

PARTICULAR COMMEMORATION HABITS
OF THE MIDDLE CLASS FROM ROMAN DACIA *

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Abstract: *The current research focuses on a very specific class of funerary monuments from province Dacia: those in which absolutely no professional, social or status mentioning existed for neither deceased nor commemorator. The characters thus registered mainly represent part of what we would define as the economical and social middle class of the provincial society. Without being totally out of borders, their epigraphic behaviour is slightly different from that of other groups, classes or categories registered so far, underlining once again the necessity of a flexible and manifold approach when studying the layers of Roman society.*

Résumé: *L'objet de la présente étude est constitué par une catégorie particulière des monuments funéraires de la province romaine de la Dacie: ceux qui ne mentionnent aucun détail professionnel, social ou de statut concernant le défunt ou les personnes s'étant chargés de sa sépulture. L'utilisation de ces critères nous ont permis d'identifier une série de personnages appartenant dans la plupart des cas aux classes moyennes du système socio-économique provincial. Sans être tout à fait atypique, leur comportement épigraphique diffère légèrement par rapport à celui des autres catégories visibles dans les sources jusqu'à présent, soulignant une fois de plus la nécessité d'une approche flexible et diversifiées dans les études portant sur la structure de la société romaine.*

Rezumat: *Cercetarea de față vizează o categorie aparte de monumente funerare din provincia Dacia: cele care nu prezintă absolut nici un detaliu profesional, social sau de statut, referitor fie la defunct, fie la comemorator. Personajele astfel identificate fac parte din clasa mijlocie, economică și socială, a provinciei. Fără a fi complet atipic, comportamentul lor epigrafic prezintă unele iregularități față de cel al altor grupuri, clase*

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sau categorii cercetate în trecut, subliniind încă o dată necesitatea unei metodologii flexibile și diversificate în studierea straturilor societății romane.

Erecting a funerary monument bears, in any and every culture, the form of a statement on multiple levels. Conventionally, for the Roman provincial world, an epigraphic monument was considered a sign of adopting the Empire's cultural habits and being (or becoming) part of its established society. The current research aims at analyzing a certain category of Dacia's funerary epigraphy and partially re-signifying the meaning of monuments and epigraphs in this *limes* province.

The necessity of researching the funerary epigraphy of the less important members of society constituted the initial reason and starting point of this scientific enterprise. The need for a more flexible approach on social history² has long been stated, as has been the value of cultural interpretation of the Roman inscriptions. I was determined to find out certain funerary patterns connected to the lower and middle classes of province Dacia – concerning the characters involved, as well as the form(s) of expression, if and when possible – and to underline a few details regarding Dacia's non-elite categories of inhabitants. During the research, I have reached a couple of unexpected conclusions and maybe more importantly, adopted a different methodology from the one envisioned in the first place.

Merely defining the syntagma of "middle class" or "lower class" for the Roman society is a challenge in itself and the act implies from the start considerable relativity and subjectivism. All "marginals", from slaves and private *liberti* to peregrines and the poor *plebs urbana*, can be counted among the representatives of the lower strata. As well, the ones that leave written epigraphic traces are rather part of the provincial middle classes than of the basic lower strata, as it is obvious that in their regard we are not dealing with absolute poverty – maybe only with relative,

² See ALSTON 2011, 1-33, for a general theoretical approach on "rereading" the history of the lower classes, though his study is focused on the issues of slaves and slavery.

comparative poverty³. Without certainty of the results, I have decided to adopt a form of classification which I hadn't met before: I took into consideration those funerary inscriptions in which absolutely no professional, social or status mentioning existed for neither deceased nor commemorator. Of course, one must decide for him/herself if the lack of such details stands for their real absence. The uncertainties of the path opened by this methodological choice are evident from the start: the results could be considered as connected to the spiritual prevalence of the funerary monument over its social meaning for certain persons, rather than to a specific category of inhabitants. But rendering this doubt absolute is as scientifically wrong as completely ignoring it. I strongly believe that the gathered inscriptions shed light on society and self-expression alike, being illustrative for the ways and means of representation of part of the province's middle class⁴.

