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Notes for Several Cultic Forms from the Roman Period in the Region of Kumanovo

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Abstract: *The spreading of the Roman cults in the region of Kumanovo was intensified with the settling of the Roman army after its active service has been finished. The majority of these settlers was composed of solders and liberated slaves coming from the eastern parts of the Empire, bringing along the cultic forms among which the Mithraism had the largest religious expansion, although the worship of the deities from the Thracian and Graeco – Roman pantheons has also been documented.*

However, despite the fact that the Romanization contributed to the permeation and spreading of the Oriental mystical cults, the Romans were not their supreme carriers, but these were brought by the liberated slaves serving at the customs and administrative offices in the provinces.

In the course of seven centuries, between Alexander III of Macedonia and Constantine the Great, the Mediterranean civilization created a fruitful soil for the development of new religions.

Key words: *Cults; Zbelsurd; Mithraism; Sacrificial Altar; Stone Icon.*

The conquering of Alexander, firm by his Macedonian and Roman successors, created a unique Mediterranean culture in a short period of time, composed of different nations, city – states and tribal alliances. The old forms of religious expression lost their power, while Christianity, being a monotheistic religion, is one of the answers to this question.

The region of Kumanovo was not an exception from this process. During the Roman period the increase of the demographic density and the forming of the ethnic heterogeneity lead also to religious diversity and the appearance of cults and religions brought from different regions. In general this is mainly a result of the geographic location of the region, where the main Central Balkan roads intersect and where two large ethnical and cultural wholes mix together.

With the Eastern Roman conquerings the Oriental cults, brought by the army and the Oriental slaves, begun spreading as early as the first waves of Romanization in the regions of Republic of Macedonia. Mithraism received the largest religious expansion,

but there are also visible traces of worshipping of the deities belonging to the Thracian and Graeco – Roman pantheons. However, despite the fact that the Romanization contributed to the permeation and spreading of the Oriental mystical cults, the Romans were not the main carriers, but these were introduced by the slaves and the liberated subjects of the customs and administrative offices in the provinces. The single exception was the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, accepted by the Roman army.

On this occasion we shall present a brief review over the several cultic forms discovered in the region of Kumanovo, dating before the proclamation of Christianity as an official religion in 313 with the Edict of Milan of Emperor Constantine.

1. Sacrificial altar from the village of Pchinja:

This find originates from the archaeological site of “Gradishte”, located 1.5 km from the village, on the left bank of the river Pchinja. It is a votive ara with dimensions of 83 x 37 x 32 cm. The Latin inscription in capital reads as follows:

I (ovi) O (ptimo) M (aximo) / Ivnoni reg
(inae) / Minervae /
P. Ael (ivs) Balli / sta eque (s)
Rom(anus) / a milit (iis)
Pro se su / isq(bue v (otum) s (olvit).

The inscription has a typically military character and is dedicated to the Capitoline Triad (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva). The monument is very significant because it originates from the bordering regions between the provinces of Moesia Superior and Macedonia i.e. from one of the most important fortified points in this part of the Kumanovo area.¹ It protected the route Scupi – Serdica with one military unit, most probably cohort, which is mentioned on one burial stela.²



Fig. 1 - Sacrificial altar from the village of Pchinja

¹ B.Dragojević-Josifovska, Žrtvenik iz sela Pčinje pozvećen Kapitolinskom trojstvu, Arheološki vestnik 31, 1980, 179-181;

² The stela is located in the porch of the Church of Virgin Mary in the village of Studena Bara, bearing an inscription which mentions the Cohors I Thracum, dedicated to a centurion of this cohort.

2. Lead icon from the village of Klechovce:

The icon was discovered during the archaeological excavations of 2001 on the site of “Crkvishte” in the vicinity of the village of Klechovce. It represents an icon made of lead tin with dimensions of 7.5 x 4.5 cm. It depicts mystical scenes belonging to the cult of the Danubian Horsemen.³



Fig. 2 - Lead icon from the site of “Crkvishte”, village of Klechovce

The iconography of these plates contains scenes of the Mithraism, busts of Sol and Luna, or Sol with quadriga, horsemen, lion, bird and the standard female figure in the middle, most probably a goddess whose name and function remain unknown at present. These plates originate from the workshops in Lower Pannonia and appear in this region as a result of the communication frequency of the region. Here we are dealing with one syncretised cult which can be dated from the 2nd – first half of the 4th centuries AD.⁴

³ The plaque has been preserved in only one half with a mechanical damaging from the tillage of the soil.

