

SOME NEW GREEK AND LATIN INSCRIPTIONS NOMINATING GODS IN ISTRIA (CROATIA)

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The Croatian part of the Istrian peninsula extends from the mountain Učka and the bay of Kvarner on the northeast to St. Odorik's channel and the bay of Piran, i.e. the Adriatic sea on the west. This area coincides in its greater part with the four Roman agers: *Ager Polensis et Nesactiensis* (Ager of Pola and Nesactium), *Ager Parentinus* (Ager of Parentium) and the southern and eastern part of *Ager Tergestinus* (Ager of Trieste) and entirely covers the territory of *Histriae Septemtrionalis* (northern Istria). In the period of the emperor Augustus, all these agers made part of the 10th Italic region of *Venetia et Histria* by means of Agrippa's reform in 26 B.C.¹

In recent times newly discovered inscriptions mentioning deities in Istria joined the numerous Histro-Roman pantheon which was usually divided in:

- 1) cults of the autochthonous deities (14 gods, 29 epigraphic inscriptions),
- 2) cults of Roman deities (23 gods, 54 epigraphs) and

- 3) cults of Graeco-Oriental deities (22 gods, 15 inscriptions).

The antique pantheon in Istria was determined and proved in its most part owing to found epigraphic, sculptural and relief monuments (193) embracing 59 individual cults. In an intrinsic and mutual correlation these finds can not only be the base for a research of the religious and spiritual culture in antique Istria in the 600 years of the Roman domination of the peninsula, but also the origin of legal, social, cultural, artistic, economic and ethnical contacts and interpenetration. The epigraphic monuments and their finds are therefore especially important for this complex and complementary study².

Notions on the Histro-Roman pantheon in the Istrian region existed already in the Middle Ages, and a great number of monuments was found in the 19th and 20th century. Besides by travel writers, cult inscriptions were found and documented by B. Schiavuzzi, R. Weishäupl, A. Gnirs, P. Sticotti, A. Degrassi, B. Forlati-Tamaro, M. Mirabela-Roberti, S. Mlakar, A. and J. Šašel, M. Kos Šašel, V. Girardi-Jurkić, M. Zaninović, R. Matijašić, F. Tassaux, A. Starac and K. Džin in the recent period³.

Of the 98 cult monuments mentioning deities registered until now, I am glad that I can pay special attention here on the recent finds discovered after 1990, i.e., after the creation of the independent state of Croatia.

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1. PLIN., *Nat.Hist.*, 3, 17; BOSIO, L., "L'Istria nella descrizione della Tabula Peutingeriana", *Atti e Memorie della Società Istriana di Archeologia e Storia Patria* 22, 1974, 17-95; BOSIO, L., *Le strade romane della Venetia e dell'Histria*, Padova 1991, 283; MATIJAŠIĆ, R., *Gospodarstvo antičke Istre (The Economic History of Istria in Antiquity)*, Pula 1998, 43-46; MARGETIĆ, L., *Rijeka, Vinodol, Istra: Studije*, Rijeka 1990, 123; CHEVALIER, R., "La centurazione romana dell'Istria e della Dalmazia", *Atti e Memorie della Società Istriana di Archeologia e Storia Patria* 9, 1961, 11-24, 15; KRIZMANIĆ, V., "Sulla centurazione romana dell'Istria", *Istria nobilissima* 14, 1981, 181-190; STARAC, A., "Rimsko vladanje u Istriji I Liburniji, I, Istrija", *Monografije i katalogi Arheološki muzej Istre*, Pula 10, 1, 1999, 34; JURKIĆ, V., *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre, I - Kultovi u procesu romanizacije antičke Istre (The Spiritual Culture of Roman Istria, I - Cults in the Process of Istria's Romanization)*, Zagreb 2004, 18-20.

2. MATIJAŠIĆ, *Gospodarstvo antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 145-262; STARAC, "Rimsko vladanje...", o.c., 34; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 111-117.

3. JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 9-11.

All the discovered monuments are part of the group of accidental finds and are important because they confirm the previous notions on the cults of certain deities in Istria like Hercules (*Hercules*), Liber (*Liber*) and the autochthonous Melosoc (*Melosocus*). The discovered epigraphs confirm the notion on three important cults in Istria that played an important role in determining the legal, economic, cultural and ethnical meaning in the life and beliefs of the antique inhabitants of Istria⁴.

