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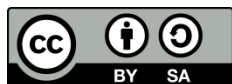
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A Dacian soldier from Mauretania Caesariensis. The case of Decineus and his *frater*

Casian G M NU ¹

Abstract: *An epitaph discovered at Sour Djouab, Algeria, was erected by Decineus, who names himself the brother of the deceased, for a certain veteran named Fulvius Felix. The death of the latter occurred, most probably, towards the end of the 2nd century AD. Despite the doubts about the biological tie between Decineus and his frater, the presence of a Dacian anthroponym at that time in an extremely militarized area of the Roman Empire is enough to raise curiosity regarding the career of this soldier. The author makes use of historical context and archaeological data in order to understand, at least in general lines, how the career of Decineus evolved. This paper aims to reconstruct, as much as possible, the life and military activity of Decineus, as well as to answer questions concerning his recruitment, belonging to an auxiliary unit and eventual life after his release from military service.*

Rezumat. *Un epitaf descoperit la Sour Djouab, Algeria, a fost ridicat de Decineus, care se numește frate al decedatului, un oarecare veteran pe nume Fulvius Felix. Dincolo de dubiile legate de legătura biologică dintre Decineus și Felix, prezența unui antroponim dacic către sfârșitul sec. II p. Chr. e suficientă pentru a stârni curiozitatea legată de cariera acestui militar.*

Keywords: epitaph, Roman army, Mauretania Caesariensis, *auxilia*, anthroponym.

1. Introduction

A funerary stele discovered during the 1948-1949 archaeological campaign that took place in Sour Djouab was dedicated to a certain veteran named Fulvius Felix, who died at the age of 60² (figure 1). The epitaph was placed by Decineus, who calls himself the *frater* of the deceased. The complete epigraphical text is the following:

Diis Manibus. Folvio Felici veterano vix(it) an(nis) LX, Decineus frat(er) eius pius fecit

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² AÉ 2 1951, 144.



(Le Glay 1951, fig. 14)

Marcel Le Glay, who carried out the excavations and discovered the inscription, notes that the stele was later used for another grave in order to cover the defunct, probably during the 4th century. Except for a crescent, the stone lacks any other decorations and its form is a fairly simple one. The gravure is executed in a refined manner, while the letters F, V, X, A and M have an aspect typical for the 3rd century³.

2. Onomastics.

One thing that needs to be questioned is the fact that Decineus is indeed the brother of the veteran who died. Despite his choice of words, there is an obvious difference between the character of the names, the first bearing a purely Latin anthroponym, while the latter having a Dacian one. If we exclude the possibility of a very unusual case of siblings who were named according to two different onomastic habits, then we have to doubt the biological tie of the two and to admit that Fulvius Felix and Decineus were brothers in the comradely sense of the word and not actual relatives⁴. We can admit, however, that they were part of the same military unit and most probably Decineus was a veteran too at the moment of Felix's death, even if the military status of the first one is not mentioned in the inscription. This hypothesis would explain how they created such a strong brotherly relationship. The epigraphical text lacks any information regarding the origin of the two and any facts about their careers have to be formulated based on correlations with other epigraphical and archaeological sources.

³ LE GLAY 1951, 74-75.

⁴ DANA, MATEI-POPESCU 2009, 225.

The Dacian character of Decineus's name is obvious and the sole historical connotation to one of the most important figures of Dacian origin should be enough to confirm his ethnic roots⁵. This doesn't necessarily imply that he was recruited from actual Dacia, considering that many epigraphical sources coming from Lower or Upper Moesia mention anthroponyms that are undoubtedly of the same origin⁶.

From Moesia Inferior comes an honorific inscription that mentions a certain Δικεναιος⁷. A few other cases of people who bore similar names are known around the Roman Empire. Two military diplomas belonged to veterans who had the same patronymic⁸, while a soldier from the Eastern Desert of Egypt was named Dekinaios⁹. We can find the same name in Luceria at the beginning of the 1st century, this time belonging to a freedman¹⁰. However, the presence of such an anthroponym towards the end of the 2nd century in North Africa is surprising, even if probably not as „absolument aberrant” as Marcel Le Glay considered it to be¹¹. The name of his „brother” appears in a very similar form in another funerary inscription from Dougga¹² while both Fulvius and Felix are fairly common onomastic forms in the African provinces.

