

Evidence of Greek and Latin Inscriptions on Greco-Roman Culture and Civilization in Scythia Minor

ბერძნული და ლათინური წარწერების ამსახველი მასალები ბერძნულ-რომაული კულტურისა და ცივილიზაციის შესახებ მცირე სკვითიაში

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Abstract: Scythia Minor was not only the cradle of a synthesis of Greek and Roman civilizations, which was manifested in the large settlements of this province, but through the diffusion of the elements of these civilizations "extra muros", in the large mass of the native Dacians and the Romans, who conquered this province in 27 B.C., it was also the cradle of an ancient Romanian civilization. Its existence is also attested by the great ecclesiastical personalities but also by the universal culture of Daco-Roman origin, coming from here, the so-called Scythian monks, who marked the 5th and 6th centuries, among whom the most important were Ioan Casian, Dionisie Exiguus – (the humble), John Maxentius, etc. Excellent connoisseurs of the Greek and Latin languages, but using Latin as the language of their works, they demonstrate the highest level of theological, philosophical, juridical and astronomical knowledge acquired, according to their testimonies, in the schools and monasteries of their homeland. Although there are documents about the existence of such institutions, they are few and unfortunately very little known. Instead, there are hundreds of epigraphical testimonies in Latin and Greek, regarding various aspects of social, military and religious activities, discovered all over Dobrogea today, during the last 200 years. They attest to the dynamics of the implementation of Greek and Latin cultural elements in the land between the Danube and the Sea and their adoption by the native population.

Keywords: Ancient Romanian culture and civilization, civil and religious institutions, Scythian monks, Romanian Dobrogea

რარეს ბარდუ

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აბსტრაქტი: მცირე სკვითია არ ყოფილა მხოლოდ ბერძნულ-რომაული ცივილიზაციების სინთეზის აკვანი, რაც ამ პროვინციის დიდ დასახლებებში

გამოიხატა, არამედ, ამ ცივილიზაციათა ელემენტების „*extra muros*“ გავრცელებით, ადგილობრივ დაკიულ და რომაულ მოსახლეობაში, რომლებმაც ეს პროვინცია ძვ.წ. 27 წელს დაიპყრეს. ის ასევე იყო ძველი რომაული ცივილიზაციის აკვანაც. მისი არსებობა დასტურდება როგორც დიდი საეკლესიო მოღვაწეებით, ისე დაკიურ-რომაული წარმოშობის უნივერსალური კულტურით, რომელიც აქედან მომდინარეობს და ცნობილია სკვითი ბერების სახელით. რომელთაგან ყველაზე გამორჩეულები იყვნენ იოანე კასიანი, დიონისე (Exiguus), იოანე მაქსენტი და სხვები. ბერძნული და ლათინური ენების შესანიშნავი მცოდნენი, რომლებიც ლათინურს იყენებდნენ თავიანთი ნაშრომების ენად, ადასტურებენ უმაღლეს დონეს თეოლოგიური, ფილოსოფიური, იურიდიული და ასტრონომიული ცოდნისა, რომელსაც, მათი გადმოცემით, თავიანთ სამშობლოში არსებულ სკოლებსა და მონასტრებში დაეუფლნენ. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ასეთი დაწესებულებების არსებობის შესახებ დოკუმენტები მოგვეპოვება, მათი რაოდენობა მცირეა და, სამწუხაროდ, ძალიან ნაკლებად არის ცნობილი. არსებობს ასობით ლათინური და ბერძნულენოვანი ეპიგრაფიკული მტკიცებულება, რომლებიც ეხება სოციალურ, სამხედრო და რელიგიურ საქმიანობას. ისინი ბოლო 200 წლის განმავლობაში დღევანდელი დობრუჯასა და მის შემოგარენშია აღმოჩენილი. ეს მტკიცებულებები ასახავს ბერძნული და ლათინური კულტურული ელემენტების დანერგვის დინამიკას დუნაისა და ზღვას შორის მიწებზე და მათ მიღებას ადგილობრივი მოსახლეობის მიერ.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ძველი რომაული კულტურა და ცივილიზაცია, სამოქალაქო და რელიგიური დაწესებულებები, სკვითი ბერები, რომაული დობრუჯა