One of the most characteristic and most important cults for the region of the antique Istria, and especially for the Roman colony Pola, was Hercules who appears on an inscription from the 2nd century and is the patron of the city (*Colonia Iulia Pola Polentia Herculeana*)⁵. This Greek god was accepted with its iconographic, symbolic and cultural characteristics and in different syncretistic forms in countries and religions which surrounded or had contacts with Greece already in the period in which the epics Iliad and Odyssey were created, and through the Etruscan civilization to the autochthonous inhabitants of the eastern Adriatic coast. The attributes characterizing Hercules, strength, courage and nobleness, were the protective aspect for travelers and merchants against robbers and wild animals; the god was also considered a special protector of soldiers as a deity of success, but also of seamen, stone-masons and families. Because of the complexity of the features he suited the religious conception and the ideal picture of the Roman state and was, therefore, completely accepted by the official Roman politics⁶.

Bronze prehistoric statuettes of Hercules were discovered in Istria proving that his cult was popular among the autochthonous Histri and he was accepted in the context of their romanization after

the Roman conquest of Istria in 177 B.C.⁷ Known epigraphic formulas and onomastics confirm that Hercules was worshiped in Istria by all the autochthonous romanized Histri, by the legionaries and Roman colonists, by slaves and freed men of oriental origin. The arch of the oldest preserved city gate in Pula which, in its ground plan, kept the inclined castelleri form, is decorated with an engraved Hercules with a bat and dates from the year 50 B.C., the period of the formation of Caesar's colony⁸.

The text is:

L(ucius) Cassius C(ai) f(ilius) Longin(us)
L(ucius) Calpurnius L(uci) f(ilius) Piso
(duo) vir(i) [---]

I.I., X/I, 81

Lucius Cassius Longinus, son of Gaius /
Lucius Calpurnius Piso, son of Lucius /
duumviri (magistrates)

Not far from this city gate, on the stretch between the amphitheater and the crossing of the main roads towards Nesactium and Trieste, five inscriptions dedicated to Hercules were discovered⁹. The most recent discovery was in 1997 beside Hercules' gate thus again confirming the importance of the cult of Hercules in Pula and showing the concentration of monuments dedicated to him on this small area.

It is a votive urn made of limestone on a profiled base, broken in the upper part. Two lines of letters have been preserved. The letters are narrow, prolonged, R has a longer foot, M is irregular and inclined, C does not close more than half a circle. The letter I is longer. It is 42 cm high, the base is 40 cm wide and 30 cm long, the width of the body is 30 cm and its length 23 cm, the letters are 4 cm high. Dates from the 1st century. Site: Pula, Hercules' gate (Carrara 1), 1997. The monument is kept in the Archaeological museum of Istria, Pula, inv. num. A 26732 (Fig. 1).

4. DEGRASSI, A., "Culti dell'Istria preromana e romana", *Adriatica praehistorica et antiqua. Miscellanea Gregorio Novak dicata*, Zagreb 1970, 615-632; ŠAŠEL KOS, M., *Pre-Roman divinities of the Eastern Alps and Adriatic*, Ljubljana 1999, 63-80; ZACCARIA, C., "I culti pagani nell'Adriatico romano settentrionale", *Les cultes polythéistes dans l'Adriatique romaine*, Bordeaux 2000, 171-193; MATIJAŠIĆ, R.; TASSAUX, F., "Liber et Silvanus", *Les cultes Polythéistes dans l'Adriatique romaine*, Bordeaux 2000, 65-119; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 112-200.

5. I.I., X/I, 85.

6. STICOTTI, P., "Il culto di Ercole a Pola", *AT* 3 ser. 4, 1908, 233-239; SANADER, M., "O kultu Herkula u Hrvatskoj", *Rasprave o rimskim kultovima*, Zagreb 1999, 13-84; GRANT, M., *Roman Myths*, London 1971, 11; TURCAN, R., *L'art romain dans l'histoire*, Paris 1995, 17-357; CAVENDISH, R.; LING, O.T., *Mitologija*, Ljubljana 1990, 120-144.