Following the criterion presented above, I have gathered a total of 124 inscriptions and about 280 names (I have taken into consideration solely the names that can be read or at least plausibly reconstructed). It must be mentioned that a few other inscriptions might pertain to this group (i.e. *CIL* III 7669 or *CIL* III 7698 etc., but their extreme deterioration makes, on one side, the framing difficult and on the other side they would have brought no informational contribution). For the epigraphy of Dacia, the number of inscriptions is rather modest, but for its onomastics, the names represent a quite high figure: almost 10% of the names registered so far⁵ in the province, from all types of epigraphic sources (stone monuments, as well as military diplomas, wax tablets and *instrumenta*). On the given epitaphs, 132 ages at death have been counted. Out of the approximately 500 ages registered in Dacia⁶, our figure means about 25%.

³ OSBORNE 2006, 1-2.

⁴ I have decided upon avoiding the term of *plebs media*. Though quite popular among a series of Roman social history researchers, it is pronouncedly scholastic and it requires supplementary defining.

⁵ Unfortunately, we do not have a complete catalogue of the personal names registered in Roman Dacia. The present estimation is based on a general figure provided by Mihai Săsărman, whose developing PhD research is focused on the onomastics of province Dacia.

⁶ MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004, 9.

I find this percentages revealing – it proves that a consistent part of Dacia’s population⁷ erected funerary monuments without the desire to “advertise” something more than a name and to commemorate the memory of a loved one.

The first analysis that I will present focuses on the discussed monuments’ geographical areas of concentration. On the map listed below, I have graphically marked the most important sites and the distinctions between them, as explained in the following lines. Thus, the great majority of the inscriptions come from Dacia Superior, fact that is in a consensus with the general situation of Dacia’s epigraphs. Great concentrations are to be observed in the urban centres of Apulum and Sarmizegetusa and a high number of inscriptions come from other towns, such as Napoca, Potaissa, Ampelum and – to a lesser degree – Drobeta. The quantity of inscriptions coming from the urban centres of the province is fully explainable: here, on one side, the desire and the habit of erecting a stone monument was more pertinently present and on the other side, the financial situation of even the lesser members of the community must have been better that the one of many rural inhabitants. I shall not insist on estimating the costs of a stone monument⁸, as we basically do not know how high or how affordable they could have been in Dacia, nor on the speculations concerning wood (or other perishable materials) epigraphy⁹, but especially this second issue must be kept in mind when one separates the urban and the rural environments. A special case is

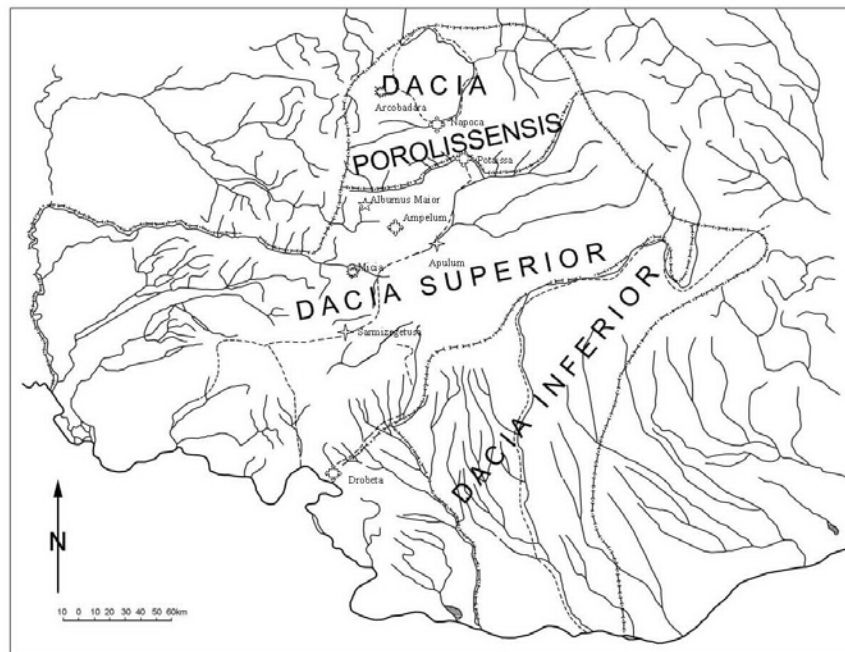
⁷ This statement needs to be explained, as a „consistent part“ of any province’s population has no epigraphical manifestations. The distinction between demography and epigraphic representativeness has been underlined in a very convincing fashion by J. Herman (HERMAN 1983). Studying the case of Gaul, he calculated that about 0,5% of the population of the province had ever erected an epigraphic monument and that only about 0,02% of the names were preserved and are known to us.

