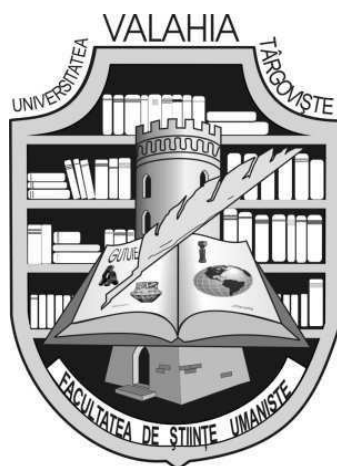


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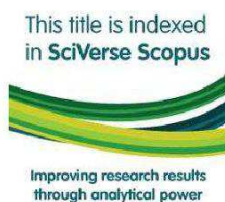
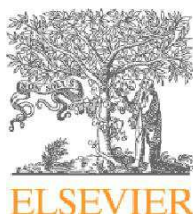
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Venus Cult in the inscriptions from Dacia

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Abstract: *Venus Cult in the inscriptions from Dacia.* In Dacia nine inscriptions with goddess Venus were found. The bronzes, terra cottas or stone statues of Venus are more numerous in Dacia than the inscriptions. The difference lies in the particular ways of expression in public and private cult. The inscriptions reveal especially the public side of the cult, the official side. The inscriptions are most probably a result of a work obligation. Monuments with inscriptions are made for the public benefit, for the entire community and the entire Roman people's benefit. But, a clear distinction between the public and private side of the cult cannot be made, because the both sides often overlap and complement each other.

Key words: inscriptions, Venus, public, private, Dacia.

Résumé : *Culte de Vénus dans les inscriptions de Dacia.* En Dacia neuf inscriptions avec déesse Vénus ont été trouvés. Les bronzes, les terres cuites ou les statues en pierre de Vénus sont plus nombreux en Dacia que les inscriptions. La différence réside dans les moyens particuliers d'expression dans le culte public et privé. Les inscriptions révèlent surtout l'aspect public du culte, l'aspect officiel. Les inscriptions sont probablement le résultat d'une obligation professionnelle. Monuments avec des inscriptions sont érigés pour le bien public, au bénéfice de la communauté et du peuple romain entier. Mais, une distinction claire entre le culte public et privé ne peut pas être faite, parce que les deux questions se chevauchent souvent et se complètent mutuellement.

Mots clés: inscriptions, Vénus, public, privé, Dacia

Despite the numerous figurative representations of Venus in the minor arts, over 200 terracotta statuettes, 60 bronze statuettes and some 30 stone representations, the goddess is rarely mentioned in the inscriptions from Dacia (Fig.1). The statistic of the inscriptions published in IDR (IDR III/1/2/3/4/5-1, 2/6) is eloquent: Venus appears in only 2% of the total of the divinity inscriptions discovered in Dacia, namely 9 inscriptions (Alba Iulia, Alba county: 3; Băile Herculane, Caraş-Severin county: 1; Cluj-Napoca, Cluj county: 1; Roşia Montană, Alba county: 1; Sarmizegetusa,

Hunedoara county: 2; Veşel, Hunedoara county: 1). The situation is similar at the scale of the whole Empire, the few inscriptions from Dacia being part of a broader phenomenon. The most of the inscriptions from the Empire (Fig. 2) were found in the North African provinces, their number being explained by syncretism with some local divinities, while in the western provinces, such as Gallia and Germania, they are almost absent (R. Macmullen, 1987).

The numerical discrepancy between the figurative material and the inscriptions may be due

to different, complementary characteristics of the Venus cult. According to the definition of Festus, Roman public religion develops in the name of the people, financed from public funds, and the private religion has a personal character and it develops in the name of families, clans or *collegia* (Festus, *De Significatione Verborum*). In compliance with this

differentiation, the figurative material donated for a personal purpose, from the own resources of a private person, seeks personal welfare and belongs to the private sphere of the cult. The inscriptions put by public figures, which aim the well-being of the entire community, of the Roman people, are part of the public cult.

