

An epigraphic monument dedicated to Liber Pater recently found at Ampelum

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Abstract. This paper describes and transcribes a Roman inscription-bearing altar. The photo of the altar was founded in the PC of a culprit searched for illegal prospections in archaeological sites. The culprit declared that the piece was excavated in the area of the former Copper Processing Factory from Zlatna (Alba County), well known as the former area of *municipium* Ampelum, the residence of the gold and silver mining administration of Dacia. The fragmentary monument, dedicated to the Liber Pater by a certain Iulius, is missing now (wanted by the Romanian Police). The characteristics of the text and the aspect of the decorated surfaces suggest that it was made by an urban craftsman with experience. The altar may have originated from the *municipium* Ampelum. Although the great number of Roman vestiges, especially with inscriptions or figurative reproductions (statues, altars, funerary monuments etc.) placed Ampelum, both the settlement and necropolis, among the most dynamic urban centers of the province. The paper is also focused on the problematic of the inefficient protection of the cultural heritage.

Keywords: Liber Pater, votive altar, Dacia, penal file.

Rezumat. Un monument epigrafic dedicat lui Liber Pater descoperit recent la Ampelum. Acest studiu descrie și întregeste un altar cu inscripție romană. Fotografia altarului a fost găsită în calculatorul unei persoane cercetate pentru prospecții ilegale în situri arheologice. Persoana a declarat că piesa a fost descoperită în zona fostului Combinat de prelucrare a cuprului din Zlatna (județul Alba), pe teritoriul fostului *municipium* Ampelum, reședința administrației minelor de aur și argint din Dacia. Monumentul fragmentar, dedicat lui Liber Pater de un anume Iulius, este acum dispărut, fiind căutat de poliția română. Caracteristicile textului și aspectul părții decorate sugerează că a fost făcut de un meșter urban cu experiență și precizie.

Altarul ar putea proveni din *municipium* Ampelum. Un mare număr de vestigii, inscripții și monumente figurate (statui, altare, monumente funerare etc.), plasează Ampelum - așezarea și necropola - printre cele mai dinamice centre urbane din provincie. Lucrarea se concentrează și asupra problemei ineficienței protecției patrimoniului cultural.

Cuvinte cheie: Liber Pater, altar votiv, Dacia, dosar penal

The beginning of the 21st Century in Romanian archaeology is marked by a phenomenon with previously unseen and multiple connotations, a phenomenon that places those involved in researching the underground remains of civilizations and cultures in front of a new and complex challenge. We are here referring to the emergence of dilettantes and *pseudo-archaeologists* amongst owners of metal detectors, commonly referred to as *detectorists*. We will not accomplish here a detailed analysis of this phenomenon¹, as we will limit ourselves to the conclusion that the Romanian society, is, once again (!) unprepared to adequately and efficiently react to the consequences of this type of investigations, resulting in most cases in the irreversible destruction of archaeological contexts and/or the plundering and loss of often important and spectacular artefacts of national heritage status.

On the importance of archaeological heritage of the Ampoi valley we do not consider necessary to elaborate again in detail². The location of this area in the famous *Gold Quadrilater* of the Occidental Carpathians, the presence of essential metal resources (copper, gold, silver, marble, useful construction rocks, etc.) and the important role played in connecting this area to the main artery of communication and transport of the Mureș Valley made it the home of representative habitations and cultural evolutions. The highlight of this continuous evolution, from prehistory to nowadays, is considered to be the Roman presence, closely linked to the exploitation of gold and silver at Roșia Montană (*Alburnus Maior*) and the surroundings of nowadays Zlatna (*Ampelum*) and Almașul Mare.

The object of our discussion here is a chance find, probably from recent construction works in the area of the former Copper Processing

¹ See more literature on the subject: Teodor 2014; Ciută 2012; 2014.

² Moga/Ciugudean 1995, *passim*; Wollmann 1979; Wollmann/Lipovan 1982; Wollmann 2009, *passim*; Popa, Berciu, Pop 1968, *passim*; IDR III/3.