7. TONINI, L.F., "Quattro bronzetti da Nesazio", *AMSI* n.s. 19, Venezia 1966, 9-141, t. 1/1; STARAC, A., *Augustov hram*, Pula 2004, 5-46, no. 7; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 166-177.

8. DEGRASSI, "Culti dell'Istria...", o.c., 621; STARAC, A., "Herkulova vrata, Herkulov kult, in: *Arheološka istraživanja 1997-1998. / Pula – iza Herkulovih vrata*", *Katalog Arheološki muzej Istre*, Pula 2001, 21-25.

9. I.I., X/I, 4, 5, 6; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre...*, o.c., 62-168: 2.7.1.; 2.7.2.; 2.7.3.; 2.7.4.; 2.7.11.



Fig. 1

The text is:

[--]rus Herculi sacr(um)

[--]rus dedicates to Hercules

Of the letter *R* only the inclined foot is preserved. It is thought that the central position of the cognomen shows that there cannot be more than two letters missing at the beginning. The name *Carus* was one of the suggested possibilities although other variants of the name can be found. It is not known whether the inscription had another upper line above the preserved ones and therefore we cannot determine whether the dedicant was a free citizen or a slave with a single name scheme¹⁰.

Among numerous female autochthonous deities (*Eia, Ica, Sentona, Aitica, Iutossica, Seixomnina Leucitica, Boria, Trita, Nebres, Iria*) present exclusively on the ager of Pula, southernmost to the bay of Lim (Dvigrad) and on the area of the eastern Istrian coast in Liburnia¹¹, only one male deity can be found — *Melosocus* (in pure or syncretic form as *Melosocus Augustus*)¹². This deity

10. STARAC, "Herkulova vrata, Herkulov kult ...", o.c., 24-25; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, 167-168.

11. JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 36, 56, 111-112, 116-117, 121-138.

12. DEGRASSI, "Culti dell'Istria...", o.c., 617; JURKIĆ, V., "Arte plastica del culto come determinante l'esistenza dei culti romani e sincretici nella regione istriana", *ACRS* 5, 1974, 6; JURKIĆ, V., "Kontinuitet ilirskih kultova u rimsko doba na području Istre", *JZ* 11, 1979-1981, 162-164; JURKIĆ, V., "La continuità dei culti illirici in Istria durante il periodo romano", *ACRS* 14, 1983, 15; JURKIĆ, V., "Autohtoni kultovi u odnosu prema helenističkoj i grčko-rimskoj religiji", *Jadranski zbornik, Povijesno društvo Istre i Rijeke* 12, 1982-1985, 279; MATIJAŠIĆ, R., "Novi rimskodobni grčki natpis iz južne Istre", *Obavijesti, Hrvatsko arheološko društvo* 1, 2000, 44-50; MATIJAŠIĆ, R., "Nalaz

appears as "*numen*", a lower rank deity, known in Latin lettering from inscriptions found in the 19th century as *Theo - God*, discovered in 1998 on a new find in Greek lettering¹³.

It is a small votive urn made of limestone. The base and the lower part of the inscription area are missing. The inscription area is 21,0 × 15,0 cm, and above it there is a triple profiled frame with an elevation (*pulvinus*) which is also damaged. The sides of the altar are worked but have no decoration, while the back part was probably built in. The inscription is arranged in five lines, cut in Greek letters and containing text in Greek language (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

The text says:

Theo / Melisoco / Silouester / apodus / thusian

To God / *Melisocus / Silouester / performed a vow*

The monument was discovered at the end of 1998 in a 90 m deep Karst cave and transported to Poreč in 1999. Height 30 cm, width 23 cm, thickness 19 cm. Datation: 1st century. Site: Golubinčina near Krnica. Location of the monument: County museum of the Poreč region in Poreč.

antičkog natpisa u kraškoj jami", *Godišnjak muzealaca i galerista Istre* 6, 2000, 8-9; JURKIĆ, V., *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 128-129.