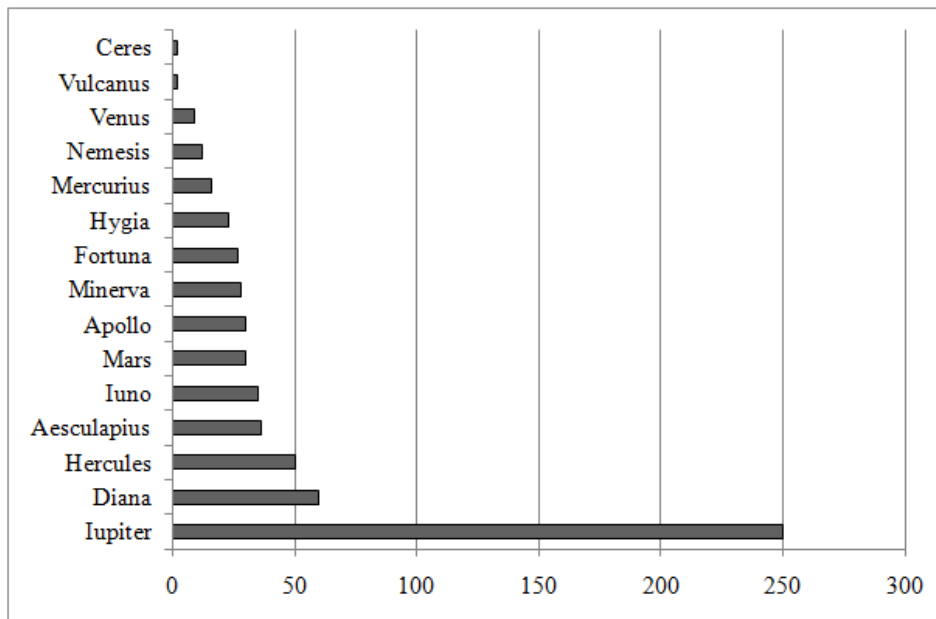


Fig. 1 - Deities frequency in IDR inscriptions

Notwithstanding, a final differentiation cannot be done, because the public and the private cult do not function separately, but they often overlap, thus completing each other. The best example refers to the finds from the forts, the most numerous relating to the Venus cult in Dacia. These may be attributed to the private sphere of the cult, due to the discoveries from barracks, but also to the public cult, the goddess Venus being linked with the Imperial cult by her attributes of Mother of the Romans and, especially, of the Imperial family. Equally, in the case of the other archaeological contexts - domestic, cultic, funerary - the private side of the cult seems to almost always blend with the public one (A. Antal, 2011; A. Antal, 2012).

Regarding only the inscriptions, in order to find out the purpose of the donation and, hence, in which sphere of the cult one could place the inscription, special attention should be paid to the dedicators and the epithets which add up to the

name of the goddess. The presence of a dedicator with a certain public position could take out the inscription from the private sphere. Among the dedicators of the Venus inscriptions from Dacia, we can reckon a fiscal procurator, a Decurion and a local priest, all having important public positions. Regarding the epithets of the goddess in the inscriptions from Dacia, Venus appears as *Augusta* or *Victrix*, which refer also to the public sphere of the cult.

One of the most important dedicators, fiscal procurator of Dacia Apulensis under Maximinus Thrax and Maximus, but also under Gordian III, is Quintus Axius Aelianus. He is mentioned in 9 inscriptions from Dacia (CIL III, 74, 1422, 1423, 1456, 7899; IDR III/2, 89, 157, 158, 191, 206, 244; ILD 277, 278; I. Piso, 1998), the goddess Venus being present in just one of them. The votive altars put by the procurator can be grouped in two categories. The ones dedicated to Fortuna *Redux*,

Venus Cult in the inscriptions from Dacia

Roma *Aeterna* (CIL III, 1422; IDR III/2, 206), the genius of Colonia Sarmizegetusa (ILD 281; I. Piso, 1982) or to the Capitoline Triad (CIL III, 1422; IDR III/2, 206) is the result of position duties, of public obligations, thus they can be related to the official public cult. The altars dedicated to the

Celtic divinities such as Apollo Granus, Sirona (CIL III, 74, IDR III/2, 191), Camulus, Rosmerta and Mercurius (ILD 277; I. Piso, 1998) are part of personal piety, of the private sphere of the cult, the procurator originating probably from Gallia Belgica, from a Celtic family.