Factory, known to have overlapped to a great extent the ruins of the ancient *Ampelum*, a *municipium* of the Roman Empire and the headquarter of the administration of the gold mining operations in Dacia³. We cannot ignore the fact that, while the specialists of Roman times considered this town to be an extremely important and essential economical centre in the Roman times, with remarkable ruins noticed since the 16th Century to the early 20th Century, while it is listed on the National Repository of Historical Monuments - *Lista Monumentelor Istorice* (coded LMI 2010 AB-I-s-B-00055 while even more listed in the National Archaeological Registry - *Repertoriul Arheologic Național* (RAN 2032.01)⁴ and the Archaeological Registry of the county of Alba - *Repertoriul Arheologic al Județului Alba*, the last 20 years have not seen even a single rescue archaeological excavation being performed as part of the important interventions and construction works that have taking place here!⁵ It is hard, if not impossible to disregard the fact that in this case we are confronted with major urban development plans backed, unfortunately, by a lack of interest from the public offices of heritage management, failing thus to solve this serious disfunction. In practice, even though the museums of Transylvania (and not only) are full of artefacts originating in the ancient *Ampelum*⁶, to this date we do not have an official and public local museum, only the passionate activities of some scholars, amongst them I.T. Lipovan, resulting in the compilation

³ Moga/Ciugudean 1995, 221-222.

⁴ An unexplained occurrence is that the archaeological site of *Ampelum* is listed in the National Archaeological Registry - RAN as belonging to the nearby village of Pătrîngeni (Petrîngeni, Pătrunjeni) and not the town of Zlatna (!), a situation different from that of the Alba County's list (*Repertoriul arheologic al județului Alba* (Alba Iulia 1995), where both localities are treated distinctly, with the Roman town of *Ampelum* listed only for Zlatna, at Pătrângerii we have only the suburbs (!) and Roman cemeteries (Moga/Ciugudean 1995, 140).

⁵ A simple check with the evidences filed at the Ministry of Culture, specifically the authorisation forms issued for rescue archaeology (since of systematic excavation at Zlatna and Pătrângerii we cannot even talk about!) points out that even if in the town we had a lot of new buildings and several other major construction works, no such authorisation was requested or obtained, as the law requires. We therefore rightfully ask if this listing of the site to the nearby village instead of the town was a deliberate act, a *modus operandi*, chosen so that the housing developments of the last 20 years should not be impeded by the existence of the site. We would also like to mention here the destruction, in 1993, of another settlement, belonging to the Bronze Age, at *Măgura Dudașului* (Moga/Ciugudean 1995, 221).

⁶ Wollmann 2009, *passim*.

of a museum collection, in the building of the town's cultural centre, a project that was abandoned at some point⁷.

The investigation of a recent penal case, involving illegal metal detecting activities performed in various archaeological sites, supplied to us a new and interesting archaeological research subject. This investigation included an examination of the computer archive of one of the persons indicted in this case⁸, and revealed, quite surprisingly, a series of photographs made at his summer house, somewhere in the Vältori Valley⁹, nearby the town of Zlatna - and representing several artefacts of obvious archaeological origin, exposed in his backyard, as follows: a fragmentary votive altar, with inscription, two column bases and a fragment of a column. A remarkable photograph shows the readable text on the upper side of the altar, in an excellent preservation state (Pl. I/1). We will not report on this case's obvious illegal activity, the presence of these archaeological artefacts on a private property, especially as the defendant, a known metal detectorist (!), is also a graduate of historic studies...

