

# CULTS OF ANATOLIAN LOCAL GODS IN MOESIA SUPERIOR THROUGH THE EYES OF THEIR WORSHIPPERS

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## Abstract

*With only a few studies about the cults originating from the Eastern provinces, mainly interpreted through archaeological and epigraphical material and architectural remains, it is not easy to analyse and interpret how immigrants from Eastern provinces settled in the new province of Moesia Superior, and how Romanised inhabitants in the same territory experienced cults of Asia Minor and Syrian origin. Thus, it can be perceived that certain cults, such as those of Asia Minor local gods equated with the god Zeus/Jupiter, enjoyed popularity not only among the population originating from the Eastern provinces, but also presumably among some Romanised citizens. The reasons for venerating those deities were varied, depending on the dedicator's origin, profession and social status, but in the cases where small communities of phratra/collegia existed, one of the main reasons was that the devotees stayed loyal to their home gods and goddesses in the wish to preserve their national identity and tradition.*

**Key words:** *Asia Minor – Syria – Moesia Superior – cults.*

The subject of “Oriental” cults in the territory of the Roman province of Moesia Superior, unfortunately has not been systematically studied until now, yielding only a few studies dedicated to the problematic of the cults of Asia Minor, Syrian, Egyptian or Persian origin.<sup>1</sup> Sporadic articles about mentioned cults mainly deal with the finds related to some of these deities, but do not elaborate in great depth on all of the other important elements, such as the possible sacral spaces, ritual practices, beliefs and experiences of inhabitants who accepted or maintained religious customs and tradi-

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1 Zotović 1966; Zotović 1973; Gavrilović Vitas 2021.

tions of “Oriental” deities (their degree of knowledge about the theology of a particular cult) etc. Through combining epigraphic, iconographic, archaeological and burial testimonies, we will attempt to clarify some of the relevant questions.

In the corpus of votive and funerary monuments known so far from Moesia Superior, one-tenth can be related to immigrants originating from the Eastern provinces judging by the inscriptions,<sup>2</sup> furthermore, there are even more monuments whose iconography, in some cases combined with the anthroponomical elements, implies an origin of the dedicator or the deceased from the Eastern provinces. A fine example of this can be observed in a funerary monument from Singidunum dedicated to the Manes, the spirits of the dead (*Dis Manibus*) two-year-old Valeria Apphion, by her parents veteranus Gaius Valerius Valens and Valeria Elpis in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> In the register field of the monument, some objects belonging to *mundus muliebris* are presented: a pair of sandals, a mirror and a writing tablet. The child’s diminutive *Apphion* is very frequent in Phrygia, particularly in Sardis and Pergamon.<sup>4</sup> The images of a mirror, sandals and writing tablet depicted on the monument are also well known as motifs from Asia Minor sepulchral art, thus implying that Valeria’s parents were of presumably Phrygian origin.<sup>5</sup> Although the image of a writing tablet underlines the Valerii’s adoption of Roman cultural identity, all other elements which express parental sorrow for the prematurely lost daughter suggest their maintaining the traditions and customs of their Asia Minor homeland, which can be also perceived in other monuments from Singidunum, Viminacium, Timacum Minus, Scupi etc.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding epigraphic and archaeological monuments dedicated to the deities of Asia Minor or Syrian origin in which we find the dedication to a particular divinity combined with iconography, the situation is complicated because of their rarity in the territory of Moesia Superior. Focusing first on Occidental immigrants who came and stayed for a variety of reasons in Moesia Superior, epigraphic and archaeological testimonies attest that they were of different origins and professions. One aspect they had in common was their need to preserve and nurture their ethnic, cultural and religious identity and maintain ties to their homelands while integrating into the new environment. In particular, worshippers of local Asia Minor or Syrian divinities gathered in closed, small communities, on the basis of ethnic, social or professional purposes.<sup>7</sup> Certain deities, such as Sabazius, Jupiter Dolichenus or Jupiter Melanus are referred to in votive inscriptions as “paternus deus”, for example in monuments from Timacum Minus, Prizren and Ulpiana.<sup>8</sup> However, in addition to the case study on Jupiter Dolichenus whose

2 Михајловић 2009.

3 *IMS I*: num. 42; Кондић 1968, 272; Danković 2020, 137–138.

4 Özlem-Aytaçlar 2010, 521 n. 88.

