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SARCOPHAGUS OF *AELIUS IULIUS IULIANUS* FROM ROMULA, AN EXPRESSION OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL ART AND POETRY

Gabriela FILIP
Oltenia Museum Craiova

Cuvinte cheie: arta romană, Dacia Inferior, epitaf, *tabula ansata*, poem
Key words: Roman art, Inferior Dacia, epitaph, *tabula ansata*, poem

Understood not only as a whole art culture in the capital of the Empire, but also as an aesthetic expression of the entire Roman world, in direct contact with the variety of artistic genres belonging to the Hellenistic and Oriental worlds, thus borrowing certain notions and artistic styles, the Roman art has managed to create an original character, specific and obvious in each of its fields. Many of the artistic manifestations were imposed in the conquered territories, but at the same time, they were enriched with local artistic traditions.

*

Within the Roman art of Dacia, the funeral sculpture holds an important place, imposed by the demands of religious life. Regarding the cult of the dead, there was a strong belief in the existence of the soul after death, the Romans considering the grave as its eternal home, and for this reason all funeral monuments have received special attention¹.

Turning our attention to the sarcophagi, this type of funeral monument began to be used increasingly more often in Rome, starting with the end of 1st century A.D., but especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D., when the grave burial or inhumation spreads in the Empire as the main funeral rite². This particularity can be found, as might be expected, also in the funeral art of all the Roman Empire provinces.

Typologically, can be distinguished: the Greek sarcophagus, produced in the workshops in Athens, with *operculum* (the lid) made in two slopes, with fronton and *acroteria*, and *arca* (the box) ornamented on all sides with sculptures; the Italic sarcophagus, of Etruscan influence, provided with a flattened side in the form of a bed on which the deceased ones were rendered in a laying position; and the Asian sarcophagus or Corinthian with the lid double-

¹ Cumont 1949, p. 24-28; Tudor 1978, p. 394-411; Bărbulescu 1984, p. 190; Mureșan, Mureșan 2023, p. 206-218 and so on.

² Tudor 1933, p. 65-73; Floca 1941, p. 4-32; Gramatopol 2000, p. 202.

ridged, sculptures divided into scenes on the outer faces of the box, flanked by columns³.

Most sarcophagi discovered in Dacia show on the main side of the *arca* a *tabula ansata* or even a central medallion (Galați, Barboși, *Durostorum*)⁴.

A considerable number of Roman sarcophagi comes from Dacia Inferior. Made of limestone, most of them do not have any decoration on their surfaces. Exceptions are made two sarcophagi discovered at Romula. It is about the funeral monument also known as Ghika Sarcophagus, as well as the one belonging to the decurion Aelius Iulius Iulianus⁵. Both are well crafted and their typology is similar to those in Moesia Province.

*

The sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus, from Romula, is the subject of this article (**Fig. 5-6**). Even though it has been published on several occasions in the past⁶, I want to bring it back into discussions here, for some considerations. First, the sarcophagus is remarkable in its manner of achievement, through sculptural and architectural precision, and it seems to be the most well-done piece of this kind from Roman Dacia⁷. Further, the inscription on the monument has no analogies in the Latin poetic environment. And, as I mentioned above, the sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus has been published so far, several times, but under rather weak graphics, as the technology of those times allowed, without a good resolution of the illustrations and without a graphic drawing reproduction of the monument. Small shortcomings which, through this present study, I have proposed to solve.

The context of the discovery

The archaeological context of discovery of the sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus is well known. It was discovered accidentally in Romula⁸ (**Fig. 1-**

³ ECR, 694; Gramatopol 2000, p. 203.

⁴ Gramatopol 2000, p. 205; Știrbulescu 2007, p. 287; Oța 2012, p. 256.

⁵ Gramatopol 2000, p. 205; Știrbulescu 2007, p. 292.