In regards to the origin of these artefacts, including the altar, the defendant declared that they were brought over accidentally, by truckload, amongst the spoil earth needed for raising the yard of his summer house. This was most likely excavated recently within the compounds of the former Copper Processing Factory, within the Zlatna town's limits¹⁰, nearby Pătrângenii (Suseni) village. On this occasion he recognized the white sandstone fragments of an altar and column fragments (Pl. II/2-3), which he then rescued and displayed in his

⁷ Unfortunately, despite some recent concerns of a nationalist nature from the local administration, the town does not benefit from the existence of a local history museum, even though it certainly deserves one, at least to recover protect and valorize the remains of the old archaeological exhibit. In the interval 2009 - 2012, this old collection was affected by the precarious state of preservation of the town's cultural centre, the uninspired vicinity of an area of youth entertainment (bars and disco's) and a landslide that partially covered the backyard of the building, arranged as a *lapidarium*. A hypothesis we have to work with is that the object of this study might originate from this location and remains to be seen if there is an inventory of this collection that can confirm it.

⁸ As this case is on trial at this moment, we will not render some information to the public, but we hereby retain the right to add essential information later on, pending the results of the trial.

⁹ Here we have traces of Roman habitation (Moga/Ciugudean 1995, 221).

¹⁰ Zlatna, Goldmarkt, Kleinschlatten, Ampelum (Moga/Ciugudean 1995, 221).

backyard, for aesthetic reasons (?!). The digital photographs that depict the roman monument and the column fragments also contain the date they were taken (October 22nd 2012), making this backyard look more like an open air *lapidarium* than a vacation home. At the moment of the formal inquiry and at the end of the police raid on the premises, in November 21st, 2014, none of these cultural goods were to be found in this location, the official statement of the defendant being that *they were stolen since*¹¹...

Description of the artefact

The epigraphic monument is in a fragmentary state, missing about half of the lower part, the base, and considerable fragments from the back side, several fragments of the monuments canopy. One of the canopy's spirals is broken, our drawing being an attempt to reconstruct its initial position¹². Judging by the aspect of these broken surfaces they are most likely the result of a recent unfortunate mechanical manipulation by means of an excavator¹³.

The monument is of a common shape, with the canopy and the base wider than the body of the altar. What survived of the altar is about 70 cm tall, our estimate of the original complete height being around 1.30-1.40 m, (in agreement with the assumed height of the base and the number of text lines in the inscription). The overall width is 60 cm, of this the inscription is 50 cm wide. The monument has a crowning 80 cm wide, the monument we assume to be at least 50 cm thick, with a possibility of being even thicker (over 60-70 cm). The height of the preserved inscription field is of 45 cm, the total height being, probably, around 70 to 80 cm. The back of the altar seems to be entirely broken and missing. The lateral sides are preserving some bas-relief depictions that cannot be identified due to the poor quality of photographs we have. Also, due to the damage sustained it is hard to assume if the canopy and

¹¹ As it is the case, all the information and data obtained for the current study are almost exclusively based on the data recovered from the culprit's computer.

¹² From the photograph we can easily notice that the cylindrical spiral from the right had broken and was laid at the base of the monument, with two other fragments, possibly from the crown or the base.

¹³ For the estimation of the measurements we used several photos of it, frontal, from the sides and with the back. Unfortunately the low quality of these photographs and the fact that in most of them the subject was not the monument limited our perception of details.

the base are symmetrical; our conclusion is that they most likely were not. Above the inscription, the partially deteriorated crowning has about six rounded steps topped by a classic pediment, with a bas-relief decoration of a grape bunch. At the lower ends of the pediment, facing the front of the monument, we have two ornamental spirals (volutes, curls), about 14 cm in diameter, with ornaments, the right one a 4 petal symmetric flower and the broken off left spiral a 16 (or 15) petal flower (Pl. I/1-2). One of the few photographs taken from the sides show several linear base-relief ornaments on the cylinder of the right spiral (a bunch of *fascias*?), very difficult to reconstruct (Pl. II/1).

Above the pediment, on each side, most likely were other representations, either of animals or vegetation, now impossible to identify or reconstruct. It is very likely that the right side might have had represented the head of an animal (wolf?). The crowning continues, above the garble, but is missing, most likely having a libation cavity on top.