It is generally known that among historical sources, epigraphic testimonies are appreciated by researchers as the most precious resources in establishing concrete elements related to ancient civilizations. If the old chronicles and other documentary testimonies that have reached us require an in-depth critical study to establish historical truths, being often vitiated by the author's subjectivity, erroneous knowledge, or successive copies into which inaccuracies have crept in, the epigraphic testimonies always appear in their original form, exactly as they were written and read by the ancients. Where present, they reproduce elements that, in collaboration with other testimonies, complete the picture of the religious, social, administrative and economic life of a culture of a certain time and space. In the following, we will try to bring to attention some remarkable inscriptions from Scythia Minor, highlighting defining notes of the cultural synthesis here, such as elements of pagan and Christian religion, features of philosophy, as well as the

phenomenon of Romanization, manifested especially among the rural population. Among this population, in addition to numerous colonists and veterans from all corners of the empire, there was an autochthonous Getic element, which, according to historical testimonies, made the majority - "*The Greeks here are mixed with the Getae, But the wild Getae the Greeks*" (Ovidius Publius Naso, 2019: 333). This Romanized population will later make the Latin language preeminent in Scythia Minor in the 4th-5th centuries, both as vernacular language, in the form of *Vulgar Latin*, and as the *cultured language* in which the great personalities of the church here, those whom history mentions as Scythian monks, wrote and became known.

I. Funerary Inscriptions

Tombstones and funerary monuments contain the most epigraphic evidence that survived Greco-Roman antiquity in Scythia Minor. As today, these were not only intended to commemorate the deceased but also to mark their social status that they had while they were alive. They were often the support of funerary epigrams in verse, containing philosophical ideas and even quotes from classical works, such as Homeric poems or from Hesiod's catalogues with the appellations enshrined there (Buzoianu, Bărbulescu, 2013: 318). These ideas and quotes expressed elements related to the temporality of man, the unpredictability of fate, the mourning of those left behind, etc., but they also have distinct notes of philosophical currents such as Stoicism and Platonism, such as the acceptance of the idea that "death erases suffering" and "everything becomes ashes" or that life, in its spiritual form, continues even after death. They express the momentary moods of the survivors and provides us with an insight into how these philosophical ideas of the time were assimilated by those who composed these epigrams. They give us concrete data about the deceased, such as their age and occupation, but at the same time they often present them in idealized forms, being defined by piety, beauty, politeness, friendship, dignity, wisdom. For example, the epithet *pius* appears frequently, in its superlative form: *parentes pientissimi, pientissimo patri* or *filiis piisimis*, as we can see on an inscription from Tomis dedicated to the Mani Gods by the "*pius*" parents of two young people who died at 27 and 30 years old, respectively. The large number of these epigrams is an indication of the existence, especially in the urban settlements of Scythia Minor, of workshops of poetic creation, as well as of schools where classical works and philosophy were studied. These epigrams sometimes become themselves small works of literary art, conveying feelings and experiences that transcend time and space, still sharing the same emotions with those who read them today.

One of the most beautiful and well-known of them, discovered at Tomis, is that written in Greek for a man called Eros. It exposes the point of view of a stoic, who

does not believe in the immortality of the soul, and it also reveals his philosophical thinking:

"But the dead miss nothing more, [as] there is no love for those who have gone, but the dead lie like a stone stuck in the middle of the field, scattering their flesh in the fresh earth. Therefore, leaving them the honest glory of life, take yourself, bearing with all the possessions, flesh love. From water, earth and breath I was made before. Once dead, I lie [here], giving everyone everything. That is enshrined among the immortals. But what is more? The weakened body scattered where it came from." (Aricescu, 1963: 8)

With these words, the author expresses the idea of the materiality and perishability of the human being destined, after death, to reintegration into the circuit of nature. He sees these things as a given, a fate, a destiny that we cannot oppose and, therefore, he does not express any regret towards those who have left this earth. (Aricescu, 1963: 8)

Another funerary epigram, dated to the late 3rd century or early 4th century, discovered in mid '70 at Constanța (Tomis), is the one dedicated by his parents to a child named *Lillas*. In A. Aricescu's translation it sounds like this:

„Nothing depends on human beings, everything changes under the (power) of destiny.