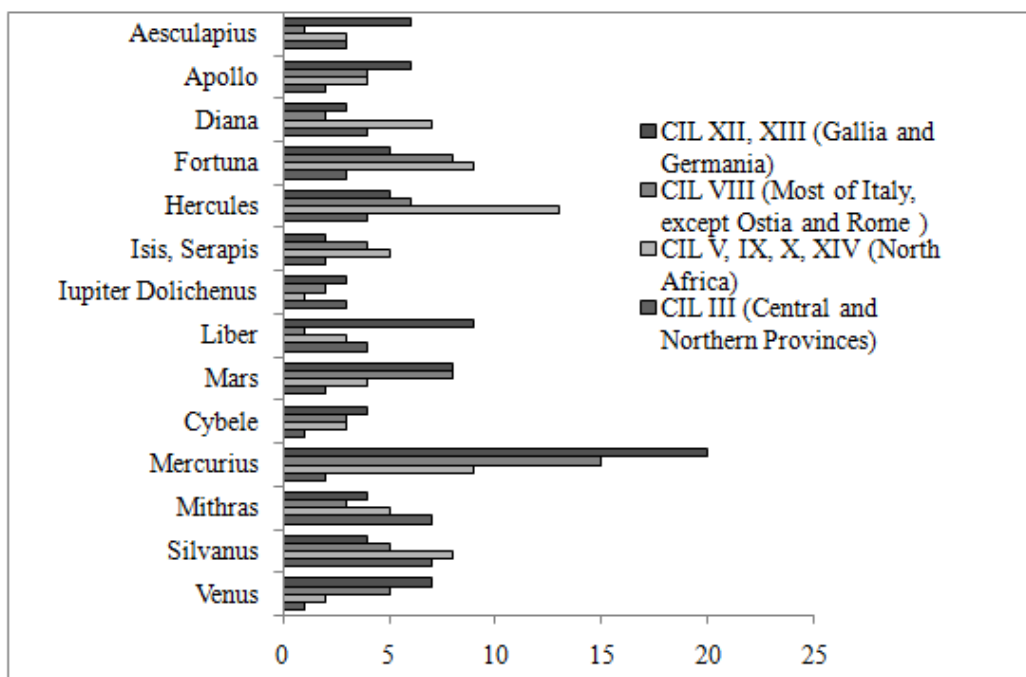


Fig. 2 - Deities frequency compared to Iupiter in CIL inscriptions (after R. Macmullen 1987)

The inscription mentioning Venus (cat. no. 7) belongs to the latter category, of the private sphere, along with the goddess being present Aesculapius and Epona. The purpose was a private one, the personal healing of the procurator (AE 1101; ILD 278; PIR 1688; I. Piso, 1998). The two inscriptions put by the son of Quintus Axius Aelianus for the health of his father, also dedicated to the gods of medicine (CIL III, 1422, 7899; IDR III/2, 157, 158), are proof that at one point he was ill. The fact that the inscription was found at Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, in the *area sacra*, near the *praetorium procuratoris* (AE 1998, 1101; ILD 278; PIR, 2. Aufl., A 1688), may be related to the public position of the dedicant and not necessarily to an official public dedication. Alongside Aesculapius, Epona and Venus, with the epithet *Ubique*, the altar is dedicated also to Neptune and Salacia. Thus, it may be presumed that the source for the

procurator's illness was related to water, probably to *balnea*. The place itself was recognized in the Empire for generating numerous diseases, some of sexual nature, because it was a medium that facilitated erotic encounters (CIL III, 12274c; CIL VI, 15258). Therefore, the divinities in the inscription could be grouped in healing deities, Aesculapius and Epona, the divinity which generated the disease, Venus, and the divinities who patronized the medium favorable for being taken ill, Neptune and Salacia. The epithet of goddess Venus, *Ubique*, she who is present everywhere, is only one more time encountered in the Empire related to Venus, in an inscription from Pompeii (CIL IV, 7384). This epithet confers Venus a general competence.