5 About motifs of Asia Minor sepulchral art in the Central Balkans see Gavrilović Vitas 2021a, 271–286.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 118–122.

8 The text of the inscription from the votive monument dedicated to Sabazius Paternus from Timacum Minus: *Pro salute Imp(eratoris) / Flaviu[s] Cleme(n)[s] / Saba[zi]o Pate/rno A[ug(usto)] posu/it M(arco) Ant[o[nio] / Gordiano / Augusto et C[lodio] / Pomp(eiano) co(n)s(ulibus)*, *IMS III-2*, no. 13. The inscription from the votive monument dedicated to Jupiter Paternus Dolichenus from Prizren: *[Telesphoro Hygiae] //*

venerators left enough epigraphic and archaeological attestations in Moesia Superior about the god's popularity, other evidence about several Anatolian local gods equated with Zeus are also interesting and will be the subject of this paper.

In Moesia Superior in antiquity, in no other cult than in the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus did the priests leave traces of their presence and activities – nine priests have been attested on votive and funerary monuments,<sup>9</sup> presumably even more once existed; on the votive altar from Karataš dated from 212 to 214, an unknown number of priests is mentioned.<sup>10</sup> Archaeological excavations confirmed the existence of a shrine to Dolichenus in Karataš<sup>11</sup> and a new find of a god's life-size head in Karataš (fig. 2)<sup>12</sup> shows all the traits of the representative imperial sculpture, presenting Jupiter Dolichenus with an imperial wreath of laurel leaves with a circular medallion *corona gemata* on his Phrygian cap. This is a detail known from Syrian iconography, for instance from the relief of a priest of a storm god equated with Jupiter Dolichenus on a stele discovered in Hamman and dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> Presumably the statue of Jupiter Dolichenus to which this head belonged was placed in the sanctuary of the god at Karataš, where his devotees could honour the god and understand in more depth the theology of the cult, perceiving it through the eyes of the Syrian priests.

Two priests of Jupiter Dolichenus mentioned in votive monuments from Jasen and Ratiaria were presumably in active military service as well, while a rare example of a priest of Jupiter Dolichenus and Dea Syria is known from a funerary monument discovered in the Danube Limes locality of Glamija-Rtkovo.<sup>14</sup> Julius Apollinaris, who probably originated from the Eastern provinces, was a priest of both deities, analogous



**Fig. 1 – Funerary monument of Valeria Apphion, Singidunum (Danković 2020, 138, fig. 41)**

*As/clep[i]o / So[3] / Heracliti Su/rus et pro / Gen(io) I(ovis) O(ptimi) Dolic(h)eni / Paterno deo et Geni(o) / co(ho)rtis votum libies(!) f(ecit). Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 234, cat. no. 13. The inscription from the votive monument dedicated to Jupiter Melanus Paternus: AE 1990, 859. For more about all three monuments see Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 81–82, 109, 119–120.*

9 Ibid, 108.

10 The text of the inscription from the votive monument discovered in Karataš: *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) Dol(icheno) [p(ro) s(alute)] / M(arci) Aur(eli) Anto/nini Pii Aug(usti) et Iul(iae) / Domn(a)e Aug(ustae) ma/tri(s) Aug(usti) et castro/rum dedicante L(ucio) / Mario Perpetuo / c(onsulari) per Restutum / m(agistrum?) c(ivium) R(omanorum) D(ianae?) sacerdo/tes eiusdem loci / d(edicaverunt?)*. Mirković 2015, 39.

11 Ранков-Кондић 2009, 367–400.

12 Popović and Borić-Brešković (eds.) 2013, 309 no. 70.

13 Blömer 2015, 186–192.

14 Gavrilović Vitas 2019, 231–246.



**Fig. 2 – The marble head of Jupiter Dolichenus from Karataš (Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 239, cat. 27)**

to the priest Flavius Barhadadi from the votive inscription found in Apulum.<sup>15</sup> Flavius was also a priest of Jupiter Dolichenus and Dea Syria identified with the goddess Caelestis, but also perhaps – because its authenticity is regarded as doubtful – to the dedication to Jupiter Dolichenus and Iuno Assyria Regina of Lucius Fabirius from Rome.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to observe that priests of Jupiter Dolichenus in Moesia Superior were not only active in larger centres such as Ratiaria and Viminacium, and Limes localities like Karataš (Diana), but also in smaller, interior regions like the area of Gračanica,<sup>17</sup> thus confirming that they spread the god's cult not only in urban centres, but also in less accessible areas. Of course, the diffusion of the Dolichenus cult in urban and Limes centres can be attributed presumably mainly to the officers and soldiers of the Legion VII Claudia, who participated in a military campaign in Syria and could have brought the cult from there. The names of the dedicators on two marble statuettes of Jupiter Dolichenus standing on