Indeed, I too have striven to raise my child and lead him to ideals.

But against my will, the decision (of destiny) was made before, through this tomb.

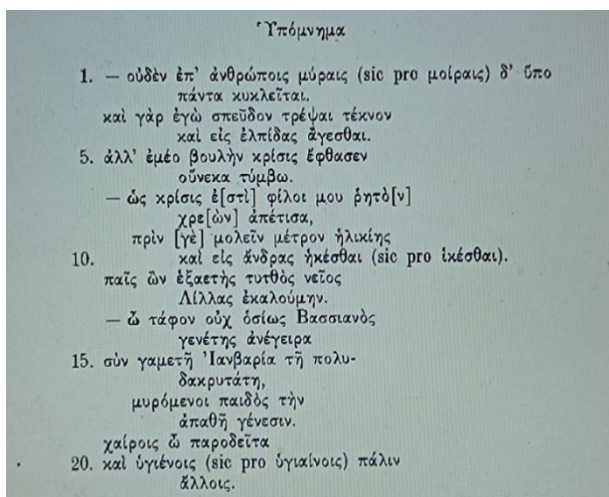
"As proved by the decision (of destiny), my beloved ones, I have paid my doomed fate, before reaching adulthood and joining the ranks of men.

As a 6-year-old child, young and small, my name was Lillas."

"To whom I erected this grave as I should not (abnormally), I, Bassianos, the father, with my wife, Januaria, who is much too tearful, mourning together the happy birth of the child."

"Rejoice, passers-by, and be healthy especially for others." (Aricescu, 1963: 8)

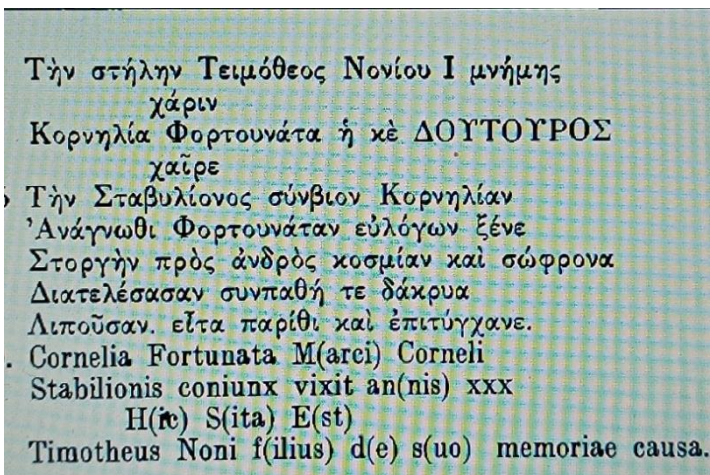
In the case of premature deaths, there is a violation of natural norms, hence the awareness of injustice in addition to the pain caused by the event. The fatality of the act is attributed to fate, *Fatum* or the *moirails*: *"But my will was taken before*



the decision (of fate), through this grave". (Aricescu, 1963: 8) Here, destiny is assimilated to providence, although the *moirails* are also indirectly addressed, according to Stoic philosophy, widespread in the *Late* Roman epoch. They are often invoked in the non-Christian funerary inscriptions of the era not only in Tomis, but also in the entire Mediterranean area. The names which appear in this inscription are also of particular importance. If *Bassianos* and *Ianuarina* are typical Roman names, *Lillas* is a name with Thracian roots, although it can also be a diminutive of the latin name *Laelius*. (Aricescu, 1963: 9) Another remarkable fact that this inscription reveals is that although the text is written in Greek, the names are Roman and possibly Thracian, being a proof of the ethno-cultural synthesis so remarkable in Scythia Minor.