The association of Venus with healing divinities took place in the context of the Greek influence in the Roman cult, Aphrodite being frequently

associated with Asclepius. In the sanctuary of Asclepius from Epidaurus, also functioned a temple for Aphrodite, and, at Sicyon, the Aphrodite's temple was side by side with the one of Asclepius (Pausanias, II, 27, 5). The association of Asclepius with Aphrodite takes part in a much broader context of the association of a healing god with feminine divinities which also have chthonian attributes. It seems that such attributes were possessed by Aphrodite, hidden under epithets like *Melainis*, the black one, epithet specific for goddess Demeter as well (V. Pirenne- Delforge, 1994). At the same time, this association could be founded on an essential principle in the process of healing in Antiquity: placating not only the gods that could heal the illness, but also the ones who generated it (I. Piso, 1998). In this setup, statuettes of Venus could be brought in the sanctuaries of Aesculapius by the believers who got sick following a love affair. At Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, in the temple of Aesculapius and Hygeia, 5 terracotta statuettes of Venus were found (C. Pop, E. Nemeş, 1977; D. Alicu, C. Pop, V. Wolmann, 1979; D. Alicu, A. Soroceanu, 1982). It is worth mentioning the fact that Venus was worshiped also as a patron divinity of life before death, which could explain her invocation in the case of a severe illness. Not incidentally, Venus terracotta was discovered in the legionnaire hospital from Novae (M. Popescu, 2004).

Another important dedicator which appears in the inscriptions associated with Venus is Aurelius Umbrianus, probably from Umbria, veteran and former Decurion. Taking into account the military history of the dedicator, it is easy to understand that his invocation is for Venus *Victrix* (cat. no. 5), the victorious (IDR III/5, 364; CIL III, 1115). In the Empire, Venus with the epithet *Victrix* appears frequently in inscriptions, especially in Italy, Dalmatia and Pannonia (M. Speidel, 1984). The Venus *Victrix* cult was started in Pompeii in 55 BC, when a temple is dedicated to the goddess. Victorious generals such as Sylla, Pompey and Caesar associated their names with Venus *Victrix* or Venus *Felix* (R. Schilling, 1954). Caesar invoked Venus *Victrix* before the battle of Pharsalus, the goddess being also present on the coins minted by him at the time, represented with a shield and a spear (M. Speidel, 1984).

Venus *Victrix* is linked in Dacia with another dedicator, Caius Iulius Valens, *haruspex*, priest of

Colonia Apulensis. His activity as *haruspex* may be traced in six votive inscriptions which he signs (CIL III 115, 1114, 1116, 1117, 14475; IDR III, 5/1, 297, 356, 357, 364, 367, 388). All are put for the health of the Empire, of the Senate, or the Decurion order of Apulum. Of the six inscriptions, two are statue bases, one of them for the statue of Nemesis. Besides the inscriptions for Venus *Victrix* (cat. no. 1), Nemesis (AE 1930, 0006; AE 1930; IDR III, 5/1, 297) and a divinity with the epithet *Invictus* such as Hercules, Mithras or Sol (CIL III, 14475, IDR III, 5/1, 357), the identity of the divinity could not be established for the other inscriptions.

The city's priests, as magistrates, controlled the sanctuaries and organized the games or the religious celebrations. But the magistracy's piety had to be doubled by generosity, thus the magistrates had to make donations, to pay for the games or to build cult edifices, all of these representing position obligations (W. Andringa, 2009). The inscription dedicated to Venus *Victrix*, for the health of the Empire, of the Senate, of the Roman people and of the Decurion order of Colonia Apulensis, represents an act of public piety of the priest.