the bull from Egeta<sup>18</sup> – Pompeus Isauricus and Kastor – reveal their origin from the Eastern provinces. The statuettes are of similar iconography to the statuette from Pincum<sup>19</sup> dedicated by Silvanus and Leonides – the analogy is apparent in the detail of the altar beneath the animal's body on all three statuettes.

It can be presumed that already established networks and the mobility of not only soldiers, but also traders, artisans, miners, migrants and as we saw priests, contributed to the spread of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus. The incorrect vulgar Latin forms of the god's epithet such as Dolicenus, Dulcenus and Dolycinus<sup>20</sup> instead of Dolichenus, can be attributed to dedicators of indigenous origin,<sup>21</sup> this confirms that not only smaller communities of immigrants from the homeland of Jupiter Dolichenus, attested by

15 AE 1965, 30a; Szabo 2018, 163.

16 CIL VI, 465.

17 Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 235.

18 Gavrilović Vitas 2020, 204–208.

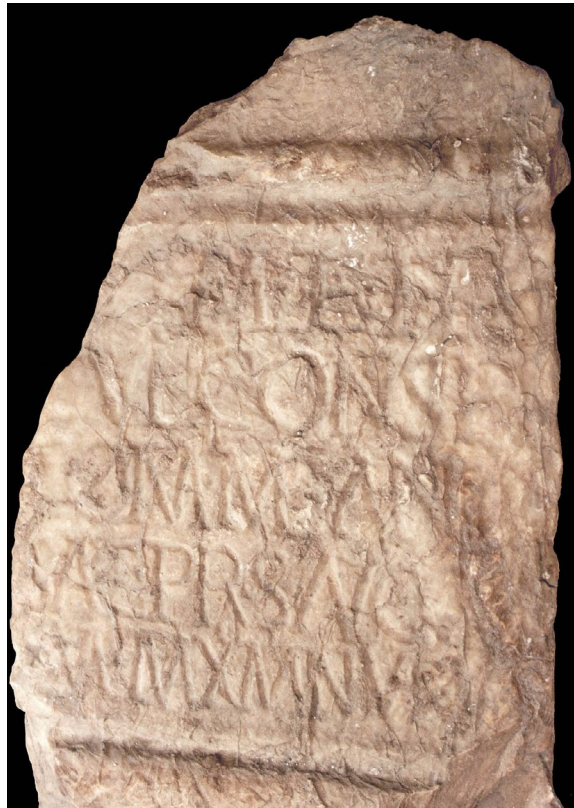
19 Timoc and Boda 2016, 121–127.

20 Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 233 cat. no. 1; Timoc and Boda 2016, 121–127; Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 234 cat. no. 9.

21 Vágási 2019, 537–546.

lost monuments from Viminacium, were among the god's venerators, but also indigenous inhabitants as well.

A marble altar (fig. 3) recently discovered between the villages of Kušiljevo and Vezičevo, north of Svilajnac near Jagodina in the centre of Moesia Superior, near the location of *Iovis Pagus*, a station on the Roman *via militaris* on the road between Viminacium and Naissus, provides interesting evidence for the honouring of local gods from Asia Minor.<sup>22</sup> It is dedicated to both Jupiter and Hercules by Gaius Valerius Maximinus, for the health of Septimius Severus and Caracalla or Caracalla and Geta.<sup>23</sup> As can be seen from the inscription, Hercules is here commemorated as *Conservator Comameanorum*, that is as the protector of the citizens of Comama, Colonia Julia Augusta Prima Fida Comama (or Comamenorum), a Roman colony in Pisidia founded by Augustus in 25 BC.<sup>24</sup> We presume that behind the name of *Hercules Conservator Comameanorum* the ancient Anatolian god Kakasbos is hidden, associated with the Greek god Herakles/Roman god Hercules before or at the beginning of the Imperial period, with established iconography until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>25</sup> Both Kakasbos and Herakles/Hercules carried a club as their main weapon, fought successfully against destructive forces, ensured victory and protected their devotees.<sup>26</sup> At Comama, beside the rock-face sanctuary of Apollo of the Perminoundeis, there was another rock sanctuary where, in addition to the god Men, and the Dioskouroi with a lunar goddess, the god Herakles/Kakasbos was venerated.<sup>27</sup> The fact that Gaius Valerius Maximinus' origin is expressed with an epithet given to the god, but derived from the name of ded-