The first row of text, as well as the third, is decorated, most likely on both sides, with the vegetal motif of a summarily depicted vine leaf. The one at the end of the first row is large while the one on the third is smaller. The height of the letters is approximately constant, at 5 to 6 cm, with a row space of 1 cm. The letters are correctly depicted, in an elegant manner with no asymmetries, with slightly rounded extremities and well proportioned spaces, the work of a good scribe, with a good and experienced hand. The text is laid out symmetrically in the inscription field, the blank fields that might unbalance the whole being filled with the inspired addition of vine leaves. The craftsman who wrote the text from the altar could be an urban stone-cutter, probably from Ampelum or Apulum. It may have been a qualified craftsman, good connoisseur of the scripts and ligatures and of symbolic meanings specific to votive monuments. We may presume that the altar it wasn't his first order of its kind, if we take into consideration the very good quality of the whole altar which was made very symmetrically with well finished surfaces and elegant decorations (Pl. I/1).

The reading

The preserved text of the inscription is easily readable being framed in the rectangular shaped field but incompletely (four rows fully legible but the fifth illegible has kept the upper part of at least 3 letters from the final word) is as follows:

LIBERO
 PATRI AVG
 SACR
 [...] IVLIVS
 [...] NVS

It seems that the fifth row it is ending with VS or rather NVS, representing the terminus of the *cognomen* dedicator. Unfolded text gives as follows:

Libero
Patri Aug(usto)
sacr(um)
 (...) *Iulius*
 (...) *ius*
 [...].

The translation of the incomplete text is: «*For Liber Pater, Augustus, consecration, ... Iulius (...)nus*» and it may end with a formulation in which the altar was dedicated to this deity. It is supposed that there were at least two or three rows. Even in the absence of the final text it is obvious that we are dealing with a votive monument, which might be ended with *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* as in the case of another altar discovered in Mesentea locality which was dedicated to the same god¹⁴. Either in the case of other similar shrines dedicated to the same deity, from *Apulum* or other cities of the Roman province¹⁵.

Liber Pater to whom it was dedicated the altar, was very popular and highly worshiped in the imperial province of Dacia¹⁶. The proofs are standing his dedicated temples from *Apulum* and *Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa* as well as multitude of shrines discovered throughout the Roman province colonized with peoples from Dalmatia and Pannonia¹⁷.

The representation of the bunch of grapes on the top, associated with vine leaves is a common one to whole manifestations dedicated to

¹⁴ Ardevan, Popa 2012, 216.

¹⁵ Popa, Aldea 1974; Wollmann 2009, 145 fig. 25b; Ardevan, Popa 2012.

¹⁶ Ardevan, Popa 2012, 216.

¹⁷ Bodor 1963; Popescu, Popescu 1995; Ardevan, Popa 2012, 216; Popa, Aldea 1974; Nemeti 2005, 189.

Liber Pater¹⁸. Archaic deity from central Italy, Liber Pater was together with its counterpart Libera, the protector of vines and fields fertility. This circumstance has led to its assimilation with Dionysus - Bacchus and his cult has spread in the whole Roman Empire¹⁹. Liber Pater, from the Latin word *libare* which means *flow, sacrifice, taste*, was an old Italic deity of abundance and breeding. Usually Liber Pater was associated with Libera goddess, both being plebeian deities. The celebration consecrated to Liber were been called *Liberalia* and were celebrated on 17 March.

The dedicator, which probably was a wealthy person and certainly a Roman citizen, still remains unknown, because the text of the inscription is lacking right at his cognomen space which enable the identification of his hierarchical position or social status. We only know his name, Iulius and his ending cognomen, «...NVS» too common to give a social or ethnic connotation²⁰.

Iulius was a *gentilicius* widespread in Dacia and in other roman provinces. It may be a citizen with Italic origins, a wealthy *beneficiarius* of the *procuratorium aurarium*, perhaps. Or why not, even a *procurator aurariorum*.

The hypothetical place of the discovery of the epigraphic monument being associated with ancient *Ampelum* territory as well as the his skilled and complex realization it may suggest the affiliation to his dedicator to the wealthy class of the administration staff of silver and gold mining from the Quadrilater of the Apuseni Mountains.