The Venus *Victrix* representation type appears frequently on coins or gems, rarely in statuary. Venus as *Victrix* is depicted on the coins and gems from Dacia sitting in a war chariot, crowned by Amor (L. Marinescu, 1960; L. Marinescu, 1965). Based on the representation from the Vatican Museum, where Venus appears as *Victrix* (J. Flemberg, 1991) with a bay laurel crown, seven terracotta statuettes of Venus from Dacia can be assigned to this statuary type (Gherla: D. Protase, N. Gudea, R. Ardevan, 2008; Apulum: C. Popa, 1978; D. Anghel et al., 2011). A bronze statuette of Venus found in the Nemesis temple near the amphitheater from Porolissum (C. Pop, 1998), may be linked with this aspect of the divinity, being probably an item dedicated by the gladiators for gaining victory.

Another dedicator was Fabius Pulcher, from the equestrian order, which carried out his tribunate in the 2nd or 3rd Legion, and later became procurator in his native city, Augusta Treverorum, in Gallia Belgica. He dedicates an inscription to Venus *Augusta* at Apulum. Fabius Pulcher appears in Dacia just in one more commemorative inscription, put with his brother for their father (CIL III, 1214;

IDR III/5 527). It is dedicated to Venus *Augusta* (cat. no. 2), epithet used to mark out the patron divinities of the Imperial house. The epithet *Augusta*, next to Venus, originated in the tradition of the patronage of the goddess Venus over the Iulia family, tradition started by Caesar. Beginning with Caesar's successor, Augustus, Venus became not only the protector of the Iulia family, but also the protector of the Imperial family and, later on, Mother of all the Romans, as Venus *Genetrix*.

No other details are known on the other two dedicators from Dacia, an Illyrian pilgrim from Alburnus Maior (cat. no. 6) and Aelia Flavia from Micia (cat. no. 9). The two inscriptions are the only ones bearing their names. Venus has no epithets and is not associated with other deities.

Besides the inscriptions mentioned above, other three were discovered, without bearing the names of the dedicators. In the inscriptions from Apulum (cat. no. 3) and Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (cat. no. 8), Venus has no epithets and is not associated with any other divinities. In the third inscription, from Băile Herculane (cat. no. 4), Venus, without any epithet, is associated with Hercules and Mercurius (IDR III/1, 68; CIL III, 1567). Hercules, as protector of the thermal waters, appears many times in the inscriptions from Băile Herculane. Venus is often associated with water, being in many instances associated with Hercules. The most consistence pieces of evidence were found in the *lararia* from Pompeii (A. R. Kennedy, 2008).

As witnessed by the inscriptions, the public and private spheres related to the Venus cult are hard to fully separate. In some cases, the differentiations are evident. The priest of Colonia Apulensis makes a dedication for Venus, but also for the health of the Empire, of the Senate, of the Roman people, and of the Decurion order of the Colonia, performing an act of public piety in his position as public person. In some case, it is more difficult to differentiate. The fiscal procurator of Dacia Apulensis puts a dedication for Venus for his own health, but his position rather obligates him to put the dedication in an important public place from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, in the *area sacra*, next to the *praetorium consularis*.

In the inscriptions, the public side of the cult is more visible. They relief better an evolution of the cult towards a formalism and a contractual side pushed to the extremes, towards a transformation

of the cult from an act of piety into a position task of political character.

Beyond this public side, the Venus cult was strongly present in the private medium as well, where the goddess's closeness towards the believers was more powerful. In the private sphere, the primary attributes of Venus are predominant, as a nature and fecundity divinity, along the ones influenced by the Greek Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, love and marriage. But this side is visible mainly in the small inventory of the cult, such as bronze and terracotta statuettes, but less in the inscriptions.