**Fig. 3 – Votive altar to Jupiter and Hercules  
Conservator Comameanorum (Archaeological  
Heritage of Svilajnac 2011, 5, no. 4)**

22 Grbić 2015, 126–127; Archaeological Heritage of Svilajnac 2011, 5 no. 4.

23 The text of the inscription from the votive monument dedicated to Jupiter and Hercules: *[[I(ovi)] O(ptimo) M(aximo) et Herc(uli) Conser(vatori) / Comameano(rum?) / sac(rum) pr(o) s(alute) Augg(ustorum) nn(ost-rorum) / C(aius) Val(erius) Maximinus v(otum) s(olvit)]*, Grbić 2015, 126–127.

24 Mitchell 1993, 90.

25 Kakasbos was a local god most worshipped by the populations of Northern Lycia, Western Pamphylia and Pisidia, presented riding a horse with a club in his hand on rock-cut areas and votive stelae, Candaş 2006, 1–5.

26 Talloen 2015, 95. For more about the iconography of Kakasbos/Herakles see Candaş 2006, 24–33.

27 Ibid, 231.



icator's hometown "Comama",<sup>28</sup> it implies that he dedicated the monument not only in his name, but for a group of his countrymen with whom he was united in an ancestral cult of the homeland god, whose *interpretatio Romana* is the god Hercules.

This kind of group dedication is familiar in Moesia Superior, particularly in mining areas, where migrants from different parts of Asia Minor were employed either as miners or clerks in mine administration. Their gods were mostly ancient local gods from their homeland who were equated with the supreme Roman deity Jupiter; we may now focus on these cases to highlight their significance and characteristics. One votive monument from Prizren and three votive altars discovered in Lipljan, Ulpiana are dedicated to Jupiter Melanus,<sup>29</sup> who on one monument is addressed as *Paternus* and on two monuments as *Melanus Cidiessus*. The dedicators were either of Bythinian or Phrygian origin, since the epithet Melanos was probably derived from the name of the city of Mele in Bithynia, or the names of the villages Melakome or Malos in Phrygia.<sup>30</sup> The god Zeus Melenos is known from Trajanic coins from the Phrygian town of Dorylaeum.<sup>31</sup> The epithet Cidiessus could be derived from the name of the Phrygian town Kidyessos in the vicinity of the town of Dorylaeum.<sup>32</sup> Thus, this local Asia Minor god, Jupiter Melanus, was from Anatolia, rich in ores; he was presumably regarded there as the protector of mines and miners, as he was honoured by the immigrants of Asia Minor origin in Moesia Superior.

Another Phrygian god was honoured in Lipljan, Ulpiana: Zeus Ezzaios, whose epithet in the opinion of S. Dušanić was derived from the name of the Phrygian town of Aizanoi,<sup>33</sup> is known by emissions of coins which emphasised the strong tie between the city and the supreme Greek god,<sup>34</sup> but also by the famous pseudo-dipteral temple of Zeus and Cybele built under Domitian.<sup>35</sup> The dedicator Apollonios, son of Menelaos was probably a Hellenophone immigrant or descendant of an immigrant,<sup>36</sup> as was also Sokrates, son of Paulos who was also a miner or related to the mining activities in the Kosmaj region near Belgrade, Singidunum. Sokrates made a dedication to the god Zeus Okkonenos (fig. 4), whose epithet is presumably derived from a toponym Okaenon, near Nicaea in Bythinia, where eight dedications to the god have been confirmed so far<sup>37</sup> and

28 There is also a possibility that Gaius Valerius Maximinus was of occidental origin, but spent a certain amount of time in Pisidia. I sincerely thank colleague Laurent Bricault for his suggestion.

29 Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 242, cat. no. 1-4.

30 Душанић 1971, 257.

31 *RPC* III, 2635.

32 The name of Zeus Kidiesos has been attested on coins from Asia Minor, Parović-Pešikan 1990, 607.

33 Душанић 1971, 259.

