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A Votive Altar dedicated to Venus, from Colonia Flavia Scupi

UDK: 904:292.113.5(497.711),,652”

During his travels through the Balkans in 1883, the great archaeologist Arthur Evans founded the study of archaeology in these regions, thus beginning a process by which the existence of Colonia Flavia Scupi was slowly to come to light.

In the 1970s, Professor Ivan Mikulčić began the first measurements of the city and made the first estimates of the whole territory of the Roman colony of Scupi, providing the first tangible evidence of the existence of Scupi. His archaeological excavations at this time were those of a lonely Renaissance spirit exerting a gigantic effort and involving himself in all phases of the excavations. There soon followed the discovery of the 4th century city bath-house, the Christian basilica, the Civilian Basilica and the theatre of Scupi.

The artefacts found in Scupi, uncovered after lying for so long beneath the sunny hill on the north bank of the Axios have become the life work of Professor Mikulčić. His books include *The Territory of Scupi*, *Scupi - the Eastern Necropolis and the city fortification*, *Scupi - Eastern Necropolis*, *About the problem of the pre-Roman population in the Skopje valley*, *The Monument of a praefectus castrorum from Scupi*, *Early Roman skeleton tombs from Scupi*, *Late Roman tombs from Scupi*, *Roman lucernae from Scupi*, *Ancient glass from Scupi and other Macedonian findings*, *Non-Illyrian elements amongst Scupi findings from pre-Roman to Roman times* and *Skopje with surrounding fortresses*.

More intensive excavations began in several locations in 2008: in the Eastern Necropolis, the Eastern Fortification and the central part of the city. One day in May during these excavations, the visionary spirit of Professor Mikulčić sparkled once again as he walked through the newly exposed contours of the 2nd century Roman bathhouse. On this unofficial visit he predicted the discovery of the statue of Venus several weeks before she was found. This Roman statue in its beauty and significance was to be the the most famous archaeological discovery of that year.



Fig. 1: The votive altar in the Tepidarium from the big thermal object.

Photo: M. Ončevska Todorovska.

The site of discovery

As mentioned above, a large Roman bath was discovered in the urban centre of Scupi, situated on the east side of the main street *Cardo Maximus*. It was built in the 2nd century AD and lasted into Late Antiquity.¹ The rooms of the bath were linked according to the customary layout of apodyterium, frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium.

The votive altar was found during excavations in the tepidarium (*fig.1*).² It was discovered very close to the main street, dislodged from its original place.³

Although not fully explored, the large thermal building yielded several finds of importance in the same year (2008). The large statue of Venus Pudica with a dolphin by her feet was in an apsidal of the tepidarium.⁴ This white marble statue was probably made in the 2nd century AD and was sculpted by a high quality workshop. In the atrium

1 Ončevska 2009, 75-83.

2 The monument was presented by M.Ončevska Todorovska at the 21st symposium of MAND in 2010 in her article *The large thermal building in Scupi*. I would like to thank her for information concerning the archeological research and the place of discovery.

3 The altar is now kept in the Museum of the City of Skopje (inv. no. 362).

4 Ončevska 2009, *figs.* 8, 9, 10.

in situ was found a monument⁵ probably from the second half of the 2nd century AD, with the following Latin inscription (*Avg(ustae, o?) sacr(um) / Q(uitus) Axenna / Q(uiti) f(ilius) Fab(ia) Rufus / dec(urio) col(oniae) / ob honor(em) / aedilitatis / l(ocus) d(atus) d(ecreto) d(ecorionum)*). It is not clear whether the monument with the votive inscription served as the base for a small sculpture. Perhaps it was another dedication to the goddess Venus erected by *decurio coloniae* Quintus Axenna Rufus.

In the apodyterium a Roman military diploma was found, dated to the 2nd century AD under the reign of Antoninus Pius.⁶

The discoveries from this site are evidence of the intensive development of the city in the early Roman period, especially in the 2nd century AD, and confirm the the cult of the goddess Venus in the Roman city.

The votive altar

The altar (*fig. 2*) is made of marlstone. It is entirely preserved (100 x 48 x 63 cm) with a moulded capital and base, though the capital is broken off in the upper right section. The inscription (*fig. 3*) is not framed. The inscription reads as follows:

Deae Vene[r](i)
 avg(ustae) sacr(um)
 M(arcus) Ant(onius) Lupus II
 vir item II vir q(uin)q(uenalis)
 5 col(oniae) Scup(inorum) et Ae-
 lia Genthiane
 eius.