The epithet *Ubique*, with which Venus appears in the capital of Dacia, demonstrates in the best manner how well the province was anchored in the Roman tradition. The numerous attributes of Venus make her really present all over, covering the entire aspects of life, but also death, both in the public and private spheres.

Catalogue of discoveries:

1. Alba Iulia – Apulum (Alba county); MNM - Budapest; Inv. No. 197/18735; votive shrine; discovery place: Partoș district; limestone; fragmentary preserved: the front side with the inscription field is partially damaged (rows 1 and 2 of 10); chronology: after Commodus when *Apulum* becomes *colonia*. (Fig. 4/c)

[Veneri Vic]/[trici p]ro sal(ute) / imperi(i) et s(enatus) p(opuli)q(ue) R(omani) / et ordinis col(oniae) / Apul(ensis) C(aius) Iul(ius) Va(le)n(s) haruspex / col(oniae) s(upra) s(cryptae) et antis/tes huiusce / loci / [v(oto) l(ibens)] p(osuit)

Translation: To Victorious Venus, for the health of the Empire, the Senate, the Roman People and the *colonia Apulum* Decurion Order, Caius Iulius Valens, *haruspex* of the above mentioned *colonia* and priest of this place (sanctuary), raised (this monument) willingly fulfilled a vow.

(CIL III, 1115; IDR III/ 5, 364; I. I. Russu 1975).

2. Alba Iulia – Apulum (Alba county); MNU – Alba Iulia; Inv. No. 530; statue base; discovery place: Dealul Furcilor; limestone; state of preservation is good, canopy partially destroyed; chronology: Septimius Severus period, as evidenced by the career of T. Fabius Aquiliensis. (Fig. 3/a) Veneri / Aug(ustae) / Fab(ius) Pulcher / [--- A]ug(---) / [---] col(oniae) / [vot(um)? sol]vit
Translation: To Venus Augusta, Fabius Pulcher from colonia.... fulfilled a vow.



Fig. 3- Statue base and votive shrines: a. Alba-Iulia, Alba county (after O. Harl); b. Sarmizegetusa, Hunedoara county (after G. Alföldi); c. Vețel, Hunedoara county (after I. Piso).

(IDR III/ 5/1, 363; CIL III, 1157)

3. Alba Iulia – *Apulum* (Alba county); now lost; statue base; limestone.

Veneri / sac[r]um / PR[-]T[-]OL / [-]GOTH / [-]P[-]
-- / [-----](?)

Translation: consecrate to Venus....

(IDR III/5/1, 362)

4. Băile Herculane (Caraș-Severin county); M – Băile Herculane; votive shrine; limestone; h = 0,87m; fragmentary preserved: broken on upper side, inscription field partially damaged (rows 1, 3, 5); chronology: 201-270 p. Chr. (Fig. 4/d)

Herculi / et / Veneri / Mercurius / pr(---) E[-]L[-]
N / cum suis

Translation: To Hercules, Venus and Mercury, the procurator (prefect?) ... (together) with his (put the offering)

(IDR III/1, 68; CIL III, 1567).

5. Cluj-Napoca – *Napoca* (Cluj county); MNIT – Cluj-Napoca; votive inscription; limestone; state of preservation is good; chronology: 151-270 p. Chr.

Veneri / Victrici / Aur(elius) Umbri/anus
vet(eranus) e[x] / dec(urione) v(otum) s(olvit)
l(ibens) m(erito)

Translation: To Victorious Venus, Aurelius Umbrianus, veteran, former Decurion, willingly and deservedly in fulfillment of a vow.