34 The coins from Aizanoi implied that the town was the birthplace of the god Zeus, Chiai 2020, 214; *RPC* I, 3088.

35 The temple was dedicated to Zeus and Cybele: Zeus was worshipped in the above-ground part of the temple, while the underground chamber was for honouring the goddess Cybele. The acroteria on the temple of Zeus and Cybele were in the form of Cybele's head, that is of Meter Steurene's head, a local version of the Mother goddess; she appears on bronze coins of Aizanoi shown as Rhea holding Zeus and surrounded by the dancing Koribants, *Ibid.*

36 Душанић 1971, 259.

37 Delchev and Raycheva 2018, 254.

whose sanctuary was founded in the Imperial period in the vicinity of Kilciler in southern Bithynia.<sup>38</sup> In addition to Moesia Superior, the cult of Zeus Okkonenos is also confirmed in Dalmatia and Thrace, where his cult was practised in Nicopolis ad Istrum by Bythinians such as Palumbos Apolonidu, who honoured his homeland god.<sup>39</sup>

The votive altar dedicated to Zeus Synenos (fig. 5) was also discovered in the Kosmaj mining region, near the find-spot of the monument dedicated to Zeus Okkonenos. Zeus Synenos was honoured by Antipater, son of Timotheos, whose home town was probably the city of Synnada in central Phrygia.<sup>40</sup> These individual dedications were just as important as the group dedications, like the one from a votive monument discovered in Singidunum, made to the god Jupiter for the health of Septimius Severus, Caracalla and Geta, by *Cilices contirones* in the year 196. *Cilices contirones* were part of the legion IV Flavia stationed in Singidunum and their presence is also attested by a stamp on a lamp found near the presumed Roman forum in Singidunum.<sup>41</sup> This ethnic association perhaps had a club and a *sacellum* in Singidunum, and since its provenience is emphasised in the inscription, as is the case with other Asia Minor associations confirmed in Viminacium

(*κώμη Σιγῶν*, *κώμη Χαϊρουμουτα* and Abdarmisu),<sup>42</sup> it can be presumed that one of the most important reasons for their forming was to preserve the national identity and tradition of the association's members. These private associations known as *phratra* or *collegia* consisted of migrants from the Eastern provinces who were involved in emperor worship, were active participants in the Roman army and city administration,



Fig. 4 – Votive altar to Zeus Okkonenos (Нинковић 2019, 68, cat. 79, T. XXVI/79)

38 Ozlem-Aytaclar 2010, 512.

39 Guinea Diaz 2019, 80.

40 Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 120, 242, cat. no. 7.

41 Ibid, 120.

42 Ibid, 191.



**Fig. 5 - Votive altar to Zeus Synenos (Hunković 2019, 67, cat. 77, T. XXV/77)**

jupiter Melanus, Zeus Okkonenos, and Zeus Synennos allowed the venerators to more easily connect, prepare and organize amongst themselves, sharing interests that encompassed different aspects of life, including cult practices. Although the army was the most visible element in the epigraphic monuments, this does not mean that other venerators of "Oriental" cults did not exist just because they were not visible. In that context, the analysis and interpretation of the practising of the cults originating from the Eastern provinces are comprehensible only through the combination of epigraphic, architectural and archaeological data, in order to gain a more accurate reconstruction of the religious beliefs, practices and rituals of "Oriental" cults in the way that their devotees experienced them in antiquity.

took up various priesthoods, or simply made private dedications to continue and cherish the religious heritage and tradition of their homeland deities.

Resuming our inquiry into the perception of deities of Anatolian or Syrian origin through the eyes of their devotees in Moesia Superior, unfortunately we cannot speculate on presumed sacral spaces and ritual practices that took place; their existence, however, is not debatable and was probably similar to the sacred spaces and ritual practices of the deities in question in other parts of the Roman Empire. Venerators of "Oriental" deities sought the protection and support of the gods they honoured in this life and the afterlife, through votive dedications, characteristic motifs in sepulchral art or cult objects placed as grave goods, which had an apotropaic and a soteriological dimension. Although no traces of sacral spaces are attested, we can presume that they were small and modest sites where rituals in honour of a particular deity could be performed and votive gifts placed. The existence of *phratra* or *collegia* of previously mentioned Asia Minor divinities such as Ju-



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