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Venus cult in Dacia

- Summary -

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I. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation represents the first monographic study of a Roman divinity from Dacia, the goddess Venus. The cult analysis is based on a detailed catalog containing various objects: inscriptions, figurative material (bronze, terracotta and stone statues) and jewelry (gemstones, hair pins and distaffs). The material that can be associated with Venus cult is numerous, 335 objects being discovered in Dacia so far. The figurative materials prevail and only 9 inscriptions are mentioning Venus. Once the direct information related to material were extracted and the iconographic types, discovery contexts and the craftsmen were identified, the dissertation purpose is to enter inside the provincial mind and trying to understand the significance and the role of the goddess Venus cult specific objects.

The researches about the Venus in Dacia were not very consistent. Specific archaeological material was published in studies different in subject and consistency such as excavation reports, sites monographs, conferences papers and general studies of art and religion.

II. VENUS CULT IN THE ROMAN WORLD

To understand the Venus cult in Dacia, an overview across Venus cult in Roman world was necessary, from its origins in the Republic to its organization and spread into Roman Empire provinces. Unlike Aphrodite, Venus was not only a deity of love and vegetation. Venus had an important role in the founding myth of Rome, receiving the epithet *Genetrix* as ancestor of Latins and Mother of Romans. With the cult spreading in provinces, Venus was able not only to absorb the entire legacy of Aphrodite but to assimilate other gods in the *interpretatio romana* phenomenon. According the archaeological discoveries, the cult spread was uneven in provinces. The noticed disproportion between figurative material and inscriptions in Dacia was not an exception, other provinces of the Roman Empire being in the same situation.

A special attention was given to Greek prototypes imitated in Roman art. These Greek prototypes were found also in Dacia, but mostly the types were hybrid. Comparing the Greek original types with the Roman imitated ones, changes may be observed, thus revealing how Venus adapted to local demands.

III. DISCOVERY CONTEXTS IN DACIA

At first sight, the many figurative objects seem to provide sufficient information to feature the Venus cult characteristics in Dacia. But, following the discovery contexts, it can be concluded that only for the half of them the exact place of origin is known. Small proportion of the known discovery contexts lead to relative statistic results. Also, many objects have been published briefly. Moreover, some objects were lost over time and others are part of private collections therefore inaccessible to study.

The most important discovery contexts were religious, domestic, military and funerary. Venus appears in all these kinds of contexts identified in Dacia, in a relatively equal proportion, excepting the funerary contexts where the presence of the goddess was sporadic. The figurative objects functions and meanings are closely related to these discovery contexts.

IV. EXECUTION METHODS, WORKSHOPS AND CRAFTSMEN

Chronology of each object is difficult to determine. As we have already stated, half of them have not a known discovery context, namely no certain means of dating. Those found in well-defined contexts were dated based on material find the same context, especially with coins that provides a large chronological sequence. Other objects have been dated according to the general stratigraphy of the site. The stylistic analysis could not establish any general development or degradation of iconographical types. Stone statues are an exception; in this case certain decadence of style was noticed from one period to another. Thus, there are few figurative objects that can be dated within a shorter period than the entire existence of the province Dacia.

For the bronze Venus statues in Dacia the type that prevailed is *Venus Anadyomene*, for the terracotta and stone statues the *Venus Capitolina* type and for gemstones the *Venus Victrix* one. Along with these types other like *Venus Genetrix*, *Venus Cnidos*, *Venus Kallypigios* or *Venus Capua* types were identified. At most bronze or terracotta statues the gestures were rendered in mirror, inverse than the original type. In this way, the right hand of the goddess is often stretched along the body with the palm turned forward, towards the viewer. The gesture appears to be linked to piety or worship, but when it is done by a believer. When the same gesture is made by a god, rather means the accepting of piety and worship as well as the offer of protection and benedictions to the believers.

The provincial art in Dacia had no original manifestations, from a stylistically point of view. The provincial art innovation consisted rather in the manner of interpretation the Greek models than in creating something new. For example, many statues from Dacia render Venus with an elongated upper body and straight hips that gives the goddess a teenage look.

The vast majority of figurative objects were local products. The objects diversity and large number imply the existence of a series production. In this way, the figurative objects gradually lose their quality through details blurring as the same mold was used several times.

Small statues could be easily brought into Dacia, but not necessarily as commercial imports, but as goods carried by people on the move. An important role in this objects movement had the army, which explains why a large number of pieces were found in the military forts from Dacia. Iconographic external influences, some oriental in features, could arrive in the same way in Dacia, with the military troops from Moesia or Pannonia.

V. ASSOCIATION WITH OTHER DEITIES AND EPITHETS

Venus was often associated in Dacia with other deities who had similarly or complementary areas of competence. The association was directly, when Venus is mentioned in inscriptions alongside other deities (Hercules, Mercury, Aesculapius and Hygeia, Epona, Neptune, Salacia), by syncretism (Isis) or in statuary groups (Amor, Hercules, Diana). The association was also indirectly, through Venus cult objects discovered in other deities temples or in religious contexts (Liber Pater, Aesculapius and Hygeia, Hercules, Nemesis, Diana, Juno). Regarding the epithets in Dacia, Venus appears in inscriptions as *Augusta*, *Ubique* or *Victrix*.

