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OF A BRONZE VOTIVE TABLET FÜR IUPITER DOLICHENUS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 182 (2012) 312–314

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UBI FALSUM NASCITUR: ORIGINAL AND FALSIFICATION OF A BRONZE VOTIVE TABLET FOR IUPITER DOLICHENUS*

Iupiter Dolichenus is one of those ancient gods, whose name is only known by inscriptions. Epigraphic records of this cult were mainly found in the frontier provinces of the Roman Empire, and soldiers form the most vivid group of all dedicators. This led to the assumption, that the cult of Iupiter Dolichenus had been especially wide spread within the Roman army from the 1st to the 3rd century AD.¹

In 2005 a small inscribed bronze tablet was presented which fits this picture.² The *tabula ansata* (dimensions 15.5 × 8.2 × 0.08 cm) was found in the area of Svishtov (ancient Novae) in Bulgaria (fig. 1). Two holes for nails in the middle of the upper and lower part show that the tablet originally was fixed on a dedication to Iupiter Dolichenus. The height of the *litterae* is 1 cm, and their contours are engraved in fine lines on the sheet. Double stroke letters were not often used. They can be observed e. g. on the fragment of a late antique silver bowl from Chesterton (Durobrivae, Britannia)³ or on two *paterae* from Šumadija in Upper Moesia⁴.

It reads:

I(ovi) • O(ptimo) • M(aximo) • Dolichen(o)
 ubi • ferrum • na-
 scit(ur) • P(ublius) • Aelius Be-
 nivolus • dec(urio) • al-
 ae • Comagenor(um)
 iussu dei ipsius

This inscription is interesting not only because it mentions the *ala Comagenorum* for the first time in Upper Moesia, but also in view of the formula *ubi ferrum nascitur*, which refers to the origin of the god.⁵ The center of the cult of Dolichenus was the region of Comagena, which was considered as the “native” place of Dolichenus.⁶ Early activities in extracting iron are attested in this area.⁷ Furthermore, in Antiquity it was believed that iron (and other metals) were born, like the child from the womb of the mother. Together with this tabula five inscriptions with this epithet are known, the others originating from Alba Iulia in Dacia

* We would like to thank Victor Cojocaru and Werner Eck for improvements and clarifications to our manuscript.

¹ M. P. Speidel, *The Religion of Iuppiter Dolichenus in the Roman Army*, Leiden 1978; E. Schwertheim, *Die Denkmäler orientalischer Gottheiten im römischen Deutschland*, Leiden 1974, 305–315; M. Hörig, E. Schwertheim, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Dolicheni (CCID)*, Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain 106, Leiden 1987.

² N. Markov, Една нова войскова единица в долна мизия от втората четвърт на II век (според открит наскоро посветителен надпис). *Acta Musei Varnaensis* VII-2, Varna 2008, 253–258; AE 2008, 1187.

³ RIB 2414.1; *Britannia* 7, 1976, 385 no. 32 with fig. 28 and tab. XXXII A.

⁴ IMS I 170 and 171; IV 129. See also a silver plate from AD 318 in: M. Mirković, *Moesia Inferior. Eine Provinz an der mittleren Donau*, Mainz 2007, 89 fig. 82, or the round bronze plate CIL 14, 163 (= E. Hübner, *Exempla scripturae epigraphicae Latinae a Caesaris dictatoris morte ad aetatem Iustiniani*, Berlin 1885, 320 no. 916) from Ostia, now in the database “Antike Bronzen in Berlin” (<http://emp-web-24.zetcom.ch/eMuseumPlus>) with the Inv. Nr. 2504.