⁴ И.Поповић, Један Доњопанонски центар за израду оловних икона Подунавских коњаника, Старијар XIX, Београд 1969, 113 – 125;

3. Burial stela from the site of “Odzirom”, village of Dobroshane:

This stela has the following dimensions, height of 132 cm, width of 73 cm and thickness of 25 cm. In the middle, on the fronton, a figure of a horseman is visible, poorly preserved due to the crumbly stone structure. It is a representation of the Thracian Hero, being a typical motif, especially in the eastern parts of the Empire (provinces of Thrace, Macedonia, Moesia Superior and Inferior and Lower Dacia) whose largest expansion occurs during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The inscription field is framed with a double profiled frame in which an engraved illegible inscription can be identified.

The iconography of the Thracian Hero originates from the 6th century BC, but during the Hellenistic period it became more prominent and often equated to Apollo, Dionysus, Silvan or Darzaletes and epithets such as lord, savior or healer are ascribed to him. His attributes are the following: dog attacking a boar and a tree with a coiled snake around it. The figure itself is represented in a peaceful posture, riding a horse, with a cloak – chlamus.⁵ This epigraphic monument has a funeral use, while its location, near a river, adds the feature of fertility through the water as a fountain of life.⁶



Fig. 3 – Burial stela from the site of “Odzirom”, village of Dobroshane

⁵ Н.Вулић, Антички споменици наше земље, Београд 1941-1948; Истиот: Трачки коњаник, Глас СКА, CXVI (64), Београд 1925, 87-89; Истиот: Трачки коњаник и друге култне слике из античког доба, Споменик XCVIII, Београд 1941;

⁶ А.Цермановић-Кузмановић, Култни споменици Трачког Хероса у Балканским земљама, ЗФФ, књ. VI/2, Београд, 71-79;

4. Sacrificial altar from the village of Dovezence:

The sacrificial altar has been discovered in the ruins of the Church of St. George e.g. “Stara Crkva” (“Old Church”), in 1988.⁷ It is a sacrificial altar made of gray andesite with dimensions of 70 x 54 x 48 cm.

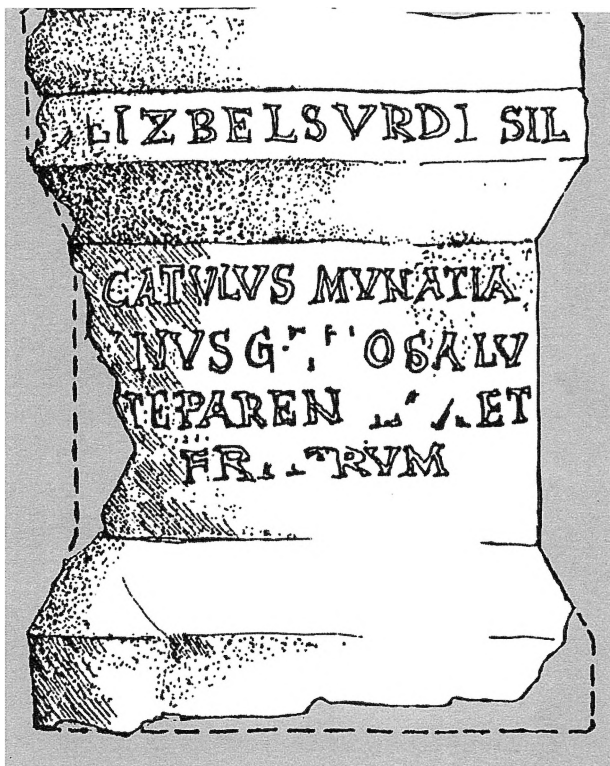


Fig. 4 – Sacrificial altar from the site of “Stara Crkva” (“Old Church”), village of Dovezence

On the front side the engraved text is only preserved in parts. The edicula contains the name of the supreme Thracian deity Zbelsurd or Zbeltiurdes, while the inscriptive field has an engraved votive text dedicated to Catulus Munatianus. The inscription reads:

(De) I Zbelsurdi SIL (.....) / Catulus Munatia / nus
G (pr)o salu / te paren(tium) et / fr(at)rum.

Today this sacrificial altar is inside the renewed church.