(Sacred to the goddess Venus Augusta. M. Antonius Lupus joint mayor also joint mayor in charge of the census in the Colony of Scupi and his Aelia Genthiane.)

The letters are carved deeply and elegantly. There are triangular punctuation marks between the words except in the first line. The height of the letters in the first line is 4.5 cm, and in the others are 4 cm. In line 4, I is elongated, in line 6 (in Genthiane) the letter I is 1cm and E is carved 2.5 cm. In line 4 the letters IR and QQ are in ligature.

The altar was erected to the goddess Venus. The origin of the name is Italic. This old Italic goddess was protector of the fields, gardens and those who cultivated them. She was analogous to Feronia, the old Italic goddess of luxurious nature, goddess of spring and beauties of the land, worshipped especially in Campania, Etruria and Rome, and to the old Italic goddess Flora, the symbol of universal fertility who was adored in Rome.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *figs. 6, 7.*

⁶ This diploma was presented by M. Basotova at the 21st symposium of MAND in 2010 in the article: *A Roman military diploma from Scupi.*

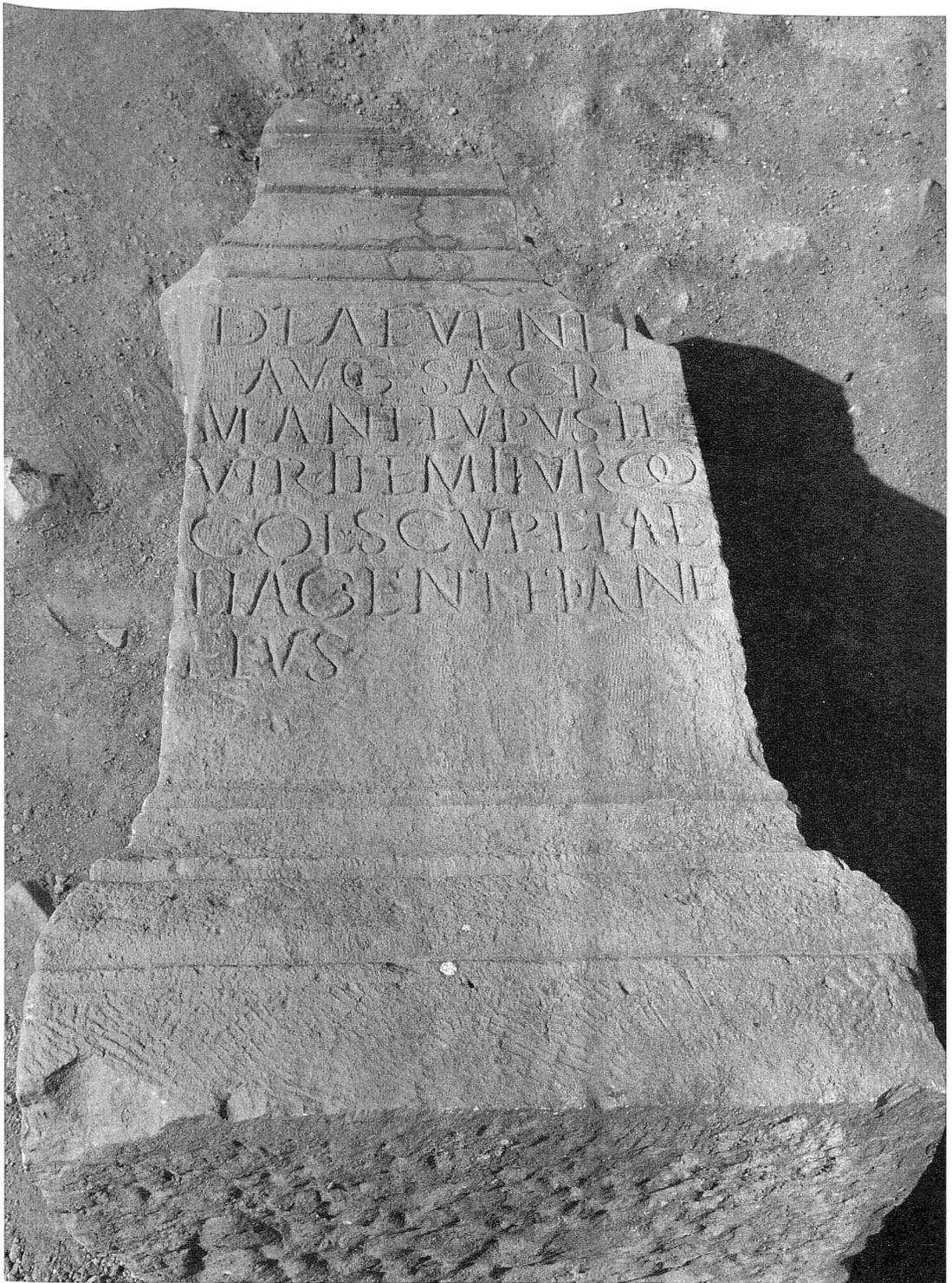


Fig. 2: The front side of a votive altar. Photo: M.
Ončevska Todorovska..