⁶ The sarcophagus has been published until now, as follows: Tudor 1954, p. 293-312, fig. 84; Tudor 1958, Suppl. 67; Tudor 1968, Suppl. 78; IDR, II, no. 357, with bibliography; Tudor 1978, p. 403-406; Bondoc, Dincă 2002, p. 3-6, no. 1; Kruschwitz, Murzea 2024, p. 310-313.

⁷ Tudor 1968 a, p. 31; Kruschwitz, Murzea 2024, p. 305-328.

⁸ Capital of Dacia Inferior, the settlement was an important center of agricultural and artisanal production, as well as tax station on the road from Sucidava to Olt Gorge. The strategic and economic importance of the city comes from the fact that it was at the junction of several Roman roads. Romula has been awarded with the title *municipium* in the second century AD, an event presumed to have taken place during the reign of the Emperor Hadrianus (117-138 AD). It is harder to chronologically fit when Romula was promoted to the rank of *colonia*, but most likely it happened during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211 AD). However, during the reign of Emperor Philip the Arab (244-249 AD), Romula already held this rank (see IDR II, 144-145, no 324).

3), in the year 1952, on the occasion of sand extractions in the area⁹, inside of a tumulus located near the Roman road (*The Road of Traian*) which led to the Commune Islaz. Therefore, it belonged to the southeastern necropolis of Roman town Romula¹⁰ (**Fig. 4**).

In the following I will proceed to describe the funerary monument.

Description

The lid (*operculus*) is double ridged and was made in the shape of a house roof. On its surface, there were stylized in relief some prominences which imitate tiles. To obtain a lower weight to facilitate the transport operations, the piece has been hollowed out on its inner side. There is a hole in the lid, which was made when the sarcophagus was desecrated by the treasure hunters.

In each corner, the lid is decorated with *acroteria*, rendered in the shape of quarters of sphere (0.6 x 0.52 m), the latter being decorated as follows: on the main side there are two funeral winged genii (Thanatos), in semi-recumbent position, with bulbs of poppy in hair; the genii have closed eyes and hold one hand under the head, and in another hand, they keep a coronet (**Fig. 7**). On the back side of the sarcophagus, the *acroteria* are not decorated. On the lateral sides, these were decorated with vegetal motifs (stylized *acanthus* leaves) and framed a fronton with a representation of Medusa. Under Medusa's chin, from a knot, two snakes start to the left and to the right. The head of the Medusa was rendered with an elongated face, with hanging hair loops on the temples (**Fig. 8**).

All the sculptural representations were crafted in relief. It must be also said that in the middle of the basis of each gable there was made a small hole, these being necessary to ensure a more easy lifting and maneuvering of the piece. The dimensions of the lid are 2.30 x 1.08 x 0.62 m.

The box (*arca*) shows a neat way of execution. Over time, the piece was broken into many fragments which are glued together now.

On both lateral sides, in the upper part, there is an orifice with the same purpose as in the case of the lid, that is to facilitate transport and location operations. On the main face of the box, an inscription was written on the inner side of a *tabula ansata* (1.41 x 0.52 m), which has 13 lines, of which the first four are without metrical structure, and the last ten ones are in verses (**Fig. 9**). The height of letters is 0.035 m in the first three lines and 0.025 m on the others. In the corners of the *tabula* were written the letters D and M, each with a height of 0.135 m (**Fig. 10**). The dimensions of the box is 2.22 x 1 x 0.92 m.

⁹ Tudor 1954, p. 293.

¹⁰ About this necropolis, see Popilian 1986, p. 89-99.

General information and comments

Currently, the sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus is part of the Romanați Museum Collection from Caracal town, in Romania, with the inventory number 1135.

Regarding the chronological framing of the monument, it was dated at the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.¹¹.

It was appreciated that the sarcophagus was executed in its final form at the south of the Danube, and from there brought to Romula, where it was engraved¹². For this hypothesis, it is argued that the ornamentation of sarcophagus lids in the form of tile roofs was a common practice in Moesia¹³. Same for the inscription made inside of a *tabula ansata*.

