and wine transport scene and bears a dedication (ISM V 133), without mentioning however the name of the addressed divinity. As there is no information on the finding context or on the possible reuse of the votive plates within the fortification, the

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24 BRUHL 1953, 215-223; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2009; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017; MATEJIEVIĆ 2021. For Dacia see POPESCU 2004 (with literature). For Moesia Inferior, see ALEXANDROV 2010 (with literature); SARNOWSKI 2013; TOMAS 2015.
25 ISM IV 30 (Tropaeum Traiani). - Several examples from Novae: see TOMAS 2015.
26 See ALEXANDROV 2010.
27 ISM IV 21 (Tropaeum Traiani).
28 For the finds from Novae and surroundings see TOMAS 2015.
29 See, for instance, the dedication of the equites from the same alae in Rome – note 11 above.
30 IDR III 5/1, 243.
32 DRAGOMIR 1962.
33 Only one fragmentarily preserved votive plate from Montana, bearing the depiction of a what seems to have been a Maenad and a Satyr, accompanying Dionysus, mentions Liber Pater as the divinity to whom it is addressed: VELKOV/ALEKSANDROV 1994, cat. no 70.
The evidence on the cult of Dionysus in the region, due to the Greek cities on the Black Sea shores and their traditions is behind any doubt34. In the territory of Histria, in Nistorești (Pantelimon commune, Constanța County) there was found the funerary altar of Lucius Pompeius Valens, from Anawy, which had a sacerdotium at Liberum, among other dignities in Histria, and also an estate35. He ordered the altar and his sepulcrum while still being alive (at the age of 76), for him, his wife and his son, and the order was fulfilled by Marcus, the administrator of his estate, in 157 A.D. In the interior of the province and in the centres along the Danube, the inscriptions, as already said, are not numerous36. For the relics, some fragmentarily preserved, some simply without (carved) inscriptions, the exact attribution to a divinity or, to be more precise, the name by which Dionysus/Liber Pater was addressed is unknown. Novae is a case considered very special due to the state of the existing evidence. There the epigraphic evidence on the cult of Liber Pater/Dionysus reaches the Late Antiquity and the military component of the cult, especially during the Principate, is evident37. However there are dedications to Liber and Libera or to Liber Pater alone. Furthermore, particularly in the Late Roman period, it is clear that the dedications are directly related to the successful supplies to the troops and the responsible primipili and others involved in the lustrum primi pilii. Thus, the so-called area of responsibility of Liber Pater was the harvest and the essential provisions for the army. As the depiction (statue or statuette) of Dionysius in the principia of the fortress in Novae seems to follow the common Dionysus iconography38, it is probable that the assimilation of the two deities was not complete, and there were particular situations and responsibilities for which the addressee had to be specifically Liber Pater39.

Turning back to Troesmis and the altar ISM V 218 it can be considered the same need for divine help in troubled times regarding the harvest and the vital supplies. Given the rather scarce evidence of the cult in the region a further explanation for the popularity of the cult in the provinces starting with the reign of Septimius Severus40 seems to be not significant in this case.

5. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The archaeological research focused for decades, in the northern part of the province, on fortifications and neglected their surroundings and what was supposed to be their administrative territory. This increased, in terms of interpretation and analysis on settlements development, the discrepancy between the finds of stone monuments (with or without inscriptions), made mostly accidentally, and the archaeologically investigated settlement structures. 34 PIPPIDI 1959; AVRAM 2018 (with literature).
35 ISM I 373.
36 See notes 25 and 27 above.
37 SARNOWSKI 2013; TOMAS 2015 (with literature).
38 SARNOWSKI 2013.
39 SARNOWSKI 2013.
40 KRAWCZYK 2021; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017; MATIJEVIĆ 2021.