Two sanctuaries were dedicated to Venus in Latium, one near Ardea and the other in Lavinium. *Decemviri sacris faciundis* gathered in Ardea to sacrifice to the goddess and the first Roman cult of Venus probably appeared in Ardea. The oldest temples of Venus were in the holly grove of the goddess Libitina near Circus Maximus. The festival of these two temples was on the 19th of August, the day of Vinalia Rustica, or

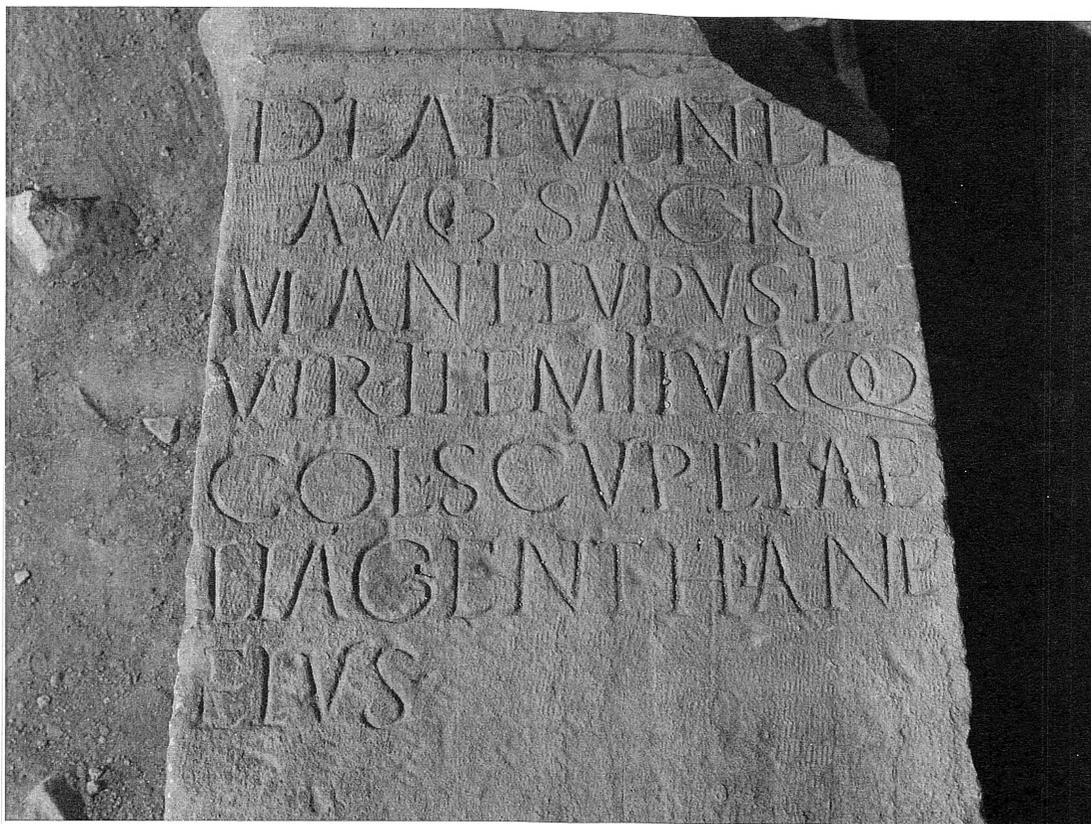


Fig. 3: A votive inscription. Photo: M. Ončevska Todorovska

the day of gardeners, which shows the original agricultural nature of the Italic Venus. In the 3rd century BC, during the Punic wars, the Romans encountered the Greek goddess Aphrodite, worshipped in all Mediterranean countries, especially in Eryx in Sicily. The Romans assimilated her with Venus. Thenceforth, Venus became a goddess of beauty and love. In Rome, two temples were built in her honour, one in 215 BC on the Capitol and one in 181 BC in front of the doors of the Quirinal. In 114 BC another temple was built in her honour as Venus Verticordia. On the annual celebration of Veneralia held on April 1 in the temple (whose location is unknown), the statue of the goddess was undressed and bathed by matrons. The cult of Venus spread in different forms over time, especially under the initiative of individual rulers. Sulla worshiped Venus Felix as protector of bona fides and luck. The face of Venus Felix was presented in Venus Pompeiana, the protector of Pompei. From the end of the Republican Period and during the Imperial Period Venus Genetrix was worshipped as the ancestress of the Julia clan, protector of the Roman state and people.⁷