13. MATIJAŠIĆ, "Novi rimskodobni...", o.c., 44-50; MATIJAŠIĆ, "Nalaz antičkog...", o.c., 8-9.

The cult of this god was worshiped east of Nesactium and finds are registered on two votive altars around the church of St. Theodore, an antique or even proto-antique locality. It is symptomatic that the two older finds are in Latin lettering while a new find in Greek lettering was found in the vicinity. The Greek writing contains a variant of the name *Meliosocus* as opposed to the earlier forms *Melosocus*. It is interesting that in the Latin variant *Melosocus* is invoked as "numen" (*Numen Melosocus*) while in the Greek variant as *Theo Melisoco*. Different authors¹⁴ connect this deity to music — *melos*, *cantus*, *carmen* and compare him to Apollo or Orpheus. Some also think that his cult is connected to pastures, woods and water as in the cults of *Silvan*, *Diana* and *Liber*¹⁵. However, there are no firm elements for such a claim. It is certain that it is about a known male pre-Roman autochthonous deity, perhaps a supreme one as the Roman *Jupiter (Iuppiter)* in the wide range of the feminized pantheon in the antique Istria¹⁶.

This new find in Greek lettering speaks of a strange symbiosis of a dedicant who is not Greek (*Silvester* or *Silouester*) and the Greek lettering which is very rare in Istria (there are only three known epigraphs from *Ager Polensis et Nesactiensis*)¹⁷. Nevertheless, the new Greek epigraph shows that the two earlier found urns with the inscription *Melosocus* were not a coincidence and that the worship of this cult was spread on the area between Nesactium (prehistoric settlement and the capital of the Histrian tribal allegiance destroyed in 177 B.C.) and Mutvoran (Bronze Age and Iron Age hillfort)¹⁸, that is, on the border of the 10th Italic region "Venetia et Histria" and Liburnia.

On the area of the *ager* of Poreč (*Ager Parentinus*), in Vrsar-Orsera, another altar to *Liber* has recently been found as part of a church tower. Finds of inscriptions dedicated to this deity has not been frequent in Istria till now. Only four altars have been registered, one in the south of Istria, in Ližnjan (as *Liber Augustus*), another in Vižinada (*Liber Augustus*), the third in Zatika

near Poreč (*Genius Liberi Augusti*) and the fourth in Marina near Labin (*Liber Pater Augustus*)¹⁹.

A new find of an altar to *Liber (Deo Libero)* in Vrsar, found in 1992, is one of very few monuments that has been accurately dated owing to the consulates of *Licius Licinius Sura* (a third time) and the consul *Quintus Sossius Senacion* (a second time) in 107 during the rule of emperor Traianus²⁰.

It is a votive plaque made of limestone damaged on the upper part. The inscription area is not framed. The text is arranged in eight lines, the letters being bigger in the first, second, fourth and fifth line (4 cm), smaller in the third (3,5 cm) and the smallest in the last three lines (3 cm). The letters are carefully cut in a classical capitel, there is a dividing point between words in the lower part and there is also usage of the ligature (Fig. 3).

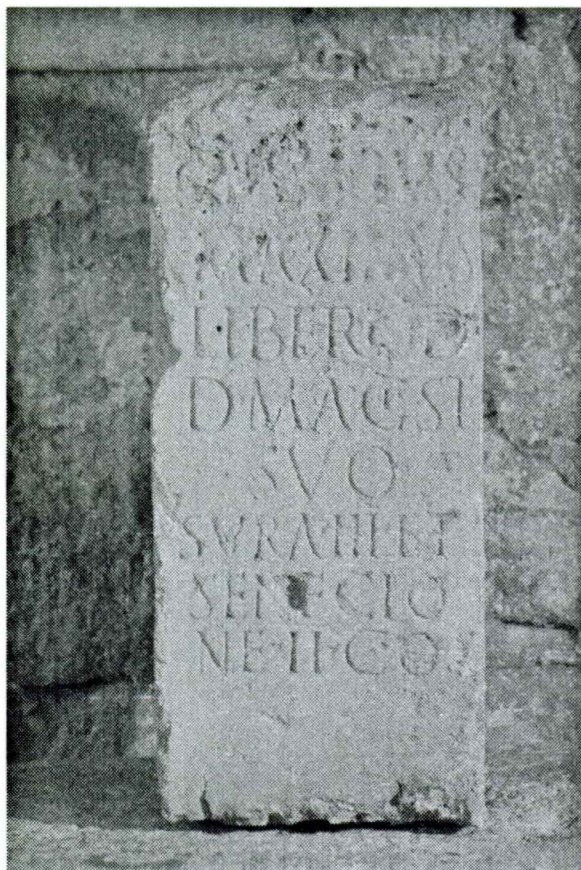


Fig. 3

14. TOMASCHKE, G., "Miscellen", BEZZEMBERGER, A. (ed.), *Beiträge zur Kunde der indogermanischen Sprache herausgegeben von Adalbert Bdezinberger* 9, 1885, 98; ROSCHER, W., *Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Leipzig 1884, 22.