⁸ The only actual figures I have encountered come from Roman Africa – and thus implicitly from a space with totally different cultural and economical realities from the one currently researched – and they indicate that the average monument costed between 1000 and 2000 *sestertii* (DUNCAN-JONES 1962, 90-91). On the other hand, at Lambaesis an ordinary monument could cost less than 100 *sestertii* (CIL VIII 18162 = 3042), which is far from a generally prohibitive price.

⁹ KEPPIE 1991, 105.

Alburnus Maior, where massive excavations have been carried out during the last decades, resulting in an impressive number of inscriptions and in the fact that the settlement¹⁰ is now the only properly documented peregrine community from Dacia. A last detail worth mentioning is the presence of only two military centres among the settlements with a high number of inscriptions: Arcobadara and Micia. The fact is not surprising in itself, as most military, as well as their families, mention the connection to the unit as a “badge of honour” or at least as identification mark.

Fig. 1. The geographical distribution of the sites with relevant concentration of monuments



Maybe the most important analysis to be undertaken is that of family relations. Confirming studies on different epigraphic samples and

¹⁰ For a few general ideas, see PISO 2004 and CIONGRADI 2009.

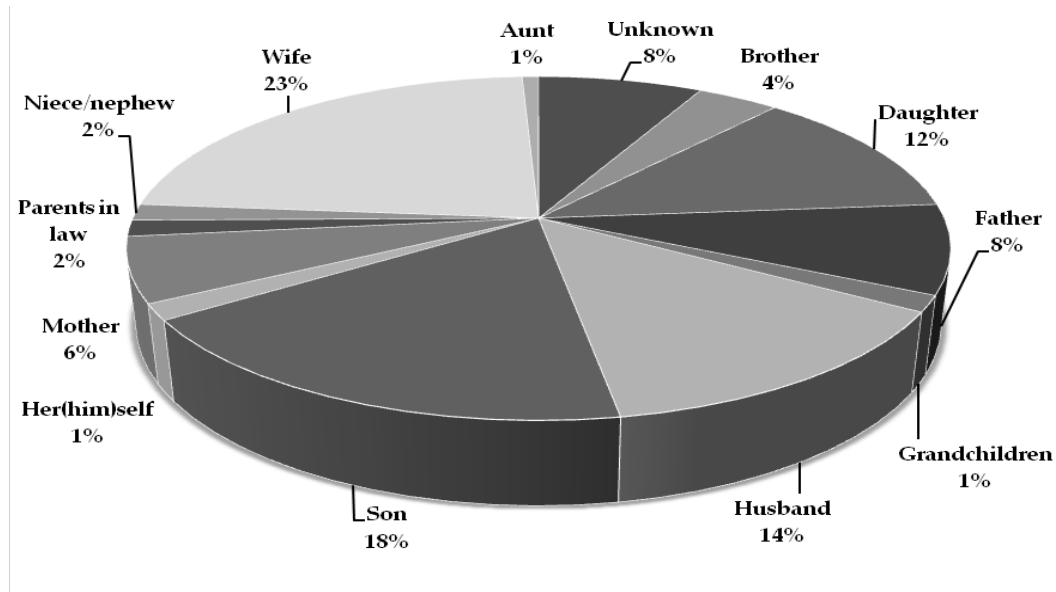
from various parts of the Empire, the best represented group is that of spouses. The majority held by monuments reflecting conjugal relations is the common standard for funerary inscriptions, especially for the lower classes¹¹. As it would have been expected, the predominance is held by the monuments dedicated to the memory of wives. Nonetheless, the number of commemorated husbands is not small, compared to the general situation registered in Dacia: we have counted a total of 48 monuments, out of which 17 were dedicated to husbands. Expectably, the average age of death for the husbands is higher than that of the wives; it is hard to establish if this feature is connected to epigraphic habits, or has purely demographic reasons¹². The ages of men vary between 20 and 70 years, with the majority listed in the interval of 40 – 60 years. It is worth mentioning, though the detail might mainly be related to hazard, that all these epigraphs come from Dacia Superior. The pre-eminence of this region is also visible for monuments dedicated to wives, but in this case the other two *Daciae* are also represented. Being generally more diversified, the epitaphs dedicated to wives cover a larger range of ages: from 17 (or 19 – *IDR III/3*, 180) to 70 years. Here, the bulk is to be found for the interval of 20 – 40 years.