3. Auxiliary unit.

The inscription does not mention in which auxiliary unit Fulvius Felix and Decineus served before their release from service. The fact that the first one was buried at Rapidum, this being most probably the place of his death, allows us to admit that the unit that they belonged too was none other than the one who was stationed there. There are no doubts that for the most part of the 2nd century Rapidum was garrisoned by *cohors II Sardorum*¹³, many inscriptions that mention this particular unit being discovered there¹⁴. The *castrum* was, in fact, built by and for the soldiers of this cohort around 122 AD¹⁵, probably during a rebellion that burst out around this year and required military intervention or right after the conclusion of those conflicts. Towards the end of the 2nd century the military function of this

⁵ DANA 2003a, 143-147.

⁶ MATEI-POPESCU 2017, 139-159.

⁷ IGB V 5281.

⁸ RGZM 31, WEI& 2007, 160-172.

⁹ DANA 2003b, 175.

¹⁰ AÉ 1983, 211.

¹¹ LE GLAY 1951, 75.

¹² KHANOUSSI, MAURIN 2002, 413.

¹³ BENSEDDIK 1982, 60-62.

¹⁴ AÉ 1929, 133, CIL VIII 9198, AÉ 1951, 145, CIL VIII 9200, CIL VIII 9207.

¹⁵ AÉ 1975, 953. SESTON 1928, 157.

fort loses some of its importance, while another line of defensive fortifications, known as the *nova praetentura*, appeared to the south of Mauretania Caesariensis¹⁶. This was caused by an actual territorial expansion initiated by Septimius Severus which resulted in the increasing of the area that the Roman Empire controlled in North Africa¹⁷. In this context, *cohors II Sardorum* was transferred to Altava¹⁸, a newly formed *castrum* that was part of the *nova praetentura*, no later than 208¹⁹.

There is a certain possibility that Decineus and Fulvius Felix were mounted soldiers. Two funerary steles discovered during the same archaeological campaign include representations in bas-relief of horsemen who were members of *cohors II Sardorum*²⁰. More than this, after the unit's transfer to Altava its commander was Titus Iulius Germanus, *decurio* of *ala II Thracum*²¹. If *cohors II Sardorum* was actually a *cohors equitata* then they could have been two of the few members of such a unit that were not pedestrians, but mounted soldiers. AÉ 1929, 133, CIL VIII 9198, AÉ 1951,145, CIL VIII 9200, CIL VIII 9207.

On the other hand, it was assumed that *ala II Augusta Thracum pia fidelis* was present at some point in the same location²², but there is no source which could prove the fact that this unit was actually stationed there at full capacity (an extremely improbable fact considering that Rapidum was already occupied by a *cohors quingenaria*) or for a long period of time. The presence of this unit was suggested by the discovery of a stele belonging to a former *miles* who died at Rapidum before his release from service²³ and of an honorific inscription erected by a *decurio* of the same troop²⁴. Most probably these sources prove that *ala II Augusta Thracum* sent, at some point, a *vexillatio* that was supposed to support the soldiers of *cohors II Sardorum* during a military intervention, a lengthier presence being out of question²⁵.

4. Military career..

¹⁶ LAPORTE 1983, 261.

¹⁷ LAPORTE 2011, 122-125.

¹⁸ RUIU 2002, 1419-1424.

¹⁹ AÉ 1932, 31, CIL VIII, 10949. The cohort is attested at Altava in the time of Severus Alexander: AÉ 1891, 5.

²⁰ AE 1951, 145, CIL VIII, 9200. LE GLAY 1951, 63-64, 75-76.

²¹ CIL VIII, 10949, AÉ 1932, 31.

²² R.E., I, 1266.

²³ CIL VIII 9203.

²⁴ AÉ 1929, 135.

²⁵ BENSEDDIK 1982, 44-45.

As we have seen, Marcel Le Glay, the one who discovered and published the inscription, considered the epitaph to be raised at the beginning of the 3rd century, based not only on the gravure of the letters, but on the reuse of the stele in a 4th century cemetery as well²⁶. Florian-Matei Popescu and Dan Dana argued for an earlier dating, suggesting that such a late enlistment of a Dacian soldier for a unit that was stationed in Mauretania Caesariensis is unusual²⁷.