Another funerary stele, also from Tomis, attracts attention by being bilingual, containing two different texts, which are related, written in Greek and Latin and being made of high-quality marble. The stela consists of two registers. In the upper part, the scene of the funeral banquet is carved. The man lying on the *kline*, leaning on his right hand. The woman, next to him, sitting on a chair, has a rich garment, falling in folds all the way down. The heads of both the man and the woman are missing. In front of the *kline* there is a table with three legs. At the edge, on the right and on the left, there is a slave. Everything is carved with great finesse showing the hand of an extremely skilled sculptor. The second register includes the inscription. In this

space, 2 cm deeper than the level of the slab, is delimited on the edge with a profiled border. On the space that separates the two registers there are two lines of inscription in Greek, completely preserved. Part of the funeral banquet scene and an unadorned part,



from the base, are destroyed. Limestone deposits and erosions in the marble can be observed on the entire surface. The writing is neat, with the letters evenly cut and close to each other. The ligatures are missing, and the line is prominent.

In the upper part, is the Greek text, on seven lines, apart from the two lines between the registers, with small distances between them. Below it, follows the Latin text in four lines. The letters are 1.2-1.4 cm high, except for the abbreviation

H S E (r. 2) which is double height, i.e. 2.4 cm. The content of the text translated and reconstructed by A. Aricescu is as follows:

Greek text: *"Teimotheus son of Nonios (placed) the stele as a sign of remembrance.*

« Cornelia Fortunata.? »

Enjoy!

" Distinguished stranger, learn that the tender and wise Cornelia Fortunata, wife of Stabillio, ended up loving her husband, leaving him in pain and tears.

(After you read these) go well and have luck ».

b) The Latin text: *« Cornelia Fortunata, the wife of M. Cornelius Stabillio, lived 30 years.*

« Here she is placed,

< Timotheus, son of Nonius, of his own means (set up this monument) as remembrance"(fig.1)

This inscription also contains clear evidence of Greco-Roman synthesis firstly by the fact that it is bilingual but also by proper names that are both Latin and Greek. The relationship between the owners of these names is also interesting. If the two spouses, Stabillio and Cornelia Fortunata have Latin names, the one who erected the monument has a Greek name - Timotheus, and the patronymic is Nonius - a Latin name. He must have been a relative of the deceased, who took the name Fortunata by marriage, after her husband's Roman surname. The fact proves



that in the 3rd and 4th centuries we can already speak of an ethnic synthesis between the Latin element and the oldest one of the Greek populations and even the Geto-Dacian one.

Fig. 1

In terms of content, researcher A. Aricescu observes the use of poetic terms, rarely found in prose inscriptions. This fact shows the existence in Tomis of an elevated literary culture that could only be appreciated and spread among a highly educated population, undoubtedly acquired in local cultural and education institutions.

The funerary inscriptions also contain interesting data about the spread of Christianity in Scythia Minor. Thus, in the vocabulary and sculptural motifs of the funerary stelae, elements of the new faith appear progressively, starting with the second half of the 4th century, framed at the beginning by elements specific to pre-Christian funerary epigraphy. On a funerary stela from Tomis, from the beginning of the 4th century, although a Christian symbol appears, namely the dove, the text does not contain any clue related to the new religion. (Munteanu, 1977: 100)

Another Christian inscription from the same metropolis also includes pagan elements. Besides the Christian formulation- *spiritum deo redere* - (to give the soul to God), the closing formula is the well-known greeting - *Ave vale viator* (farewell passerby)- found on many Roman funerary monuments. (Popescu, 1977: 12). The phenomenon is explained by the fact that when the Christians left the catacombs, after the decree of Mediolan in 313 of Constantine the Great, there were not enough Christian sculptors or epigramists who could create texts in accordance with the teachings of the new religion. However, in Scythia Minor, since the beginning of the 4th century, purely Christian epigraphic documents appear, completing the picture of the religious life here, sometimes confirming documentary sources, such as the acts of martyrdom, the minutes of the ecumenical synods, also attended the bishops of Tomis, or the occasional descriptions of the homeland found in the works of the Scythian monks, such as John Cassian and Dionysius Exiguus (the Humble One).

