ON MITHRAISM IN THE ARMY OF DACIA SUPERIOR

The penetration and expansion of the Mithraic religion in Dacia in the period following the Roman conquest is in keeping with its general and rapid propagation in the whole Roman Empire. Among its characteristics, some of which were common to other Oriental religions related to mystical practices and to the hope of salvation, Mithraism reached the deepest emotional levels in all the components of the Roman army. The new religion was borne all over the extent of the empire, from the Danube to Britain and from Africa to the Rhine; it extended wide and large over the Dacian province where it became, from the IIIrd century onwards, the most powerful local religious current. It was adopted especially by the army and it had adepts in the widest circles of the Dacian population.

The great number of Mithraic epigraphic and sculptural materials that were discovered conferred to the province north of the Danube a prominent place as compared to other parts of the empire. These materials are, for the most part, already published in F. Cumont’s and M. J. Vermaseren’s repertories.


2 Fr. Cumont, Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain, Paris 1929, pp. 138-139.

3 M. Macrea, Viața in Dacia romană, București, 1969, p. 372.

and the findings of the last two decades complete the image and the proportions of the cult’s development in Roman Dacia.5

The problems referring to Mithraism were discussed in recent works concerning Dacia Inferior6 or the Roman Dobrodja,7 so we shall limit the subject of this paper to Dacia Superior where we shall follow the manifestations of this cult within the army. A selection among the abundant Mithraic material in order to single out what was dedicated by soldiers is a difficult task: reliefs, rondo bosso sculptures and votive altars bear many fragmentary inscriptions whence precisely those elements required to ascribe them are missing, and we do not know the actual conditions in which they were found and which would enable us to assign them to military cadres. This being the case, we shall tackle first the material that undoubtedly belongs to soldiers, as well as some of the pieces which, without straightforwardly expressing their appurtenance, can be ascribed to members of the army, considering the circumstances in which they were found.

The territorial distribution of the findings reveals from the beginning — beside the fact that they were naturally concentrated in places that were also the seats of military units like Apulum,