It is also worth noticing that some of our characters are referred to in more than one way: thus, some of the husbands are also remembered as fathers (the monument being erected by the widow and children/child: *IDR III/3*, 337; *IDR III/4*, 492), while some wives are also commemorated as mothers of their children (*IDR III/5*, 571; *IDR III/4*, 198).

¹¹ SALLER, SHAW 1984, 138 uncovered as extreme percentages 66% for Republican Latium (with most inscriptions concerning members of the lower orders) and 22% for the imperial senatorial families.

¹² A research undertaken by L. Henry, in 1959, sheds some light on the matter. He compared the deaths registered in the civil documents of a French community in 1833-1834 to the existing tombstones. The stone monuments revealed a situation resembling to the Roman epigraphy, while the civil records evoked a different reality. For example, the percentage of women deceased at ages between 15 and 34 years is with 50% higher according to the funerary monuments that it actually appears to be in the civil records (HENRY 1959, 327-329).

Fig. 2. Family relations



A consistent part of the monuments are erected as an act of remembrance of deceased children, sons and daughters alike – and in this point the discussion is to be extended. Thus, the balance between sons and daughters is quite equilibrated, with a few inscriptions in the favour of the sons' group. If we consider infant mortality up to the age of 10, we have a number of 31 children commemorated, among whom 22 are boys. This detail is crucially important: in the whole province, 73 names of children under the mentioned age have been registered on funerary monuments¹³. Thus, about 40% of the infants commemorated in Dacia belong to this category; the percentage is very high and extremely eloquent, as besides the established local and municipal elites and the *liberti*, we have also ruled out the military element that is generally crucial for Dacia's epigraphy. These data talk about the popularity of certain practices and

¹³ For the general demographic picture of Dacia, see MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004, 44.

confirm some trends generally noticed by researchers in the western side of the Empire¹⁴. The best represented age group is that of 2-5 years, detail that concords with the whole Dacian picture, where the group is well represented, though not dominant.

If we take into consideration all children, up to the age of 20 (we have only one exception: a girl of 25 commemorated by her parents), we record 53 characters, among whom 34 are boys. Easy to imagine, sons were a bit more often commemorated than daughters, but the percentages are not totally unbalanced, as I have already stated. So, without considering that mourning for a child was alien to the elites, exhibiting these feelings certainly was not common for them¹⁵. Among the lesser (non-elite) classes, the public and the private appear to have been intertwined to a higher degree. Exhibiting the family's wealth through a monument – no matter how relative this well being was – was not necessarily connected to pompously presenting the public achievements of one of its important personalities. As well, publically mourning, even if it was for a child and not for a prominent member of the family, might not have been perceived by the non-elite as a sign of weakness, but as a part of everyday life.