One of the important testimonies in this category is a part of a limestone cross (fig 2), discovered near Mangalia, which on one side has the words "light-life" written in Greek, and on the other side, in Latin "here a prayer was made for the commemoration of bishop Stefan...". According to specialists, this comes from the 4th and 5th centuries, and confirms the



Fig. 2

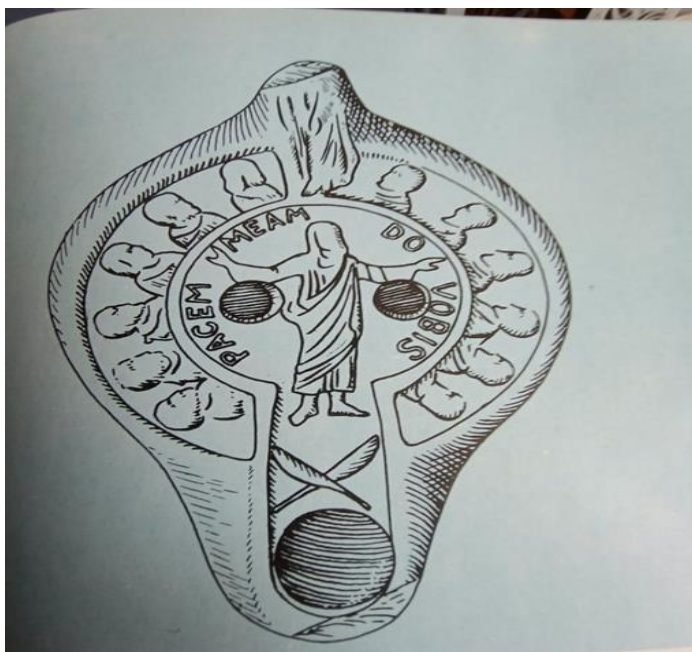
documentary testimonies, attesting to the existence of a bishopric See of Calatis. (Munteanu, 1977: 100)

Another fragmentary marble slab, from Tomis, from a martitium, commemorates a former bishop whose name has not been preserved, but supposed to be Titus or Philus, mentioned in the Acta Sanctorum on 3rd of January. He suffered during the persecution of Licinius in the years 319-320, his tomb being rebuilt later, probably in the 4th-5th century. And this artifact comes to confirm the documentary testimonies regarding the existence of an episcopal seat in Tomis. (Munteanu, 1977: 100)

II- Inscriptions on household objects

Apart from the funerary monuments, epigraphic markings can also be found on the personal and household items that belonged to the ancient inhabitants of Scythia Mynor. On such objects, such as amphorae and oil lamps, formulas such as the Grace of God, God Help, God is almighty, Mother of God, Mary gives birth to Christ, frequently appear in the Christian period. These short formulas can also be linked to the theological turmoil of the 5th-6th century which, at the Third Ecumenical Synod (431), also concerned the cult of the Mother of God.

Among these objects we note a Christian ceramic oil lamp from the 4th century on which we can see a representation of the 12 apostles and the Saviour Jesus Christ, framed by the biblical text written in Latin PACEM MEAM DO VOBIS. (fig.3)



Among the Christian epigraphic testimonies related to Scythia Minor, one of the most important and spectacular is that found on the object called "The Plate of Paternus" (fig.4), *Fig. 3* discovered in 1912 at

Malaja Pereščepina near Poltava, in Ukraine, as part of a treasury of a proto-

Bulgarian chagan. This plate of Byzantine origin comes from the 6th-7th century and once belonged to Metropolitan Paternus of Tomis. It is 61 cm in diameter and weighs 6,224 g. The weight of the raw material (silver and gold) is certified by an inscription on the back. The total of 6,855.59 g differs quite a lot from the actual weight, but this fact is normal, because due to corrosion, part of the disc was lost. Four guarantee stamps indicate the production of the disc during the reign of Emperor Anastasios. One of them has the inscription DN ANASTASIV(s) PP AVG, and another contains the name of Ioannes Kometos, identified with Ioannes Paphlagonianus, who in 498 was *comes sacrarum largitionum*. In the central part of the disk is a large chrismon, which is flanked by the letters alpha and omega. Around the central part is written the text +EX ANTIQVIS RENOVATVM EST PER PATERNVN REVERENTISS (imum) EPISC (opum) NOSTRVN AMEN+. Restoring *ex antiquis* means that silver and gold were taken from other objects and melted down to make this new disc. The border is decorated with various zoomorphic motifs and vines. On this edge, eight gold medallions with cruciform decoration were later inserted, in which precious stones were embedded (these were lost). The modification was made in a barbarian workshop, and the addition of the crosses emphasized the Christian significance of the disk, of which the owner was aware. Bishop Paternus is none other than the one mentioned in Tomis at the end of the 5th century and in the first two decades of the 6th century and is known as the first metropolitan of Scythia Minor in 520. The inscription shows that the disk was in the possession of this bishop and that it was offered to him by the Tomitian citizens, after 498. The fact that the language used for the votive inscription is Latin indicates that at the beginning of the 6th century, this language was prevalent in the use of the church of Scythia Minor.



