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THE LATE ANTIQUE DONARIUM FROM BIRTHÄLM (BIERTAN) IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMAN RELIGION

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Abstract

This paper deals with the famous Biertan Donarium. The Donarium is a fourth-century Christian votive object found near the small town of Biertan, in Transylvania, Romania. Made out of bronze in the shape of a Labarum, it has the Latin text EGO ZENOVIUS VOTUM POSVI, which can be approximately translated as "I, Zenovius, offered this as fulfilment of my vow". In this paper we put this important piece, which had been part of the décor of a church, into the context of early Christian religion, which was still much linked to the classical pagan ways of veneration in the context of Roman Religion. For ancient Roman religion as well as for modern Christians it seems that the relational framework of mutual gratitude between men and deities is quite the same.

Keywords: Roman religion, Early Christianity, votum, vow, Late Antiquity

1. Introduction

The renowned piece from Late Antiquity (Figure 1), first discovered in 1775 and rediscovered in the archives of the Brukenthal-Museum in Sibiu/Hermannstadt in 1940 by Kurt Horedt, was considered for a long time an important prove for the continuity of a Romanized and Latin speaking population in today Romania during the Migration Period. This hypothesis was used to claim that the Hungarians conquered in the Middle Ages a Proto-Romanian Transylvania with a population, descended from the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. This politically blurred view, endorsed by nationalist and later on communist leaders, was settled after 1990. As there is no ecclesiastical context, not even remains of a chapel or an hermitage at the spot where the Donarium had been found, today most of the scholars, also in Romania, hold that we have to deal with an important piece which seems to have been part of the prey of a Germanic looter, who took this Donarium with him to his dwellings in Transylvania [1, 2]. For the questions touched in this paper mainly the attached text is of interest, and not the Christogram connected to it (which had itself a now lost candelabra attached below). The text in bronze reads EGO ZENOVIUS VOTUM POSVI ("I, Zenovius, offered this as fulfilment of my

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vow") and represents a classical formula for votive inscriptions in Roman Religion. With this formula a dedicator wants to thank a deity for a service for which he promised a solemn vow, which is fulfilled with the deposition of the object in a temple (or a temple area, *temenos*), or, as in this case, in a church. As evidently this inscription, dated to the 4th century AD, is of Christian origin and addresses the Christian God, this leads us to the questions that will be shortly analysed in this paper: Can we have a clue about the religious disposition of this Zenovius who is addressing his God in the same way as a 'heathen' would for Jupiter, Minerva or Hercules? With this question we touch upon the intersection of ancient pagan cults and Christian religion, asking if the indubitably dogmatic differences and our modern concept of Christianity do not distract us too much from some basic and often underestimated communalities between Roman cult and Christian religion, which – in the end – is in its origins a very ancient and Greco-Roman feature.

Figure 1. The Biertan Donarium [Algos, Creative commons licence, Wiki Commons].

2. What is Roman religion?

What is Roman religion? Despite the fact that since the seminal book by Georg Wissowa (1st edn. 1902, 2nd edn. 1912) several modern scholars published handbooks and compendia on this subject, some essential questions concerning the true character of Roman religion are still disputed [3]. While the classical view draws heavily on its traits as civic religion, as a part of the public manifestation of a society, a new trend in recent scholarship also stresses the

'personal' and 'private' aspects of Roman Religion as part of personal religious experience of the faithful individuals [4, 5].

On the basis of the Donarium of Biertan and with reference to a whole series of other votive inscriptions, I would now like to fundamentally question the prevailing concept of 'civic religion' for Ancient Religions of the Mediterranean and question the separation emphasized in mainstream research between public cult, supportive of the state and essential for public manifestations, which is regarded as typical of ancient polytheism, and private religiosity on the other side, which is ascribed by scholars to a – especially modern – Christian ideology and seems unsuitable for describing ancient religions. The strict division of religious phenomena in the Roman Empire into a public area of 'state religion' and into a private area often devaluingly connected with the negatively connoted term 'superstitio' does not seem appropriate, which I would like to explain in more detail below.