As one can clearly notice, commemorations usually took place inside the nuclear family; the practice is of course natural and has been observed in other provinces as well¹⁶. Though not so well represented, other relationships pertaining to the extended family are also encountered: parents, brothers, mothers in law, granddaughter and grandson, niece and nephew, a maternal aunt. Two monuments bear the inscription *ipse posuit* – with the mentioning that they are not necessarily *sibi se vivo* monuments, as we will see through the following example. The practice is not exquisitely rare in itself, being common in northern Italy,

¹⁴ See J. MacWilliam for Italy (MACWILLIAM 2005, 92).

¹⁵ MACWILLIAM 2005, 84 states that no burial markers for children of the senatorial order was discovered in Italy and only one child was clearly designated as part of an equestrian family.

¹⁶ SALLER, SHAW 1984, 124 on the Roman "core family unit". EDMONSON 2005, 198 brings forth the example of Lusitania.

Raetia, Gallia Narbonensis and Noricum, in the last mentioned province dominating the funerary epigraphy¹⁷. What catches the eye for our sample is one of them, belonging to a 27 years old woman, whose testamentary executor is a woman as well (*IDR III/2, 399*). It is essential that the tomb stone comes from Sarmizegetusa, where probably there lived enough women financially independent and not necessarily willing to link their name to that of any men from the family. Some other cases are noteworthy as well: the two monuments dedicated to grandchildren are actually both erected by grandmothers. The children were very young (5 and respectively 7 years) and the monuments come from Sarmizegetusa (*IDR III/2, 392*) and Apulum (*IDR III/5, 553*).

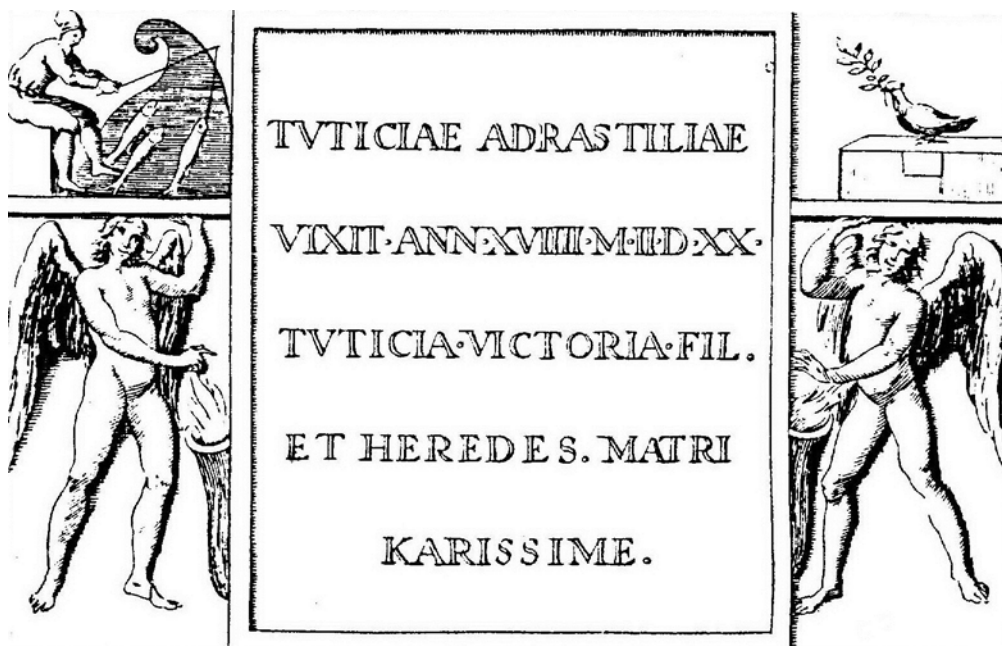
Out of the groups mentioned above, one requires special attention: the parents. The commemorators are generally sons, but daughters also appear as such on a percentagely large proportion: almost 20%. The omission of age is the generally customary practice when one commemorates a parent¹⁸. But in our case, the age is present on every single monument of this kind (we are dealing with a total of 17 monuments – a low number and maybe an unimpressive percentage, but still the reality reflected is rather relevant for the general picture). Of course, in more than half of the cases we can suspect that the ages of death were approximate, as they can be divided to 5 or 10; the phenomenon is quite frequent in Dacia and in the Empire and the reason might simply be the fact that certain people did not know their exact year of birth, thus being in the impossibility of making it known to the heirs. More than for the other groups discussed above, in this case we register certain equilibrium between monuments dedicated to mothers and those dedicated to fathers. A certain case deserves special attention, through its nature and for the questions it raises: that of Tuticia Adrastilla from Apulum (*IDR III/5, 584*), who died at 19 years, 2 months and 20 days, is described as *karissima* and is theoretically commemorated by her daughter. The exact age, as well as the daughter nominally erecting the monument (at an age when she couldn't have had nor the material means