Fig.4

III- Homage and votive inscriptions

Another category of inscriptions, discovered in Scythia Minor, are those present on certain public monuments commemorating important events in the history of the citadel or the empire, and the votive ones, through which whole communities or

prominent citizens showed their gratitude and paid their respects to Roman emperors or various deities.

Regarding the quantitative and qualitative ratio and the area of distribution of the inscriptions, it can be noted that those in Greek are more often found, especially in the big cities on the seashore, and those in Latin are common in the interior of the province and in the settlements on the banks of the Danube. (Popescu, 1977: 101)

Both Greek and Latin were used mainly in their vulgar form typical of South-Eastern Europe. Researched from a phonetic and morphological point of view, these inscriptions denote linguistic phenomena that led to the evolution of Vulgar Latin towards the Romanian language spoken today. We can also see the evolution of some Greek words towards the form in which they were assimilated in Romanian. The quality of the language of an inscription is also given by the social or cultural status of the one who orders it and by the place where it is made. Inscriptions from rural areas are often of poor quality, both grammatically and calligraphically, as well as the material on which they are applied.

After the 5th century, the Byzantine Empire, weakened by internal struggles, islamic expansion, and barbarian raids could no longer control the Danube border, and lost most of the former province of Scythia Minor. Certain heavily fortified cities, such as Tomis and Histria, remained under Byzantine control for a while, eventually falling under the blows of the Avars, proto-Bulgarians and Slavs at the beginning of the 7th century. The Romanized population does not disappear, however, and begins to be remembered by the historical sources under the name of *vlahs* or *romanois* (speakers of the Latin language), living both in Dobrogea and in the rest of the Balkans alongside Bulgarians and other Slavic peoples. It comes to have an important political role in the battles between the new formed empire called by scholars the Romanian-Bulgarian one, and Byzantium in the 12th century. Regarding the Christian faith and the cult, the Romanian scholar Ștefan Pascu claims, quite rightly, in an older work, that "*the Latin language is not definitively replaced by the Slavonic one until the 11th century and the Romanians had not completely broken their ties with the Church of Rome until this time. The rite is increasingly oriented towards Byzantium, but the ecclesiastical language remains Latin*" (Prunduș, Plaianu, 1994: 33). The proof is provided by a codice from the 11-th century that is preserved in the library of the University of Zagreb. Written in Latin, it contains a lyurgical rite consisting in a combination between the Roman and the Byzantine ones, specifying that it is the rite used by Saint Niceta, Bishop of Remesiana (present-day Bela Palanka, Serbia), in the Roman province of Dacia Mediterranea, who preached the Christian faith between the Goths and the Dacians at the south and north of Danube.

Through its rich archaeological heritage, the land between the Danube and the sea, today called Dobrogea and in ancient times Scythia Minor (Dură, 2006: 15-45), offers the Romanian people almost a thousand years of documentary and archeological attested history, between the 2nd and 12th centuries, while the rest of the area of Romanian ethnogenesis, the so-called Carpathian- Danubiano-Pontic space, the material and documentary evidence of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages is, as in other parts of Europe, scarce. These testimonies, and also the very concrete reality of the existence today's Romanians, with their unified language and civilization, and the consciousness of their own identity, testify to what many scholars call a miracle of history, namely, the continuity and existence in these lands (Dură, 2023: 185-202), of a people of Latin origin in a sea of Slavs.

To be able to understand this "miraculous" phenomenon of Romanization and the continuity of our ancestors in these lands, as well as the way in which they have appropriated, in late antiquity, the values of Greco-Roman civilization, the epigraphic testimonies from Scythia Minor, from which we pointed only a few of the most prominent, constitute to be a generous field of research, which is enriched even today through new discoveries.

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