The fact that *cohors II Sardorum* left Rapidum for Altava no later than 208 might imply that Decineus was liberated at least a few years before this event, especially if he was the same age as Fulvius Felix. Rapidum was not, in fact, completely abandoned at the beginning of the 3rd century, but only ceased to play an active military role, enough traces of inhabitation in the next two centuries being discovered during the excavations that were carried out here²⁸. More than this, it's still possible that Decineus and his *frater* were transferred to Altava with the rest of the unit and they returned at Rapidum after the ending of their service. In other words, we can conclude that the recruitment of Decineus happened after 122, while his discharge took place probably no later than 208, but this are extremely safe assumptions.

On the other hand, we could not doubt the fact that the gravure of the letters suggests a later period. However, this could mean any year from the ending of the 2nd century onwards. What we think is the most relevant aspect in this problem is the evolution of the recruitment politics at a larger scale. In fact, the presence of a Dacian soldier in North Africa is something quite common in the first half of the century, but the lack of late military diplomas coming from Mauretania provinces²⁹, as well as the generalization of provincial and then local recruitment makes from Decineus's case a rather surprising one if we consider him to be an active soldier during the Severan dynasty.

In this case, the most appropriate thing to do is to assume that Fulvius Felix died somewhen at the end of the 2nd century, in the first years of Septimius Severus's reign. In the same time, we must consider Decineus to have a similar age as his comrade at that moment. If his recruitment from Dacian or Moesian provinces took place when he was 20 years old (more or less) and he was around 60 years old when his brother-in-arms died, then he was enlisted and sent to Mauretania Caesariensis in the first years of the second half of the 2nd century, after the conclusion of the well-known military conflicts that occurred around 149-151 in North Africa³⁰. Even if it's no more than a supposition, we could corelate this case with the last know *dilectus* that took place in Dacia or Moesia. This is undoubtedly the one in which

²⁶ LE GLAY 1951, p. 75.

²⁷ DANA, MATEI-POPESCU 2009, 216.

²⁸ LAPORTE 1983, 261.

²⁹ ROXAN 1973, 855. There are no diplomas that could be dated before 160.

³⁰ CARCOPINO 1943, 227. RACHET 1970, 195-202.

Dacian soldiers were recruited and sent to Britannia, because the last diploma for an auxiliary soldier of Dacian origin dates in 178, meaning that they were enlisted in 153. Unfortunately, we do not know if this wave included soldiers that were meant to be sent to North Africa. However, this would fit well in the cycle of recruitments that were observed by Dan Dana and Florian-Matei Popescu³¹.

We can conclude, even if we must still have some reservations, that the most probable chronological limits for Decineus's military career are 153-178. After his discharge, he remained in Rapidum, the fort of his former unit, for at least 15 years, when he buried Fulvius Felix, one of his comrades. Even if this hypothesis can't be possibly verified entirely, we can perceive it as the one with the highest probability.

Regarding the events that marked his career, he probably came to Mauretania Caesariensis too late to be part of the troops that fought the local rebellion that burst out at the middle of the 2nd century and ended his service too early to be one of those who extended the military control to the south and created the *nova praetentura*. He was probably released from service a few years before the reconstruction of the *thermae* of the same fort, somewhere between 184 and 190³². Members of *cohors II Sardorum* were present at some point during the 2nd century at Ain Khial³³, but the precise moment and the reason for this intervention remain unclear. Decineus could have been, however, one of those soldiers who participated in this military action. Otherwise, his career probably was a rather peaceful one.

5. Conclusion

If we take into consideration factors like the aspect of the epitaph, the history of Rapidum and the recruitment policy in the Roman Empire, we can safely admit that Decineus was a member of *cohors II Sardorum* in the second half of the 2nd century, most probably in the interval between 153 and 178. He was recruited in a *dilectus* made in Dacia or one of the Moesian provinces and he spent the rest of his life, after his release from service, in Rapidum, the former fort of the unit that he belonged to. We can't make any assumptions regarding the year of his death, but he could have been one of those inhabitants of Rapidum after its abandonment by *cohors II Sardorum*. This means that he represents one of those few Dacian soldiers which we know were active during the second half of the 2nd century in an auxiliary unit.

³¹ DANA, MATEI-POPESCU2009, 234-243.

³² AÉ 1929, 133.

³³ AÉ 1889, 54.

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