⁵ Cf. Speidel (n. 1) 44–45; K. Roesch, Kommagene – Das Land ‘ubi ferrum nascitur’, AW 6 Sondernr. *Kommagene*, Küsnacht 1975, 15–17; U. Bianchi, I.O.M.D. Ubi ferrum nascitur, in: G. M. Bellelli, U. Bianchi (eds.), *Orientalia Sacra Urbis Romae Dolichena et Heliopolitana. Recueil d’études archéologiques et historico-religieuses sur les cultes cosmopolites d’origine commagénienne et syrienne*, Rom 1997, 591–597; Markov (n. 2) 254–255.

⁶ A. Schütte-Maischitz, E. Winter, *Doliche – Eine kommagenische Stadt und ihre Götter: Mithras und Iupiter Dolichenus*, Bonn 2004.

⁷ See K. Roesch (n. 5). Some authors also mention it as the land of the Chalybes, who are said to have been the first to extract iron. For a new, highly instructive interpretation of the term Chalybes see now E. Olshausen, Chalyben – Autonym oder Xenonym?, in: E. Olshausen, V. Sauer (eds.), *Die Schätze der Erde – Natürliche Ressourcen in der antiken Welt*, Stuttgart 2012, 337–344.



Fig. 1 (N. Markov)

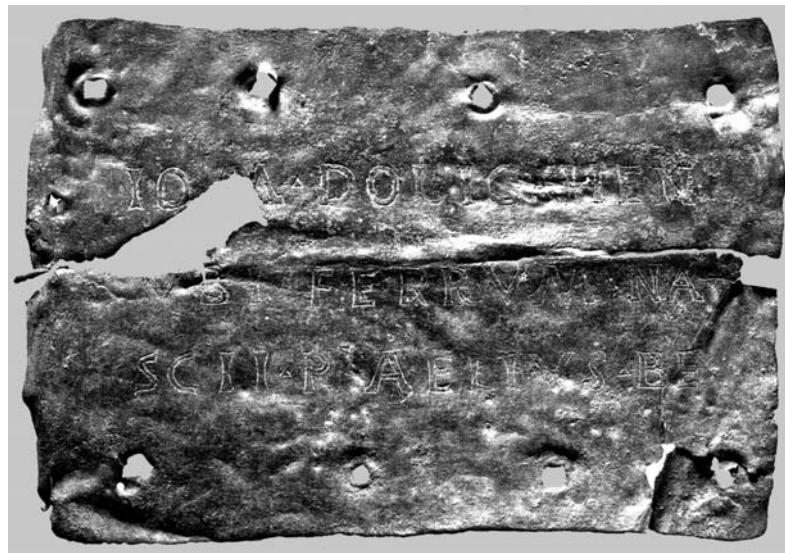


Fig. 2. Hermann Historica, Katalog Auktion 63

(... *nato ubi ferrum exor[itur]*)⁸, from Pfünz in Raetia⁹, from Rome¹⁰ and from Heddernheim in Germania Superior¹¹. In the latter, a small dedication on a silver sheet by two persons, we find the formula *ex imperio ipsius pro se et suis*, which is quite comparable to that of Publius Aelius Benivolus who dedicated the piece, to which the tabula once belonged, obeying the god himself. Therefore it is not a dedication fulfilling a *votum*, but a reaction maybe to a dream.

In the second half of 2011 another bronze tablet with the enigmatic formula *ubi ferrum nascitur* appeared in an auction catalogue.¹² Measuring 22.5 × 16 × 0.07 cm, it supposedly was part of a south German collection (fig. 2). Like in many other cases of objects dealt on the antiquities market there was no information available concerning the find spot.

Four holes above and below the inscription indicate that the sheet originally may have been fixed with eight nails. On the left side a 0.7–0.8 cm wide part of the rim is bent backwards (90°) to form a sidebar. The inscription consists of three lines. There is no framing. On the left side a part of the tablet is broken away,

⁸ CIL 3, 1128; ILS 4303; CCID 151.

⁹ CIL 3, 11927 und p. 2328, 201; AE 1889, 68; IBR 271; ILS 4301; CCID 481.