15. MATIJAŠIĆ, "Nalaz antičkog ...", o.c., 9.

16. JURKIĆ, "Autohtoni kultovi ...", o.c., 279; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 129.

17. I.I., X/I, 26 (Pula – today in Florence), 166 (Pula), 279 (Pula).

18. MATIJAŠIĆ BUŠIĆ K., "Tragovi prethistorije Mutvorana i okolice", *Prilozi o zavičaju* 5, 1988, 95 - 104.

19. I.I., X/I, 5, 85; I.I., X/II, 232; *CIL* III, 3046; I.I., X/II, 2; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 2.11.1.; 2.11.3.; 2.11.4.; 2.11.5.

20. ZANINOVIĆ, M., "Liberov natpis iz Vrsara", *Izdanja, Hrvatsko arheološko društvo* 18, 1997, 137; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 180, 2.11.2.

The text says:

*Claudius (?) / Maksimus / Libero D(eo) / d(edit)
magist(ro) / suo / Sura III (tertium) et / Senecio/ne II
(secundum) co(n)s(ulibus)*

Claudius / Maksimus / gave to god Libero / his
teacher / (in the time of the consulate) Sura for the
3rd time / Senecio / for the 2nd time

The dedicant has no first name (praenomen) in the inscription and it is known that the omission of the first name began towards the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century under the emperor Traianus. Here Liber is worshiped as a Deus, while on the altar from Zatika just as *Genius*. The votive plaque was found in 1992 in the foundations of the pilaster in the church of St. Mary in Vrsar during works on the improvement of the statics of the apse. Height 49 cm, width 21,5 cm, thickness 21 cm. Site: Vrsar, St Mary's church. Dates from the 2nd century.

This new find to Liber points to the fact that the cult of Liber was most worshiped in the ager of Poreč — three cases (*Colonia Iulia Parentium*). It undoubtedly shows that there was a firm belief in this god as protector of crops, vineyards and olive groves²¹.

CONCLUSION

Recent finds of Greek and Roman epigraphs mentioning Hercules, Melosocus and Liber, along with previous notions, undoubtedly confirm that the liberal Roman pantheon tolerated the complex polytheistic totality of gods and goddesses,

heroes and mythological creatures in Istria, but that it also respected the firmly rooted autochthonous deities, which were, thanks to their original strength, worshiped and accepted by oriental and Roman dedicants, the newly settled inhabitants of the peninsula.

In the scheme of statistic values, among the group of Roman deities the cult of Hercules makes up 10% while the cult of Liber only 6%. These deities are part of the group of Roman male deities making in total 48% of the pantheon in comparison to the 52% of the female Roman deities worshiped by the antique population of Istria in the period between the 2nd century B.C. and the 4th century.

In the sphere of the autochthonous cults Melosocus as the only male deity makes up only 7% compared to the 93% of female autochthonous deities (i.e. 14 goddesses). This points to an extremely strong matriarchal component in the Histrian religious culture. Dedicants to these deities are mainly of Greek, that is, oriental or Italic origin coming from the social structure of slaves or freed men. These are the newly settled inhabitants who put their fate in the hands of local deities having probably similar or identical characteristics as the deities in their mother country²².

If the system in the heavens is the mirror image of life on earth, as was explained by the Greek and Roman pantheon, then we can conclude that the social structure or the romanized population of southern and eastern Istria predominantly keeps the matriarchal mythological and religious roots, regardless of the intensive and systematic romanization during six long centuries.

21. JURKIĆ, "Arte plastica del culto ...", o.c., 11-12; MATIJAŠIĆ; TASSAUX, o.c., 67-75; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 111-117.

22. JURKIĆ, "Arte plastica del culto...", o.c., 30-33; JURKIĆ, "La continuità ...", o.c., 20-24; MATIJAŠIĆ; TASSAUX, o.c., 67-75; JURKIĆ, *Duhovna kultura antičke Istre ...*, o.c., 111-117.