¹⁷ SALLER, SHAW 1984, 126.

¹⁸ HOPKINS 1966, 246.

for doing so, nor probably the power of understanding required for such an act), are most probably signs of the fact that the daughter is the sole heir, her inheritance being administered by tutors at the time of the mother's death. The inscription in itself does not exist anymore and it is only registered in CIL (*CIL* III 1246) following Marsili's drawing. If the sketch followed reality – and we have no reasons to doubt the general picture, even if we remain skeptical about the details – the monument is beautifully adorned, quite imposing and it rather indicates a rich family.

Fig. 3. *CIL* III 1246 (drawing after Marsili)



Without being totally out of borders, the epigraphic behaviour of this group, delimited through a more or less methodological novelty, is slightly different from that of other groups, classes or categories registered so far. Maybe the most obvious atypical behaviour is the mentioning of ages, even if there is nothing abnormal or highly relevant about them. We

have the parents' ages, as well as the ages of husbands deceased at maturity, mentioned as a general rule, not an exception. These patterns are not exactly the customary ones for Dacia and an important part of the old ages in general and the middle-ages of men known in the province's epigraphy come from this group.

A matter that becomes self-evident is the lack of monuments erected by non-familial heirs or simply friends. It appears that these kinds of relationships, when not connected to a certain *collegium*, to freedmen or explicitly to the military environment (and thus excluded from the present study) do not hold a significant place in society. Basically, lacking amity and dependency relations, the only liaisons we have attested are family ones.

Table 1. Age structures

Age category	Number of characters	F	M
0-1	2	-	2
2-5	18	7	11
6-10	11	2	9
11-15	6	2	4
16-20	16	8	8
21-25	10	6	4
26-30	10	7	3
31-35	4	3	1
36-40	8	3	5
41-45	5	2	3
46-50	9	4	5
51-55	6	4	2
56-60	10	5	5
61-65	3	2	1
66-70	6	4	2
71-75	1	-	1
76-80	2	-	2
81-85	2	1	1

86-90	1	1	-
91-95	1	-	1
96-100	1	-	1

The age structure of the group is not extremely relevant, as the sample is small, but a comparison with the provincial situation could bring an addition to our knowledge on Dacia's funerary and epigraphic practices. At the scale of the province, the interval for which most ages have been registered¹⁹ is that of 26-30 years, with consistent number of epitaphs erected to men and women alike. For our group, predominance is held – as detailed above – by monuments erected for children and three adult age intervals are equally represented: 21-25, 26-30 and 56-60. It is noteworthy that while the intervals of 20s count a slight dominance of commemorations for women, the last age group presents equal number of monuments. Another interesting detail is that the eldest female age as well as the eldest general age so far reported for Dacia come from this particular class of monuments – so offering us little information on these men. Personalizing the information, the epitaphs have been erected for Candia Maximi (*IDR III/4, 196*), 90 years old, commemorated along with her husband by a son (or sons) whose name has not been preserved and for Marcus Aurelius Scenobarbus (*IDR III/3, 415*), 100 years old, whose relation with the commemorator, a man, we do not know. Both ages are rounded and they might simply be a way of expressing very old ages, rather than exact calculations.