My thesis – which I will supplement with examples of ex-voto inscriptions from Dacia and Lower Moesia in the further course of this article – could be summarized in one sentence and formulated like this: The emphasis on the so-called 'state cult' or 'state religion' in the Roman republican and imperial context, in which the social role of religious behaviour and the ritual side of ancient religions appear overemphasized. This concept does not do justice to the realities of religious choices and individual cult practices. Reflections on religious phenomena in the Roman Empire, but also and especially in Rome itself, must start from the diversity of polytheistic options and take into account the fundamental fact that there is a binding basis for any cultic action, also within the framework of the so-called 'state religion': the individually founded conviction of the cult participants that superior beings (gods, numina) do exist and have influence on the fate of human beings and can be influenced by their actions (prayers, offerings, etc.). In this context, individuals act in the consciousness of a religious horizon of experience that presupposes direct contact with the numinous, the 'sacred' (in Rudolf Otto's phenomenology). This direct contact, which is based on personal religious experience and which is not dependent on community ritual action in public space, is the basis for understanding religious action, including that of the Romans and the inhabitants of the Roman provinces.

3. 'Ex voto' and votive offerings

In what follows, I will underline the important connection between Roman Religion and personal piety, direct and personal devotion connected to one or more deities, who are usually addressed for support. The direct relationship to the deity is clearly expressed above all in ex-voto inscriptions, or in inscriptions, which had been erected as consequence of divinatory dreams. Ulrike Ehmig has recently published an important essay on ex-voto inscriptions which presents fundamental considerations. She was able to evaluate 12,000 epigraphic texts using the databases. She stresses the following for the way of

thinking behind these inscriptions: "It was a widespread practice in the Greek and Roman world to call on one or more deities for help for the fulfilment of a personal wish or in existential danger. In the event that the gods granted their support, the petitioners promised a consideration." [6, p. 298]

Let's have a look at a few examples from the multitude of possible samples. The personal reference to a god can most directly be observed in the context of the healing cults when people are in direct and immediate need and danger due to illness or injury.

1. Sarmizegetusa (IDR III/2 153): *Aes(culapio) et Hyg(iae) / pro salute / Aeliae Florae / et Mett(iorum) Proteni Cas/siani Florae filiae / C(aius) Met(t)ius Cassian(us) IIvir / col(oniae) v(otum) s(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*. For the health of his wife, two sons and one daughter, the Duumvir (this is something like a mayor or leading local politician in a provincial Roman city) dedicated this altar to Colonia Ulpia Traiana. The dedicator belongs to the upper class (Cognomen Protenus refers to Greek origin).
2. Sarmizegetusa (IDR III/2, 163): *Aesculap(io) / et Hygiae / pro salute / Lucilla[e fil(iae)] / P(ublius) Flacc(inius) F[el(ix)] / dec(urio) coll(egii) fab(rum) / ex voto*. Publius Flaccinius Felix, the *decurio* of the *collegium fabrum* (comparable probably to the president of the chamber of crafts), dedicated the altar for the health and recovery of his daughter. (Possibly a freedman: Cognomen Felix, certainly well positioned socially).
3. Sarmizegetusa (IDR III/2, 162): *Aesculapio et / Hygiae / P(ublius) Flaccinius Felix / ex voto*. This is the same Publius Flaccinius Felix as in IDR III/2, 163 (see above), he had already been helped by the healing gods Aesculap and Hygia, as this somewhat shorter votive inscription shows.
4. Sarmizegetusa (IDR III/2, 246): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) / Iunoni [M]inervae / diis(!) consentibus / Saluti Fortunae / Reduci Apollini / Dianae V[ic]trici / Nemesi Me[r]curio / Herculi Soli Invicto / Aesculapio Hygiae diis(!) / deabusq(ue) immortalib(us) / P(ublius) Aelius Hammonius / v(ir) e(gregius) proc(urator) Augg(ustorum)*. The case of Aelius Hammonius, who set this stone, an important personality, also known from another inscription (IDR III/2, 83), with a considerable *cursus honorum* (public career), offers further insights. Here the diversity of polytheism becomes apparent. Hammonius honours a multitude of deities in a broad sweep that represents quite a personal choice.
5. Băile Herculane (IDR III/1, 55): *Aesculap(io) / et Hygiae / pro salute Iuniae / Cyrillae quod a / longa infirmita/te virtute aqua/rum numinis sui / revocaverunt / T(itus) B(---) A(---) eius v(otum) s(otum) l(ibens) m(erito)*. This inscription is also very interesting because it does not display the donor publically. Usually inscriptions are also public reminders of the social role and importance of the benefactor. But here the donor remains anonymous, as he abbreviates his name. But even if we assume that he was such a celebrity that his name would have been known throughout the city also in this abbreviated form (T.B.A.), with this inscription the donor shows