⁷ A.Станојевић, Две недеље у Старој Србији, Београд 1898, 130; B.Dragojević-Josifovska, Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure, Vol.VI Scupi e la Region de Kumanovo, Belgrade 1982, 167(214);



Fig. 5 – Stone icon from the village of Tromegja

5. Stone icon from the village of Tromegja:

The icon was discovered as an accidental find in the vicinity of the village. It is made of fine-grained white marble with the following dimensions: height of 33 cm, width of 20 cm and thickness of 6 cm. Iconographically it represents a conventional scene from the myth of Athena and Marsyas, in a peaceful, almost static composition in which the local artist skillfully placed two frontal plans where Athena is in the front, while Marsyas is in the back plan.⁸ The goddess is depicted in a standing posture with highly girded peplos and egida beneath the breasts, a helmet, rounded shield in the left hand and beneath it a sacrificial altar with an owl over the right arm. Instead of a spear, an olive branch is represented, thus giving Athena the attribute of a mistress of the sacral olive whose origin is from the Middle East. Athena's figure is overdimensioned, especially in the parts of the head. The location of this find, close to the

⁸ К.Кепески, Две мермерни култни слики од збирката на Прилепскиот музеј, *Maced Acta Archaeol.* 5, Прилеп 1979, 55;

area known as Kisela Voda (a mineral spring) near the village of Proevce, opens the possibility to treat this icon as an inventory of some sanctuary with healing (iatrial) and soteriological character, or to a thermal bath. We came to this conclusion having in mind the possibility to locate the station Aqve noted in *Tabula Peutingeriana*.

The figure behind Athena's left shoulder is the Sylen Marsyas depicted with the usual horns on his head, while in the mildly bent arms he holds a pipe recognizable by its contours. This scene could be a copy of the Classical scene of Athena and Marsyas made by the Greek sculptor from the Classical period, Myron, whereas it also appears on the Late Antiques sarcophagi from Athens.⁹

The sacral significance of this cultic form leads us to two considerations. The first is the appearance of Marsyas on the coins from Stobi dating from the reign of the Emperor Caracalla and related to some local estate, *villa rustica* or *praetorium fundi*. The second connects it to the healing (iatic) properties of Marsyas who healed through dance and music.

Chronologically, according to the style, this icon can be dated in the middle of the 3rd century AD.



Fig. 6 – Ring from the site of “Drezga” near the village of Lopate

6. Ring from the necropolis at the site Drezga near the village of Lopate:

The cultic form of the plaque of the ring contains a representation of a dove as a substitute or an attribute of Aphrodite, protector of marriage and the house fireplace and it is most probably an engagement ring. On the left side there is a representation of a branch of tamarisk, while on the right side – the solar and lunar symbols. This cultic

⁹ J.Burchardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, III, Basel/Stuttgart 1978, 57.

emanation is a reduced representation of the sanctuary of Aphrodite from Paphos at Cyprus, which is pointed by the tamarisk which actually represents a transfiguration of Myrrha or Smyrna, the daughter of the Cypriote King Cinyras who was a protégée of Aphrodite. This cultic form is also contained in the Roman Imperial coins from Cyprus.

Along with the remaining grave finds, the ring can be dated in the middle of the 3rd century AD. It was made of silver and represents an import belonging to an owner with a higher social status.¹⁰

7. Mithras's sanctuary in the settlement of Derven near the village of Biljanovce:

The remainings of a sanctuary dedicated to the Oriental deity Mithras have been discovered on the right side of the local road Debreshte – Biljanovce on the north side of the hill Krasta, in 1931.¹¹

The Mithraistic sanctuaries were always built near springs of water, river banks or streams, through which the role of the water as a fountain of life was accentuated. These were modestly built with assets of the poor believers from the lowest social strata (slaves, liberated slaves, low administrative officials or soldiers). The sanctuaries were usually built by rocks or slopes, thus securing the necessary secrecy of this mystical cult.

The Mithraeum in the village of Biljanovce has the following dimensions: length of 10 and width of 5.40 meters oriented NW/SE. According to its architectural characteristics it is identical with all known Mithraeums. On the south-eastern side it has an atrium 2.5 meters long, through which staircases lead inside the crypt. In the north-western part there is a slightly elevated apse, while the lateral sides were elevated by built-in podia (pulpits) from which the believers followed the ritual. The apsidal part contained a sacrificial altar around which, during the first excavations, traces of a fire place and remains of animal bones were discovered. A profiled altar made of limestone was discovered on this site, having a massive base on a plinth with dimensions of 65 cm width and 37 cm length. On the front side there is an engraved inscription DEI.