Given the impressive epigraph, one can assume that there was a bench in front of the sarcophagus, on which passers-by or travelers could sit down, rest and read the inscription.

Draw attention the last 10 lines of the inscription, which were rendered in hexameters. The analysis of the metric scheme of the verses leads to the following conclusion. Namely that, in this case, there cannot be about an uneducated or unskilled poet, because the rhythm of the versed inscription is clear and perfect, and the poetic aspect of the lyrics is impeccable¹⁴. There is also a remark on the well-executed versification, it is assumed that it is about copying a literary pattern¹⁵.

The text of the inscription is the following:

D(is) M(anibus)
Ael(io) Iul(io) Iuliano, dec(urioni), quaestoric(io),
aedilic(io) col(oniae) Romul(ensis), Valeria Ge-
mellina marito b(ene) m(erenti) p(osuit):
5 *Coniugi pro meritis quondam karissimo coniunx*
Hanc Iuliano domum flendo fabricavi parennem
Frigida qua membra possint requiescere morti.
Quattuor hic denos vixit sine culpa per annos
Et sua perfunctus vidit cum gloria honores.
10 *Ecce Gemellina pietate ducta marito*
Struxi dolens digno sedem cum liberis una

¹¹ Bondoc, Dincă 2002, p. 4.

¹² Tudor 1968 a, p. 31.

¹³ See, for example, several sarcophagi discovered at Ratiaria, cf. Atanasova-Gheorghieva, Mitova-Djonova 1985, p. 26, 29.

¹⁴ Sămărghițan 2003, p. 177-178.

¹⁵ Sămărghițan 2003, p. 182.

*Inter pampinea virgulta et gramina laeta
 Umbra super rami virides ubi densa ministrant.
 Qui legis hos versus, opta leve terra, viator.*

The translation of the text¹⁶:

To Manes Gods.

To Aelius Iulius Iulianus, decurio, quaestor and aedilis of Colonia Romula. Valeria Gemellina has put to the husband who has earned it.

I, the grieving wife, I built this eternal house, to Iulianus once dear husband, for his merits, in which the cold limbs of the dead can rest. He lived without a mistake, for forty years, and he saw successful the fulfilling of his commandments. That is why I, Gemellina crying and by piety touched, I built my husband's house together with the children, between vineyards and cheerful grass, in the place where green branches give shadow above. You traveler who read these verses, wish him to rest in peace.

I present below a translation of the text in verses¹⁷:

To Manes Gods

To Aelius Iulius Iulianus, *decurio*, *quaestor* and *aedilis* of Colonia Romula, to the husband who has earned his merit, Valeria Gemellina put it:

To dear husband *Iulianus*, to his worthiness, I, the wife,
 This forever house I lifted it with tears,
 For his frigid body could rest after death in it.
 Forty years he had lived, in full honor
 And his duty fulfilling, of glory and rank he had part.
 And behold for that I, *Gemellina*, by piety touched,
 To worthy husband, grived was I when with children this house I raised up
 Between wine grove and delightful greenery,
 Where thick branches cover him with their dense shade.
 You wish him, traveler man, to rest in peace.

¹⁶ Tudor 1954, p. 298-299.

¹⁷ The metrical translation was made by S. Bezdechi, cf. Tudor 1954, p. 299 and Tudor 1968, p. 413.

It is remarkable the relatively early age when Aelius Iulius Iulianus died; if this fact was not because of unbiased reason (war, disease, accident), then 40 old could be an indicative of the average age for the population from Roman Dacia. Or, another possible interpretation would consist in the fact that the number forty would represent the totality of the years in which the two husbands lived together¹⁸.

Also, we could not neglect the career of the defunct: senator, superintendent of financial problems and finally, city father of Romula.

Beside the monumentality of the sarcophagus, the inscription which was sculpted on his face suggested certain poetical concerns, from the inside of topnotch circles who ruled Romula city.