(CIL III, 864, 7663)

6. Roșia Montană - *Alburnus Maior* (Alba county); M – Roșia Montană; votive shrine; discovery place: *area sacra* from Hăbad; tuff; h = 0,46m; fragmentary preserved: the right upper corner is damaged; chronology: 131 – 200 p. Chr. (Fig. 4/a)

Beucus Dae/ici ara(m) Ve/neri / vo(tum) s(olvit)

Translation: Beucus, son of Daecius, in fulfillment of (his) vow (put) a shrine for Venus

(AE 2003, 1483; AE 2007, 1200; ILD 392; S. Cocis *et al.* 2003; C. Ciongradi 2009)

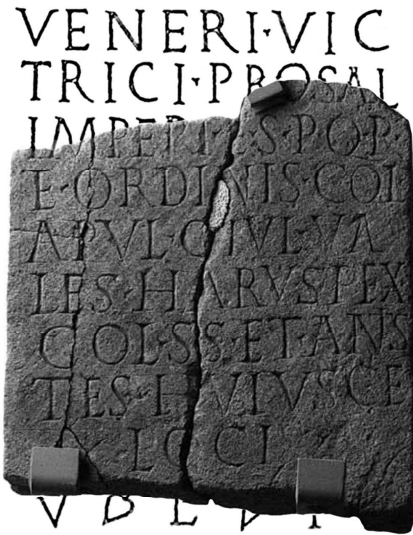
7. Sarmizegetusa – *Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa* (Hunedoara county); M – Sarmizegetusa; votive shrine; discovery place: *area sacra* near the *praetorium procuratoris*; andesite; h = 1,10m; fragmentary preserved: the right upper corner is damaged; chronology: 235-238 p. Chr. (Fig. 3/b)
Aesculapio / Saluti Epionae / Veneri ubique /
Neptuno Salaciae / cupidinibus / fontibus aquis /
Q(uintus) Axis Aelia/nus v(ir) e(gregius)
proc(urator) Aug[[g(ustorum)]] / Ioni



a.



b.



c.



d.

Fig. 4 –Votive shrines: a. Roșia Montana, Alba county (after Ciongradi 2009); b. Sarmizegetusa, Hunedoara county (after I. Piso 1998); c. Alba-Iulia, Alba county (after O. Harl); d. Băile Herculane, Caraș-Severin county (after I. Piso).

Translation: For the health of Aesculapius, Epona, Venus that is everywhere, Neptune, Salacia, Cupids, spring sources, Quintus Axius Aelianus prominent citizen and imperial procurator (AE 1101; ILD 278; PIR 1688; I. Piso 1998)

8. Sarmizegetusa – Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa (Hunedoara county); M – Sarmizegetusa; votive shrine or statue base; discovery place: *area sacra* near the *praetorium procuratoris*; marble; h = 0,36m; only the left upper part is preserved. (Fig. 4/b)

Ven[eri? sanc?]/tis[simae?]

Translation: To sacred Venus...

(I. Piso 1998; AE 1998, 01104).

9. Vețel - Micia (Hunedoara county); MCDR – Deva; votive shrine; reddish andesite; h = 0,90m; fragmentary preserved: the upper left corner and the lower left corner are damaged. (Fig. 3/c)

Veneri / sacr(um) Ae(lia) / Flavia{e} / aram a(nimo?) / votum / p(osuit)

Translation: To sacred Venus, Aelia (?) Flavia (put) this shrine in fulfillment of (his) vow (IDR III/3, 140; ILD 309)

Abbreviations

AE: *Année épigraphique*, Paris, I 1888 sqq.

CIL: *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin, I, 1863 sqq.

IDR: *Inscripțiile Daciei Romane*, București, I 1975 sqq.

ILD: *Inscripțiile latine din Dacia*, București, 2005.

PIR: *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, Berlin, 1898.

M – Băile Herculane: *Muzeul Băile Herculane*

M – Roșia Montană : *Muzeul Roșia Montană*

M – Sarmizegetusa: *Muzeul Arheologic Sarmizegetusa*

MCDR – Deva: *Muzeul Civilizației Dacice și Romane Deva*

MNIT – Cluj-Napoca: *Muzeul Național de Istorie a Transilvaniei, Cluj-Napoca*

MNM – Budapest: *Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, Budapest*

MNU – Alba Iulia: *Muzeul Național al Unirii Alba Iulia*

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