

TWO INSCRIPTIONS FROM SARMIZEGETUSA REVISITED<sup>1</sup>

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**Keywords:** CIL III 1468; AE 1959, 303; *libertus*; family relations.

**Abstract:** *The current work deals with two funerary inscriptions from Sarmizegetusa and the identity of their dedicator. Based on text details, as well as on stylistic and functional characteristics of the monuments, we got to the conclusion that the dedicator of the two epitaphs is the same person: Herculanus, imperial verna and adiutor tabularii in the capital of Dacia.*

**Rezumat:** *Articolul de față are ca obiect de studiu două inscripții funerare de la Sarmizegetusa și identitatea dedicantului lor. Bazându-ne pe date extrase din conținutul textelor, precum și pe caracteristici stilistice și funcționale ale monumentelor, am ajuns la concluzia că cele două epitafuri au același dedicant: Herculanus, verna imperial și adiutor tabularii în capitala Daciei.*

The purpose of the current paper is reinterpreting two inscriptions from Sarmizegetusa – CIL III 1468<sup>3</sup> and AE 1959, 303<sup>4</sup>. More precisely, the research will focus on the identity of the dedicator, which we believe to be one and the same person in both cases, namely Herculanus, an imperial slave holding an official position.

The two inscriptions that we hint at have different histories. The first one was initially mentioned by Steinbüchel<sup>5</sup>. A. Fodor<sup>6</sup> also described the inscription, noting that, at the time when he saw it, it was in the

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<sup>1</sup> \* This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNCS-UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0096.

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, also see <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD047408>.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, also see <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD019513>.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by MOMMSEN in CIL III, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> FODOR, II, 31, no. XXXVI. Worth mentioning, though not highly relevant, is his misreading of the woman's name: instead of Aurelia Respecta, Fodor saw Aurelia Frespecta. This detail is not very important because the inscription is readable today and there are no doubts on the correct form of the name.

property of baron Nopcsa from Farkadin (today General Berthelot village, situated at approximately 20 kilometers from Sarmizegetusa). J. F. Neigebauer catalogued it as well<sup>7</sup>, including the monument among the discoveries from Várhely (today Sarmizegetusa). M. J. Ackner, F. Müller<sup>8</sup> and subsequently T. Mommsen<sup>9</sup> repeat these pieces of information, without adding any further details. Currently the inscription is in the custody of the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization from Deva, in a fairly good state of preservation.

The second inscription has a shorter history, as it was first referred to by O. Floca in 1953<sup>10</sup>. A very important fact is that it was discovered in the necropolis of Sarmizegetusa; unfortunately, its upper right corner was totally damaged. Today it can be found at the local archaeological museum from Sarmizegetusa.

Getting to the content and form of the inscriptions, one must say that the first one, though lacking an exact discovery context, does not raise many question marks. The text is entirely kept:

*D(is) M(anibus) / Aureliae Respectae / rarissim(ae) feminae / Herculanus Augg(ustorum) / n(ostorum) vern(a) / adiut(or) tabul(arii) coniug(i).*

The monument is 95 x 60 x 10 centimeters and is stylistically interpreted by A. Diaconescu as a *locullus* plaque<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> NEIGEBAUER 1851, 33, no. 80.

<sup>8</sup> ACKNER, MÜLLER 1865, 30, no. 130.

<sup>9</sup> CIL III 1468.

<sup>10</sup> FLOCA 1953, 767, no. 10.

<sup>11</sup> DIACONESCU 2004, I, 294.



CIL III 1468 (photo after <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD047408>).