The poetic text does not have analogies in the Latin poetic environment, nor did I find similar poetic formulas in other funerary epitaphs. Therefore, it can be considered original; a creation of the political and financial elite of Colonia Romula, the capital of Dacia Inferior.

SARCOFAGUL LUI *AELIUS IULIUS IULIANUS* DIN ROMULA, O EXPRESIE A ARTEI ȘI POEZIEI PROVINCIALE ROMANE

REZUMAT

Sarcofagul lui Aelius Iulius Iulianus, senator, iar mai târziu administrator al problemelor financiare și edil al orașului Romula reprezintă probabil unul dintre cele mai reușite produse artistice de acest gen din întreaga Dacie romană. Decorat pe laturi cu acrotere și frontoane, acest sarcofag impresionează atât prin modul de realizare, cât și prin atenția la detalii. Textul sculptat pe partea din față a cutiei a fost încadrat într-o *tabula ansata* și este compus aproape în întregime din versuri.

Sarcofagul lui Aelius Iulius Iulianus de la Romula demonstrează, pe de o parte, gustul pentru artă al elitelor, iar pe de altă parte, capacitatea acestora de a exprima un mesaj într-o manieră artistică. Prin urmare, se poate remarca prezența unui interes pentru artă în lumea elitelor din Dacia, a celor care erau implicați în administrarea orașului Romula, capitala provinciei Dacia Inferior.

ABSTRACT

Sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus, senator, and later superintendent of financial problems and city father of Romula represents probably one of the most successful artistic products of its kind in the entire Roman Dacia. Ornamented on sides with acroteras and gables, this sarcophagus impresses both through the manner of

¹⁸ This interpretation was suggested to me by Sorin Nemeti, to whom I thank.

achievement and the attention to detail. The text carved on the front side of the box was framed in a *tabula ansata* and it is composed almost entirely of verses.

Sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus from Romula demonstrates on one hand the taste for art of the elites, and on the other hand, their ability to express a message in an artistic manner. Therefore, it can be noticed the presence of an interest in arts in the world of elites in Dacia, of those who were involved in the administration of Romula, the capital of Dacia Inferior province.

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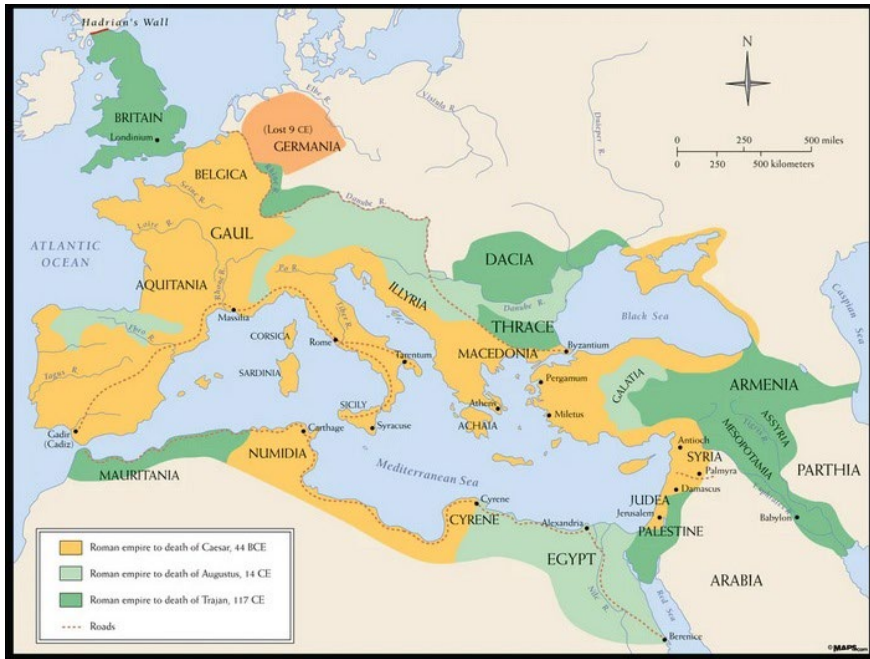