individual gratitude to the helpful deity and renounces public display of performance and function.

6. IDR III/4, 92, Micasana, (Fliegendorf): *Deo Sar/omando / Demetri/us Antoni / votum libe/ns posuit*. The choice of the villager Demetrius, son of Antonius, who thanks the god Saromandus for a certain benefice, an obscure deity which is only mentioned once in this inscription, is quite extraordinary. To this day, scholars are still puzzling about the possible origin of this strange god. More important than the origin of Saromandus would be in this context the plenty and the diversity of possible divine helpers. Even obscure deities (in faraway Dacia) are at the disposal of the faithful.
7. Inlăceni (IDR III/4, 284): *Libero Pa[t]/ri deo P(ublius) Di[dius] / Italicus [praef(ectus)] / coh(ortis) IIII Hi[sp(ano/rum)] [eq(uitatae)] / secund[um] / interpre[tati]/onem so[mni]/orum se[3] / in tabula[rio vo]/tum cum v[ovit*. The case of Publius Didius Italicus from the Roman fort at Inlăceni refers to another important source of personal religiosity: The relevance of dreams and their interpretation. The gods communicated with people through dreams, an ordinary fact in ancient times that is somewhat difficult for us to understand today. In dreams the gods communicated and gave instructions (there are several parallels of similar content also in Dacia). In this case Publius was told in a dream to set this inscription for the god Liber Pater.
8 Micia (Veţel) (IDR III/3, 49): *Deo / Invicto / [P(ublius)] Ael(ius) Eupho/rus pro / salute sua / et suorum / templum a solo / fecit.* In the auxiliary fort Micia an altar was found, which had been donated by Publius Aelius Euphoros, of whom it is known that he was a Roman salt mine manager (on his public function IDR III/3, 119). This inscription documents his gratitude to Mithras/Sol invictus (who has also qualities of a healing deity in this context) for the preservation of his and his sister's health. In addition, the inscription shows that the benefactor was a very wealthy man, as he alone (*solo*) financed the construction of the temple for the god.

Another striking example is a recently published inscription from Romanian Dobruja (the ancient province of *Moesia Inferior*), found in the village Topolog [7]. *[I(oui) O(ptimo)] M(aximo) et / [I]unoni / Reg(inae) P(ublius) Lae(...) / Comicus u(otum) / lib(ens) sol(uit)* [Restitutio L. Bîrliba]. Here an inhabitant of a remote rural hamlet (a *vicus*), who in all probability was a freedman, if not a slave (the name Comicus, according to the editor of the inscription, indicates this), dedicated an altar for the most important 'official' Roman state deities Jupiter and Juno in gratitude for a certain benefice. We do not know which essential help of the deity it is. However, Ehmig was able to clearly define some categories of fulfilled wishes in ex-voto inscriptions. I will only mention the most important ones here: health (healing of illness), happy homecoming from journeys, salvation from distress at sea, military successes, victorious homecoming from campaigns, help with career goals (reaching higher positions), etc. The vow of Comicus must also come from one of these quite personal areas of life. Here the often claimed official character of the cult,