The second inscription is the one that raises the real interpretation problems, mainly because of its broken corner and implicitly missing text. The first reading, proposed by O. Floca, is as follows:

*D(is) M(anibus) / C(laudiae) Turpillae vixit an[nis] ... / item / Caro  
Caes(aris) n(ostri) v(ernae) [vix(it) an(nis) ... / Herculanus [Aug(usti) lib(ertus)]  
adiu(tor) [t]ab(ularii) / uxori et filio bene merent(ibus) / fecit.*

As one can see, the missing parts have been filled out by the author. The reconstruction of the text is mainly satisfactory, but caution is mandatory for the title of *Augusti libertus*. One single detail of Floca's reconstruction is crucial and has not been noted: he uses "/" instead of the more common "]" for the missing parts of the texts. Thus, the editors of the *L'Année Épigraphique* adopted his reading, without properly indicating the words filled in by the author, as they probably omitted to notice his

atypical choice of punctuation. Further on, the IDR reading<sup>12</sup> is more reserved and in our opinion more realistic:

*D(is) M(anibus) / Cl(audiae) Turpillae vix(it) a[n(nis)] ... / item / Caro  
Caes(aris) n(ostri) [v(ernae?) vix(it) an(nis)] ... / Herculanus Aug(usti) n(ostri)  
adiut(or) [tab(ularii)] / uxori et filio bene merent(ibus) / fecit.*



AE 1959, 303 (photo after <http://edh-www.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD019513>).

The main “improvement” of this reading is giving up the assumption that Herculanus was a freedman. Nonetheless, the visibility of the *Aug n* syntagma on stone eludes us. Even so, the researchers that later on discussed this inscription adopted the *L'Année Épigraphique* reading<sup>13</sup>, thus considering Herculanus an imperial freedman and not associating him with the dedicator of the first epitaph discussed here.

Stylistically, this second plaque resembles the other one: it has 108 x 63 x 12 centimeters and is as well considered an epitaph marking a *locullus* (one with two urns this time, as the plaque is obviously wider than the previous), in the same mausoleum or *columbarium* of the *familia*

<sup>12</sup> IDR III/2, 402.

<sup>13</sup> Especially MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004 and CIONGRADI 2007, while DIACONESCU 2004 adopts the IDR reading.

*Caesaris*<sup>14</sup> from the necropolis of Sarmizegetusa. As well very relevant, they are both integrated by C. Ciongradi in the *Profilgerahme Tafel, Gruppe 2* category<sup>15</sup>. Even more, the letters of the two inscriptions are basically similar. If the monuments were not executed by the same craftsman, we can definitely state they were the work of the same workshop.

The main problem resides in the reading of the second text and more precisely in the insertion of the term *libertus*. While the dimensions of the stone do not impose as compulsory the presence of this status mark, the reading imposed by *L'Année Épigraphique* was later on used by all researchers interested in one or another aspect of the monument. Further on, we will explain our reasons for believing that the dedicator of the two monuments is one and the same person – Herculanus, imperial *verna* and *adiutor tabularii* at Sarmizegetusa.

As already mentioned, the two monuments seem to come from the same burial place. They are stylistically congruent and – more important – the writing points towards the same workshop. Regarding the content of the two texts, we see no reasons for adopting the *libertus* reading, when the dimensions of the stone and letters do not demand it. While Herculanus is by far not a rare name at the provincial level, these two are its only apparitions among the slaves and freedmen attested in Sarmizegetusa. As for the dating of the two inscriptions, there are no clues offered by the style or decoration of the monuments<sup>16</sup>, as they are rather minimalistic. Based on the imperial titles, the possibilities are quite numerous. Thus, for the first inscription we need to identify two *Augusti*, which could possibly be: Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161-169), Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (177-180), Septimius Severus and Carcalla (198-209) and Caracalla and Geta (211-212). For the second inscription, we are seeking a period of time when there were an *Augustus* and a *Caesar*; they could be

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<sup>14</sup> DIACONESCU 2004, I, 295.

<sup>15</sup> CIONGRADI 2007, 267, T/S 6 for CIL III 1468 and CIONGRADI 2007, 268, T/S 10 for AE 1959, 303.

<sup>16</sup> DIACONESCU 2004 and CIONGRADI 2007 give the approximate dating of the inscriptions on criteria related to onomastics and to the imperial titles mentioned by both texts.

Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius (139-161), Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (166-177) or Septimius Severus and Caracalla (196-198). More combinations of the two sets of possible years are theoretically valid, many of the in-between intervals are short enough to be correlated and they do not allow us to deduce which inscription was the first one. Based on the funerary rite, A. Diaconescu assumes that a pre-Severan dating would be more suited<sup>17</sup>. If we adhere to this hypothesis, the variables decrease in numbers. If we also consider the name of the wife from the first epitaph, which is more likely to be associated with Marcus Aurelius' after the death of his predecessor, we could reduce the interval for erecting the first inscription to two: 161-169 or 177-180. On the same criterion, the intervals best fitted for the second inscription would be 139-161 and 166-177. At this point, we believe that, realistically, this is as much as one could say about the dating of the two monuments. Though not offering unequivocal intervals, the dating is edifying and it definitely pleads for the contemporaneousness of the epitaphs.

Getting to the characters and the family details revealed by the two inscriptions, we have Herculanus, imperial *verna* and *adiutor tabularii* in Sarmizegetusa. We know nothing about his origin, as the name is completely irrelevant in this context. We could assume that he was a rather important person in the local community and not only, for his position, as well as in the light of the fact that it was not customary for an imperial slave to be an *adiutor tabularii*<sup>18</sup> (this office being usually held by *liberti*). He buries two wives – in what succession we cannot know, as seen – and a son along with one of the women. In the case of the first monument, the age is not mentioned and on the second stone, due to its advanced degradation, neither the age of the mother, nor of the child can be read. The only potentially relevant name is that of Aurelia Respecta, as it indicates a period post-Marcus Aurelius. But this is not actually compulsory, as it can be dependent on many other exterior factors. Another important detail is offered by the second inscription: while the wife is a Roman citizen, the son is an imperial *verna*, as his father.

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<sup>17</sup> DIACONESCU 2004, I, 295.

<sup>18</sup> MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004, 148.

Theoretically, this opens up more possibilities. The first one is that the mother was an ex slave, freed after the birth of Carus<sup>19</sup>; of course, she would have had to be an imperial slave as well, otherwise the child would have been the property of whomever her master was, not of the *Caesar*. Her name does not indicate a “filiation” from the imperial house and even if the bearing of an imperial name after becoming free doesn’t appear to be a general rule, it still is a major drawback for this theory. Another possibility – and the one we incline towards – takes into consideration the great malleability of the Roman civil law. Gaius, more or less contemporary with our Herculaneum, presents details of various situations that could lead to eluding the strictness of the law and that basically allowed the parents to choose, in given cases, which status would be more advantageous for their child<sup>20</sup>. Some forms of *fictiones iuris* were simply acceptable in the civil right<sup>21</sup> and in a world where the law was ruled by the power of the precedent and by imperial edicts and decrees, it is hard to believe that choosing would have been a problem for an imperial slave, with a quite good position. Of course, becoming an imperial *verna* as his father might have been advantageous for the child and putting him under the protection of the *Caesar*, the heir apparent, was definitely strengthening the family’s ties with the imperial house. The last possibility, rather theoretical, is that the child was not Claudia Turpilla’s, but the result of another marriage, unknown to us.

One last detail to be discussed, though without a demonstrative role, is the employment of terms defining the marital relation: *coniux* on the first inscription and *uxor* in the second case. Both terms imply a *conubium*, which of course is impossible in the case of a slave. Nonetheless, the “misuse” is not rare, as the mentioned terms, along with *maritus*, are used rather lightly on epitaphs, frequently appearing on funerary monuments of slaves or soldiers.

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<sup>19</sup> MIHAILESCU-BÎRLIBA 2004, 139 for this precise comment. GAIUS I 80, 81 for the legislation on the matter.

<sup>20</sup> GAIUS I 26, I 86 on certain situations when the law could be eluded.

<sup>21</sup> BIANCHI 1997, 259-266.

Our study tried to demonstrate that the two inscriptions of Sarmizegetusa, previously regarded as separate entities, are linked by the identity of their dedicator. In this new light, they reveal a couple of details on the family life of a rather important character of the local community. As well, the study underlines once again the possibilities that reevaluating even well known inscriptions can open and the role they can play in revealing new data relevant for the reconstruction of the social and familial realities of province Dacia.

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