Three relief iconographic representations have been discovered, made in stone, having on their upper semicircular parts representations of the main cultic images dedicated to Mithras's birth from the rock i.e. Mithras Petrogenus, wearing a Phrygian hat on the head and carrying a sword and a torch in his hands. Large part of the relief is filled with scenes dedicated to Mithras and Sol (their fight and feast for reconciliation, a scene in which Sol is leading Mithras with a fiery coach into the realm of immortality). The central scene contains the tauroctony (the fight between Mithras and the bull) and the taurobolia (the killing of the bull). Underneath the entire scene

¹⁰ F.Henkel, Die Römischen Fingerlinge der Rheinlande und der Beachbarten Gebiete, Berlin 1913, no.96, 108 f.f.; Д.Срејовић-А.Цермановић-Кузмановић, Речник грчке и римске митологије, Београд 1979, 269; SNG Cop. Cyprus-Capadocia, 89-90;

¹¹ М.Кокић, Нови трагови Митриног култа у Јужној Србији, ГСНД Књ.ХII, Скопље 1933, 1-10;

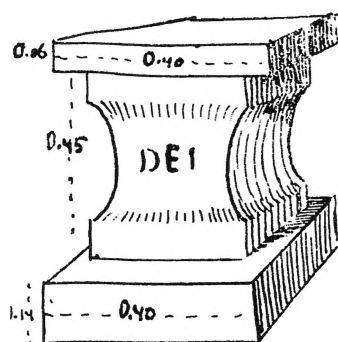
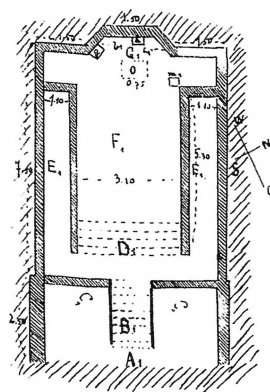
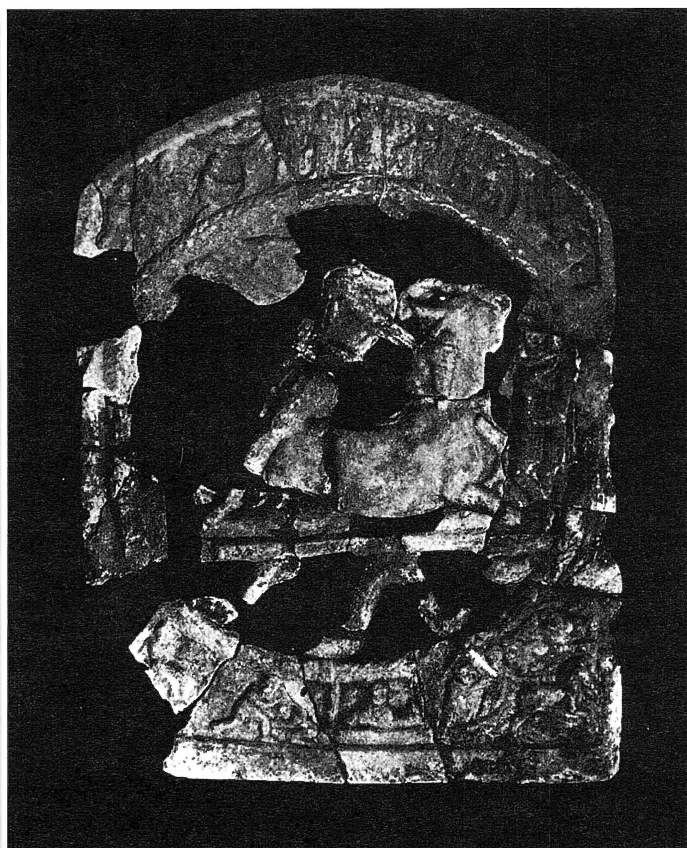


Fig. 7 – The sanctuary dedicated to Mithras and the stone icon from the site of “Derven” near the village of Biljanovce

there is a representation of a snake as a chthonic symbol.¹² During the excavations on the surrounding area, a statuette of Mithras and coins of Trajan Decius and Trebonianus Gallus have been discovered.

In the western part of the region of Kumanovo, in the vicinity of the village of Lopate, a stone plaque with an inscription dedicated to Mithras,¹³ as well as a votive ara dedicated to Apollonides, a customs officer in the stations Vizianum and Lamud(...) in 211, during the reign of the emperors Caracallas and Geta, have been discovered. The votive ara has been discovered in an apsidal construction, probably from a Mithraistic temple.