¹⁰ CIL 6, 30947 (p. 3758), cf. 6, *423; ILS 4302; CCID 427.

¹¹ CIL 13, 7342b (4, p. 125); ILS 9284; CCID 517 with tab. CXII; AE 1902, 17.

¹² Herrmann Historica Auction 63, Catalogue Antike Lot no. 1739 with photo. http://www.hermann-historica.de/auktion63/ebook/Antiken_02/index.html#/130/.

but the reading is not harmed. The text seems to be identical to that in the above mentioned dedication from the area of Svishtov:

I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) • Dolic • hen(o)
 ubi • ferrum • na-
 sci<i = t>(ur) • P(ublius) • Aelius • Be

But it consists only of the first three lines. As there are no signs that the tablet is broken below the last three lines could only have been written on a second tablet of the same size. That would be very unusual and rises first doubts on the authenticity of the object. A closer look to the text shows important differences to the first tablet.

First, it concerns the points used as word separators. In all three lines we find the same isosceles triangles pointing to the top and with an exact vertical basis. In the text of the tabula ansata triangles are also used, but their form is more vivid with different orientation and in most cases slightly curved lines. Furthermore in the first line the points are not used between the letters *I O M*, but then between the *C* and *H* of *Dolichen(o)*. Both features are very unusual.

The kind of letters in a double-stroke capital is the same as on the other tablet, the contours of them are fine engraved. There is no doubt that the hand that engraved the characters was intently careful. However, the result is a less natural writing, because the characters are less vivid and more strict and rigidly engraved. All the more the mistake in line 2/3 is surprising, where the verb *nascit(ur)* appears wrongly as *nascii* (!).¹³

Moreover, it attracts attention that in contrast to the tabula ansata from Svishtov the second tablet provides much more space for all lines. But neither the last *O* of *Dolicheno* nor more letters of the cognomen of the dedicatory were written in line 1 and 3, nor was the word *na/scii* written in one line. There is no doubt that in the first tablet the division of verses (as well as the omission of the last *O* in *Dolicheno*) is due to the lack of space; but even if the dedicatory would have wanted to make two tablets with the same text, it would have made no sense maintaining the same line division in the second tablet.

All these observations give very good reason to suspect that the second text is a modern copy, using the tabula ansata from the area of Svishtov as a template. This raises the question whether the bronze tablet itself is modern or if the text was written on an ancient anepigraphic support. Having seen it once and judging from the photos, all that can be said is that this very thin tablet is evenly flat. It shows traces of corrosion, but it is not possible to say without doubt that it is an ancient tablet, as it could have suffered some special treatments to appear older. Only archaeometallurgical analysis could give us sufficient arguments to decide this question undoubtedly.

On the other hand, observations concerning the missing parts of the tablet infecting even some letters, especially the *M* in line 1 and the *B* in line 2, lead to the assumption that at least a part of the damage was done after the incising of the text. Taken all these observations together it seems most probable that the tablet comes from a modern workshop.¹⁴

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¹³ We can only wonder if that might be the same case already observed by P. M. Billanovich in her study of 18th century Italian fake copies: “Al contrario di quanto forse giudicheremmo di primo impeto, gli errori innumerevoli di cui sono costellati molti pezzi moderni non vanno tutti ascritti all’ignoranza e alla fretta di artigiani maldestri; talvolta si tratta di varianti che il fabbricante, per sviare i sospetti dell’acquirente (...) immise ad arte nella copia onde distinguerla dall’originale. (...) Infatti per molti dei pezzi (...) ci apparirà ben chiaro come bastassero varianti minime a fare ritenere distinte, e perciò ambedue autentiche, due epigrafi altramenti eguali”; cf. M. P. Billanovich, *Falsi epigrafici*, *Italia Medioevale e Umanistica* 10, 1967, 25–110 (37–38).

¹⁴ We have to take into consideration that hundreds of people in Bulgaria are living from the production of “antiquities”.