The cult of Venus is well documented on epigraphical monuments throughout the Roman Empire, in the western as well as the eastern provinces, particularly in Rome, in Latium et Campania (regio I), especially in Pompei; in the province of Dalmatia, where her cult was very popular in Salona.⁸

The cult of Venus in Scupi has been documented for the first time. She was certainly related to water, since she was found in the Roman baths. The altar was erected by M.

⁷ For Venus and cult of Venus: Daremberg-Saglio 721-736; Srejšević-Cermanović 1992, 86-87.

⁸ See the index in *CIL*, I, III, IV, VI.

Antonius Lupus and his wife Aelia Genthiane, who may have placed themselves under her protection as it seems that she was a goddess of polyvalent nature.

The importance of her cult in the town of Scupi is reflected in the fact that she was worshipped by M. Antonius Lupus, who had reached the highest position in the colony as *duumvir quinquennalis*. *Duumviri quinquennales* had higher rank than the ordinary *duumviri* and they were elected every 5th year when the Census was held in the Empire.

⁹ The large marble statue of Venus Pudica from the centre of Scupi further confirms her special role in the religious life of the town.

The dedicators of the altar

The names of the dedicators are M(arcus) Antonius Lupus and his wife Aelia Genthiane. In Scupi, four inscriptions with the name Antonii have been discovered to date. ¹⁰ One M(arcus) Antonius is a veteran of the legion VII Claudia. ¹¹ The origin of the *duumvir quinquennalis* may have been from Italy; this name is well documented in the western as well as in the eastern provinces.

On a funerary inscription from Scupi¹² the origin of *duumvir quinquennalis* T. Turranius Proculus is stated as Flanona. *Lupus* (wolf) is a relatively frequent cognomen¹³ and is attested to everywhere in the Roman Empire.¹⁴ In this case it is an Italian name.

Two persons M(arcus) Antonius Lupus: the name of the father and the name of the son, are attested to in Italy in *Misenum* in Latium et Campania (Regio I).¹⁵

Genthiane is a rather rare name of Illyrian origin. It appears for the first time at Scupi. It is documented once on a funerary inscription from the village of Lešok in the Polog region and dated to the second half of the 2nd century AD.¹⁶ Several Aelii are attested to in the town. ¹⁷

On the basis of the name Aelia, the votive altar may be dated to the 2nd century AD, most probably under the reign of Hadrian. As the archaeological site of the Roman bath has still not been completely excavated, we have hope other inscriptions related to the Goddess Venus may soon emerge to continue the story of her cult in Colonia Flavia Scupi.

⁹ Cagnat 1914, 145.

¹⁰ *IMS* VI, nos. 33, 81, 87.

¹¹ Basotova 2007, 405-409.

¹² Mikulčić 1971, 663-667; *IMS* VI, n. 31,

¹³ Kajanto 1965, 85, 100, 327.

¹⁴ Mócsy, *Nomenclator* 1983, 170.

¹⁵ *CIL* 10, 3429.

¹⁶ Mikulčić 1971, 468, 486; Bousquet 1974, 255-277.

¹⁷ *IMS* VI, nos. 38, 80, 81, 117, 148, 155.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CIL: *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*

IMS: *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure*.

ŽA: *Živa Antika (Antiquité vivante)*

Резиме:**Вотивен олтар посветен на Венера од Колонија Флавија Скупи**

Текстот објавува вотивен олтар пронајден за време на археолошките ископувања во 2008 година во римскиот термален објект (сл. 1) кој се наоѓа во централниот дел на градот Скупи. Споменикот е сочуван скоро во целост, недостасува мал фрагмент од горниот десен агол (сл. 2). На латинскиот натпис (сл. 3) ја читаме посветата до божицата Венера од Марк Антониј Лупус дуумвир квинквенал на колонијата Скупи и неговата сопруга Аелија Гентијане. Споменикот го датираме во 2 век од н.е, за време на владеењето на Хадријан.

Во текстот се спомнуваат и статуата на божицата Венера, римската војничка диплома како и споменикот подигнат од декурионот на колонијата Квинт Аксена Руфус пронајдени во термалниот објект.

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