VI. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN VENUS CULT FROM DACIA

Venus cult in Dacia can be understood only through the archaeological material discovered, because the ancient written information that make direct references to religious life in Dacia are missing. Starting from this specific material, a difference between the public and the private cult was made pursuing the known discovery contexts.

Mostly dedicated by public characters serving the state, the inscriptions were made from public funds and were raised concerning a common good. In these cases the inscriptions could be considered a part of the public cult for Venus. Among dedicators of Venus relating

inscriptions in Dacia, was a financial procurator, a Decurion and a local priest, all with prominent public functions.

The figurative material aims the personal or family good and belongs to the private cult of Venus. The private side of cult is more visible today because the great monuments of the roman public cult did not survive. Of Venus cult figurative material, in Dacia were found 199 terracotta statues, six clay molds for statues, one clay mold for a votive plaque, a votive lead plate, a lead statue, 57 bronze statues, one bronze applique, one amber statue, 29 stone statues, one stone relief, one stone bas-relief, one natural size marble statue, 23 gemstones, two bone hair pins, one distaff and one mosaic.

In sanctuaries, the dedications were some for the personal good and some for the Empire welfare. A sanctuary dedicated to Venus has not been yet identified in Dacia. Statues with Venus were discovered in other divinities sanctuaries such as Aesculapius and Hygeia, Nemesis or Liber Pater. In these cases, Venus was worshiped as a deity of life and death, with healing powers and skills related to fate, luck or victory.

The Venus statues found in domestic contexts were most likely part of personal *lararia*. No certain *lararium* or inventory assigned to one was discovered in Dacia, so the location of the Venus statuettes in such places of worship can be rather suspected than proven. Certain Venus statues features, such as small size and unfinished back side, could be clues to their exposure in personal *lararia*. *Lararium* was probably located in *atrium*, *tablinum* or *triclinium*, where *pater familias* was performing the cult. Some Venus statues from Dacia were found exactly in those areas of the house.

The high frequency of statues found in domestic contexts could be explained by the apotropaic role of Venus, as protector of the house and its inhabitants. Venus patronage on marriage is confirmed by the goddess statues or distaffs offered as dowry accompanying the young women. Also, the human or agrarian fertility was associated with Venus in the domestic cult.

The findings from forts and military camps belong some to the private and some to the public side of Venus cult. So far, inside military camps from Dacia no place of worship was found, places where the soldiers worshiped a deity or another. Alternatively, the adoration likely occurs in barracks, where the majority of statues were found.

Public side of the cult in military camps may be related to the imperial cult and the image of Venus as Mother of the Romans. Some imperial couples have taken as a model in imperial iconography the divine couple Mars – Venus; queens and princesses frequently used

the image of Venus to represent themselves, including on coins. Venus behind these manifestations has the epithets *Genetrix*, *Felix* or *Victrix*.

The Venus statues found in military camps could be submitted in hope of fulfilling an amorous request, along with other gifts and offerings. Terracotta statue role in military camps can hardly be connected with the beauty embodied by Venus, having little aesthetic value. Rather the statues had an intrinsic value, with a strong utilitarian role in the protection of life, fecundity and fertility.

Just a few Venus statues were found in graves, but Venus is the only deity present in funerary inventories from Dacia. Goddess statues come especially from inhumation graves. Some accessories rendered on Venus statues, such as pendant *lunula*, or goddess association with Eros-Thanatos had also a funerary role.

Venus appears in *consecratio in formam deorum* phenomenon, where most of the finds come from the funerary contexts. The imperial family set the tone of this phenomenon, by represent themselves using iconographic types initially reserved to render gods. Beyond the political options, the choice of imitate Venus involves virtues that goddess represent, such as beauty, modesty and chastity, virtues considered to be indispensable for the salvation of the soul after death.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the worship place, in public or in private, the relationship between the believer and deity consists mainly of pray, sacrifices and votive dedications. The pray cannot be archaeologically surprised, but it can be presumed following the gesture of Venus made with the palm turned forward, towards the viewer, accepting the piety and offering blessing, in an answer to their prayers. Sacrifice itself also leaves little materials trace. As a result, votive dedications are the most visible and tangible evidence of the relationship between the believer and deity in the Roman world. In case of Venus, the reasons behind votive dedications were rather presume than clearly established: matters of love, human and agricultural fertility, diseases, dangers, achievement of honors and political positions, duty obligation or compliance to religious holidays.

How well was anchored Dacia in Roman tradition is best demonstrated by the epithet *Ubique*, the one which is everywhere, that accompanies Venus in the province capital. The numerous attributes make Venus to be present everywhere, covering all important issues of life and death. Throughout its evolution Venus assimilate attributes from other deities such as

Aphrodite, Astarte, Turan, Juno, Diana, Fortuna, Libera, Minerva and Mars. Thereby, Venus continuously expanded her competence domain, confirming with the epithet *Ubique* the cult universalistic tendencies. In fact, it is a confirmation that Venus was part of an Empire-wide phenomenon, of giving to major deities' universal jurisdiction by absorbing the attributes of minor deities. This phenomenon will end eventually establishing a monotheistic cult in Rome, but a cult centered on a non-Roman deity.