The later have been mainly the object of rescue excavations42. Provenance and in some case even the identity of the owner (based on the scarce epigraphic evidence) of what was interpreted as rural estates (villae, praeda) of the 2nd-3rd century A.D. were postulated. Nevertheless the limited character of the possible investigations provided only general dating criteria (2nd to 4th century A.D.) of what still needs to be carefully called, in my opinion, rural settlement nuclei. Even in this state of the research (Fig. 1) is clear that the northern part of Moesia Inferior differs from the region around the Greek cities on the Black Sea shore and in the southern part43. The difference resides in what concerns the pre-Roman settlements and the reduced number of population, as well as in the development after the setting-up of the Roman administration, especially after the Dacian wars. This was again seriously affected by the attacks of the late second and especially during the third century, until it eventually radically changed in the fourth century. V.H. Baumann could identify the specialized ceramics production and ore mining activity of several rural settlements he investigated in the surroundings of Noviodunum44. But the character, structure and specific activity is still not clear for most of the registered rural settlement nuclei. For the time being, the situation in the Troesmiss area is limited to the localization of those nuclei and to observations on their topography (sites along the main roads; sites on topographically prominent points such as a ridge; remote, protected sites in the rear valley areas)45. More in-depth analyses, as well as any attempt to clarify the dating and differentiate between villages, estates etc. need a larger archaeological information basis.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The existence of rural estates in the surroundings of military and urban centres such as Aegyssus, Tomis, Histria and Capidava is attested by their explicit mention in the inscriptions46. Some were found in reuse as building materials, very few, even if without documentation on their finding context, came to light in or near their initial place of display, without being reused. The epigraphic sources provide again the basic documentation on the existence of different kinds of rural settlements and on the ancient terminology47, the interpretation of which still escapes our knowledge in the attempt of corroborating the scarce available archaeological evidence of rural settlement nuclei, (based on the scarce epigraphic evidence) of what was interpreted as rural estates (villae, praeda) of the 2nd-3rd century A.D. were postulated. Nevertheless the limited character of the possible investigations provided only general dating criteria (2nd to 4th century A.D.) of what still needs to be carefully called, in my opinion, rural settlement nuclei. Even in this state of the research (Fig. 1) is clear that the northern part of Moesia Inferior differs from the region around the Greek cities on the Black Sea shore and in the southern part. The difference resides in what concerns the pre-Roman settlements and the reduced number of population, as well as in the development after the setting-up of the Roman administration, especially after the Dacian wars. This was again seriously affected by the attacks of the late second and especially during the third century, until it eventually radically changed in the fourth century. V.H. Baumann could identify the specialized ceramics production and ore mining activity of several rural settlements he investigated in the surroundings of Noviodunum. But the character, structure and specific activity is still not clear for most of the registered rural settlement nuclei. For the time being, the situation in the Troesmiss area is limited to the localization of those nuclei and to observations on their topography (sites along the main roads; sites on topographically prominent points such as a ridge; remote, protected sites in the rear valley areas). More in-depth analyses, as well as any attempt to clarify the dating and differentiate between villages, estates etc. need a larger archaeological information basis.

41 See especially BAUMANN 1977; BAUMANN 1983; BAUMANN 1995.
42 The best example is the settlement in Horia (Tulcea County), also in the surroundings of Troesmis, in which case the Italic character of the excavated structure was highlighted (BAUMANN 2013) as well as the hypothesis that Annaeus Palcher, centurio legions V Macedonica and frumentarius, the dedicate of a marble votive relief found in the area (ISM V 239), was the owner of the ‘villa’ (BAUMANN 1977, 158). However the fragmentary relief was found in reuse in a grave dated to the 3rd-4th century and its provenance from the earlier structures in the area is possible but not obligatory. Furthermore the settlement in Horia seem to have been a statio, as the location is an important crossroad of the N-S and E-W axes.
43 See especially BAUMANN 1977; BĂRBULESCU 2001; BĂLTĂC 2011. – On the discussion about the vici and civitates see also IBBA 2016; MIHAILESCU BĂRLIŢĂ 2018 (with literature), especially 8-14.
44 BAUMANN 1977; BĂRBULESCU 2001; BĂLTĂC 2011. – On the discussion about the vici and civitates see also IBBA 2016; MIHAILESCU BĂRLIŢĂ 2018 (with literature), especially 8-14.
45 See the overview in BĂLTĂC 2013 (with literature).
47 See the overview in BĂLTĂC 2013 (with literature).
particularly in the northern part of the province, with the different names of such rural settlements.

It goes without saying that including the systematic multidisciplinary investigation of the surroundings of the main ancient sites in the focus of the future archaeological research will certainly enable the re-evaluation of the available epigraphical and historical data, as well as the understanding of the dynamics of settlement development, economics and trade at provincial and interprovincial level.

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