Lastly, we must analyze the data we have on the exact identity of the recorded characters. I have tried to do this by following two major coordinates: their juridical status and their names. As already implies, the freedmen have been excluded from the database our study is applied on, as the indication of the status of *libertus* is clearly a social statement. On the other side, the mentioning of a servile status without connecting it to any position or office is more of an identification mark than a social commendation; more so, the slaves identified as such do not erect monuments for their masters, but for family members. From one point of

¹⁹ After MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004, p. 43-45.

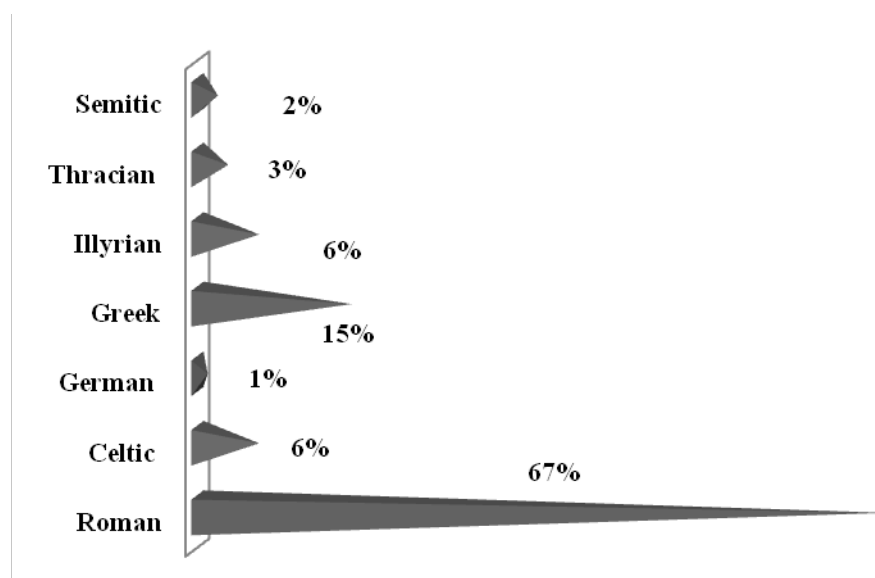
view, the juridical situation amazes: while the general funerary epigraphy of the peregrines from Dacia is quite consistent, in this case they are present only through 15 inscriptions (a total of a mere 17% from the funerary monuments of this class, compared to a roughly 20% for the provincial whole). Even if the percentages are congruent, the surprise lies in the small number of pieces, contrary to expectations. The detail is important, because it shows that most of the peregrines need to say something more about themselves and their families when erecting a monument. The phenomenon of local citizenship is also rendered by few monuments: those of (...) Macrinus cives Treverus (*IDR* III/2, 427), of Alexandrinus cives Bithynus (*IDR* III/3, 11) and of Asclepius qui et Asclepiades, as well cives Bithynus (*IDR* III/3, 342). As expected, the slaves are highly under represented – the situation is true for Dacia in general and the need to exhibit a certain position/function is naturally deeper and more acute for the servile class.

The names reveal an unsurprising situation: a majority of 67% are Roman names. The feature is in a consensus with the situation of the province, where the general predominance of Roman names has also been confirmed at the level of various non-elite groups. The second quantitative group is represented by the Greek names, mirroring again the general image of the province. The Illyrian names mostly come from Alburnus Maior, while the Celtic ones are as well normal presences in Dacia's onomastical picture. Without the desire to discard the percentages, one must keep in mind the uncertainty of some of the Celtic names, which can be linguistically traced in more than one etymologic group²⁰. The Thracian names, though frequent at the provincial scale, come in a small percentage from the researched sample; this detail can be related to hazard, to epigraphic habit and to a certain association of the Thracians with the army alike. The Semitic names are few, while the ones listed as "German" names have been categorized deductively (for example, Aurelius Germanus's – *CIL* III 916 – *cognomen* cannot be considered Roman, despite its Latin etymology, but the name's connection to a certain Germanic origin or at least descendancy is relative). Up to a point, Dacia's onomastics is