All cultic forms elaborated on this occasion point to the conclusion that the area of Kumanovo was intensively settled by Roman veterans, which explains the presence of a large number of countryside estates i.e. *villae rusticae*.

¹² The architecture of the sanctuary, its disposition, interior elements and scenes on the reliefs are evidenced in the results of the first archaeological excavations performed by M. Kokich in 1931. Afterwards the remains of the sanctuary have been dislocated and damaged. At present only the barely visible remains of the walls stand on the site. However, thanks to the location given by Kokich, near a spring of water and the distance of the road, as well to my multi annual recognitions of the area, the position can be accurately determined.

¹³ Н.Вулић, Споменик, СКА LXXVII, Београд 1934 бр.29, 44.

Белешки кон неколку култни конституции од римскиот период во кумановско

Резимé

Римските култови во Кумановската област интензивно се шират со населување на римската војска по завршувањето на активната служба. Тоа се, во најголем дел, војници и ослободени робови од источните простори на Империјата, кои со себе ги донеле и култните форми од кои најголема религиозна експанзија имал митраизмот, но забележливо е и почитување на божествата од тракискиот и грчко – римскиот пантеон.

Но, и покрај тоа што романизацијата придонела за продирање и ширење на ориенталните мистични култови, Римјаните не биле нивните главни носители, туку тие се донесени од ослободените робови, на служба во царинските и управните служби во провинциите.

Од ова не била исклучена ниту Кумановската област каде во римскиот период, со зголемување на демографската густина се јавува етничка хетерогеност, што довела и до религиозна шареноликост видлива со појавувањето на култови и религии донесени од различни простори. Тоа, пред сè се должи на географската положба на областа каде се вкрстуваат главните централнобалкански патни правци и каде се мешаат две поголеми етнички и културни целини.

Со римските освојувања на Исток на нашите простори се шират ориенталните култови уште во првите денови на нивната романизација, кои биле пренесени од војската и ориенталните робови. Најголема религиозна експанзија имал митраизмот, но забележливо е и почитување на боговите од тракискиот и грчко – римскиот пантеон. Но, и покрај тоа што романизацијата придонела за продирање и ширење на ориенталните мистични култови, Римјаните не биле нивни главни носители, туку тие се донесени од робовите и ослободениците на царинските и управните служби на провинциите. Исклучок бил само култот на Јупитер Долихен кој го прифатила римската војска.

Овде ќе направам кус осврт врз неколкуте култни конституции кои се појавиле во Кумановско, пред прогласувањето на христијанството. Тоа се:

- Жртвеник од село Пчиња - се работи за вотивна ара од чиј натпис се гледа војничкиот карактер, посветен на Капитолинското тројство (Јупитер, Јунона и Минерва);
- Оловна икона од локалитетот Црквиште кај селото Клевовце, со мистични сцени посветени на култот на подунавските коњаници;
- Надгробна стела од локалитетот Исиром кај селото Доброшане, чиј тимпанон содржи релјефна претстава на Тракискиот коњаник кој е чест мотив, посебно во источните делови од Римското Царство;
- Жртвеник од селото Довезенце, пронајден во урнатините на старата црква посветена на св. Ѓорѓи. Во едикулата е врежано името на тракиското врховно божество Збелсурд, а во натписното поле, под него, во нецелосно сочуваниот текст, врежан е вотивен текст посветен на *Catulus Munatianus*;
- Камена икона чија релјефна иконографија ја содржи групата Атина во преден план, во цел фронтален став со Марсијас во позадината, која држи буф на десната рака и наместо копје во левата рака држи маслинова гранка, со култната конституција има повеќе религиозни пораки;
- Прстен од некрополата на локалитетот Дрезга кај селото Лопате, која во култната конституција на плочката содржи претстава на гулабица како субституција или атрибут на Афродита, заштитничка на бракот и домашното огниште. На левата страна е прикажана гранка од тамарикс, а од десната страна соларниот и лунарниот симбол. Оваа култна еманација е редуцирана претстава на светилиштето на Афродита од Пафос на Кипар, слично како на империјалните монети од Кипар;
- Храмот посветен на Митра од месноста Дервен кај селото Биљановце во чии остатоци, во 1931 година, се пронајдени еден жртеник со натпис DEI и камена икона со култни сцени посветени на митот за Митра и Сол и централната сцена со тауроктонијата и тауроболијата.