reinforced by the rank of the donors, mostly officials, 'politicians' or officers of the Roman legions in the big cities, is obviously missing. Here apparently a very simple man called on Capitoline deities and evidently received a favourable response. In the context of this inscription from a rural area, which is only one example among many others, the concepts of 'state religion' as opposed to private, thus inferior cults (because these also had been often labelled as 'foreign' and/or 'oriental' cults), of 'religio' as opposed to 'superstitio' come to their limits.

4. The Donarium in the context of Roman religion

At the end of this paper we have to ask a crucial question: is this form of religious communication, even if it is based on fixed formulas, so different from Christian prayer and the fundamental Christian idea that God can help the believer in personal distress? Let us remember that the scholars who stress the alleged 'alterity' of the polytheistic (Greek and Roman) religion repeatedly emphasize that Christian devotion has nothing to do with the pagan contractual thinking of a 'votive religion'. For the religion(s) of antiquity, which according to W. Burkert had been essentially 'votive religions' in the sense of an exchange of gifts [8, 9].

In this context, let us take another look at the inscription on the Donarium from Biertan. It actually shows – at least for early Christianity – the exact opposite. Christianity is, after all, an ancient religion from Antiquity, and in its development it is mainly influenced by Rome, and thus originates from that ancient thinking which, when the vow implored by God comes true, entails the fulfilment of the vow. Vows and a subsequent votive offering are by no means alien to Christian thinking. In this sense the dedication of Zenovius is to be understood. In a similar sense we have to understand the veneration of saints in the Middle Ages and still today in the Orthodox and especially in the Catholic Church. Body part votives in churches in Tyrol which remind of God's help or the healing with the help of a saint are still the order of the day even in our times. In the 18th and 19th centuries ex-voto paintings were fashionable among seafarers who survived heavy storms unharmed. In the 19th century these works of art had been commissioned by individuals or groups of sailors at the workshops of specialized marine painters. In the Chiesa dei Santi Alfio Filadelfo e Cirino in Trecastagni, Sicily, you will find hundreds of votive offerings, some dating back to 1900, and scenes that were later called miracles [10]. These are small pictures in a naive style that show the everyday religious devotion of the ordinary population. The one selected here, represents a women who has a kind of haemorrhage but is saved because her husband prayed to the three saints Alfio, Filadelfo and Cirino (Figure 2). But also in today Germany we find examples of such popular religiosity in a grotto near Horgenzell, a place where the Virgin Mary is venerated. Most striking is the example in the upper left of the image (Figure 3) - it reads 'Mary helped'. It is a coloured painting, probably by a child, referring to the escape of the family from the German Democratic

Republic, as one can tell by the barbed wire and other features of this barbarous border regime.

Figure 2. Votive tablet from the Chiesa dei Santi Alfio Filadelfo e Cirino in Trecastagni [Wiki Commons].

Figure 3. Votive tablets from Wolketsweiler (Horgenzell), Germany [Wiki Commons].

In a nutshell: very similar expressions of individual gratitude in the case of fulfilled prayers or salvation from an emergency apply to personal relationships with God in antiquity for pagans as well as Christians. Whether the vow entails certain more complex actions, such as Luther's entry into the monastery after salvation from a thunderstorm, or the very simple duty of setting an inscription stone with formulas that in many cases are repetitive, corresponding to the material resources and social prestige, or if the vow is redeemed with an inscription tablet with a Christogram hung up in a Christian church (like the Biertan Donarium), corresponds to one important common

fundamental thought - the conviction of being dependent on higher powers, which can be influenced by different forms of communication. Whether one subsumes this fact under 'cultic action' or 'faith' is, indeed, not a question of faith, but rather a question of concepts.

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