²⁰ PAKI 2006, 507.

the one of a “colonial” elite²¹, the pre-conquest natives being the great absents of the epigraphy of the province. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that two names present nickname–*agnomina*, an interesting category of *supernomina* directly connected to the lower social classes²² and not so frequent in Dacia’s epigraphy, compared to other provinces. They are Planio Baezi qui et Magister (*IDR III/3, 423*), bearing Illyrian name and patronymic and Asclepius qui et Asclepiades (*IDR III/3, 342*), in whose case we are actually faced with the translation of his name.

Fig. 4. Name statistics



The expressions and epithets employed in the epitaphs are the regular ones. When, besides or instead of the most common *bene merenti* other epithets appear, they are usually employed in the superlative form. So, children regularly are *piissimus(a)*, *inocentus* or *carus*, wives are *piissima*

²¹ Though deeply influenced by political considerations, L. Balla was partially right in this regard (BALLA 1987).

²² KAJANTO 1966, 15.

or *pientissima*, but also *karissima*, *dignissima* and *integra*, husbands and parents are *pientissimus* or *c(k)arissimus* and the *amita* (IDR III/4, 546) is *piisima*. One more interesting detail is that even if most of the monuments lack in handicraft – not to speak of artistic quality – they are rich in details²³. The lack of socio-professional data is somehow counterbalanced by the fact that almost every inscription comprises the names of both commemorator(s) and deceased, the relation between them, the age at death and at least a dedicatory epithet.

Besides the obvious social meaning that the monuments must have had even for these characters, we might assume that the sense of spiritual duty was predominant in many of the cases. We should once again underline that professional or other status details must have been consciously omitted from some epitaphs, due to the desire of truly commemorate the dead above promoting the living. When the epitaph gained meaning in the mind of the reader, as of course it was meant to do, in these cases it was not intended to be a preponderantly social one. An incommensurable informational drawback lies in the fact that we basically know nothing about the position that these funerary monuments occupied inside the necropolises. Even if the doubts expressed by W. Scheidel²⁴ in interpreting the archaeological data offered by Roman necropolises (regarding the communities served by a cemetery, the inner organization criteria, the migration afflux etc.) are well funded, planimetric distinctions can sometimes suggest differentiations between groups and individuals inside a given community²⁵.

Concluding, the basic questions for initiating this study were: Who erected funerary monuments without any socio-professional detail mentioned? What patterns of commemoration – if any – can we discover in these monuments? These questions have been, at least up to a point, answered – or, more exactly, the ideas began to take shape, as the research needs to be extended for truly conclusive results. The group

²³ For a classification of Roman funerary inscriptions after the data they report, see HOPKINS 1966, 246.

²⁴ SCHEIDEL 2001, 11 sqq.

²⁵ CROWE 2006, 152.

epigraphically analyzed in this study represents part of what we would correctly define as the economical and social middle class of a provincial society. Of course, the analyzed characters are not the only ones that can be defined as such – just as the funerary inscriptions are not the only type of sources to be researched – and some of them might actually be part of the elite (though most probably not the provincial first-rank elite). What the present research lets us understand is that we have different levels of epigraphic expression (and self-expression, ultimately) at the scale of a not-necessarily-epigraphically-rich province. The stake is seeing, through the epigraphic source, the real layers of the provincial society.

At this point, the research must be deepened and extended. We have discovered a certain group, with slightly different epigraphic habits from the general picture and that can be identified with a part of the provincial middle class. Its main epigraphic characteristics, as observed and described above, are the almost unanimous mentioning of ages, the recording of parents' ages, the high degree of commemorating young children, the relative equilibrium between males and females commemorated (especially reflected by spouses' monuments). Further on, comparison within the province, as well as with the neighbour provinces of Dacia appears necessary. A wider picture would and will show us if the differences in manifestation that delimitate this group from the provincial elite, noted in the current study, are a general characteristic or not.

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