Returning to the extremely unusual situation of the «discovery» of the images with monuments from the Roman era, which seems to be arranged as a personal *lapidarium* in a private courtyard from Zlatna locality, we are wondering how many such pieces «decorate» other personal properties of the inhabitants from that city? If we take into consideration that in the last 20 years in Zlatna, on the territory of the old Roman town, there were frequent interventions in the ground caused by the dismantle of many buildings and improvement of the Copper Factory, activities which have not benefit from any professional assistance!

Moreover, a certain fashion of the moment imposed by the individuals with resonant names in what is desired to be the high-life of

¹⁸ Ciută 2010, 185-192.

¹⁹ Teodorescu et al. 1966, 75.

²⁰ For exemple, C. Iulius Priscinus (AÉ 1991, 1346).

of Alba Iulia and Zlatna cities makes more and more people, usually unwitting, to wish to decorate their private properties with ancient monuments, a gesture being considered to be one of *bon ton*...

In the same manner as we previously talked about archaeological-epigraphic monuments Diaspora in urban and military centers in Dacia Superior²¹ it is most likely that in the next years will be identify many such epigraphic and anepigraphic monuments.

Unfortunately it is an omnipresent practice in those countries where the interest in protection of the national cultural heritage does not exist or is extremely lower, and the institutions that are meant to handle this issue are weak, influenced, inefficient, lacking the levers that can protect the heritage.

In an exhaustive recently published study with statistical valences, we found data which shows that *Ampelum* city ranks on the third position in Dacia, after *Apulum* and *Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa*, when we discuss about the number of epigraphic finds²². In this context, the epigraphic monument under our attention comes to sustain this idea and to provide new data and information related with the cult of *Liber Pater* in Dacia province²³.

Instead of conclusion, we ask ourselves the question (rhetorical certainly!) regarding the reasons for what in the current Penal Code, launched into force in February 2014 has disappeared the article no 280¹, which punish *non-compliance regime for the protection of cultural property*?

Illustrations

Plate I - 1. The altar from Ampelum (photo). 2. Detail from left view, with the decorative elements 3. The graphical drawing of the altar from Ampelum.

Plate II - 1. Detail from right, with the decorative elements. 2-3. Other monuments (columns, basis etc.) photographed in the same location with the altar.

²¹ Wollmann 1979; 2009, 100-158. Wollmann, Lipovan 1982.

²² Wollmann 2009, 116; IDR I-IV.

²³ Bodor 1963; Popa, Aldea 1974, 113; Popescu, Popescu 1995; Nemeti 2005; Ciongradi 2009; Ardevan, Popa 2012; Popa, Berciu, Pop 1968.

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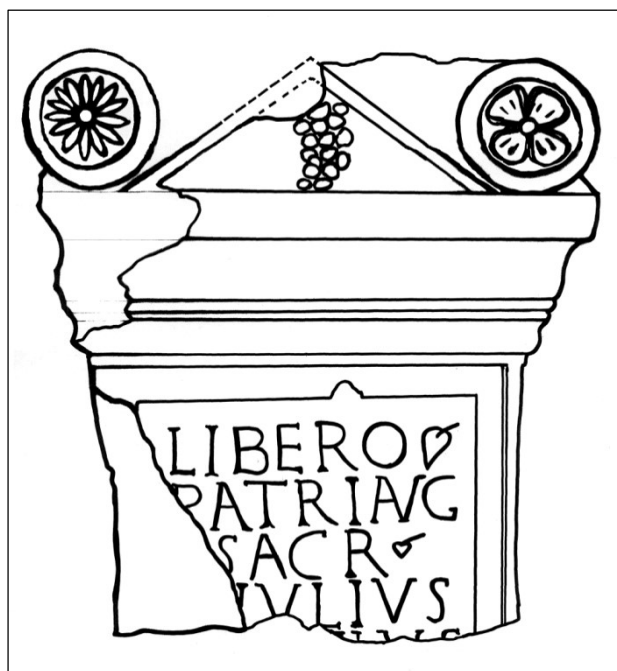
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Pl. II