Fig. 1. Roman Dacia on the map of the Roman Empire
 (https://www.madmaps.com/products/growth-of-the-roman-empire-44-bce-117-ce-910yo)



Fig. 2. Colonia Romula, on the map of Dacia Inferior, after Tudor 1968, Fig. 150

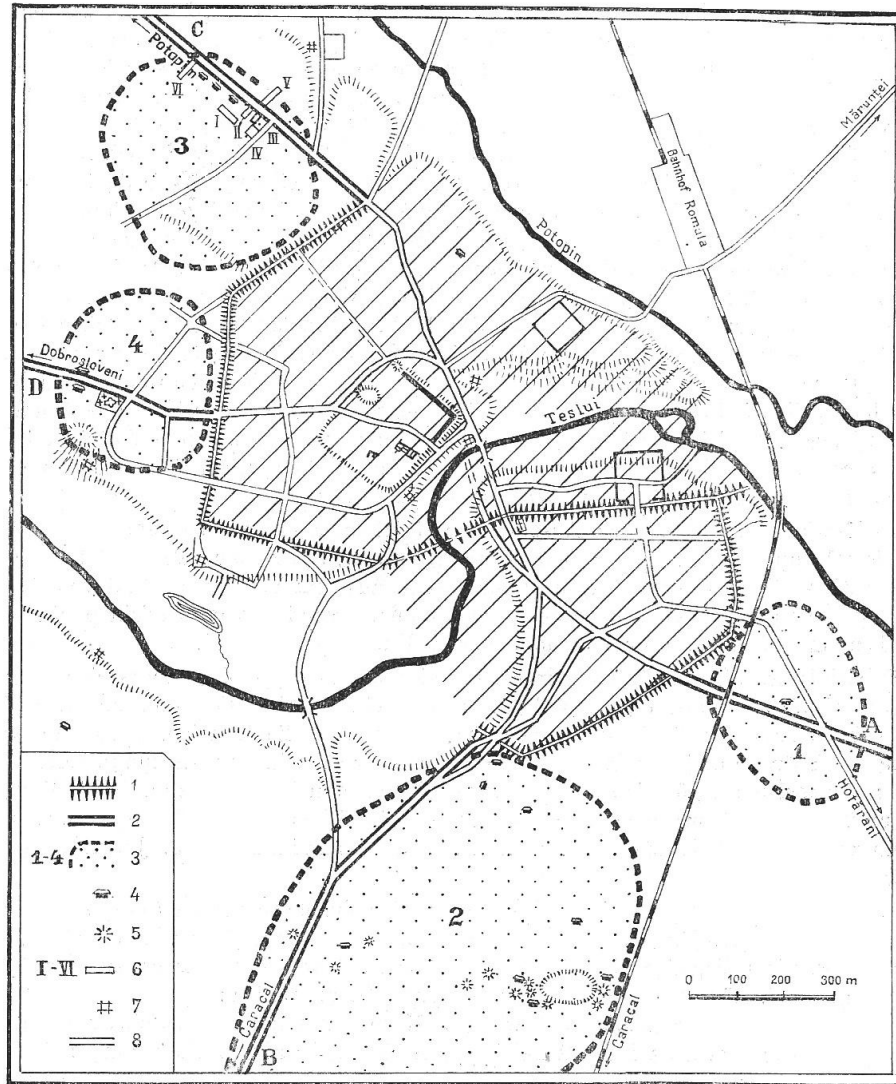


Fig. 4. Romula, the capital of Dacia Inferior. The sizes of the city and the necropolises (no. 1-4). Sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus, has been discovered in the cemetery located in the south-east vicinity (no. 1)



Fig. 5. Sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus from Romula: the front side of the sarcophagus (up) and a detail of the lateral side (down)

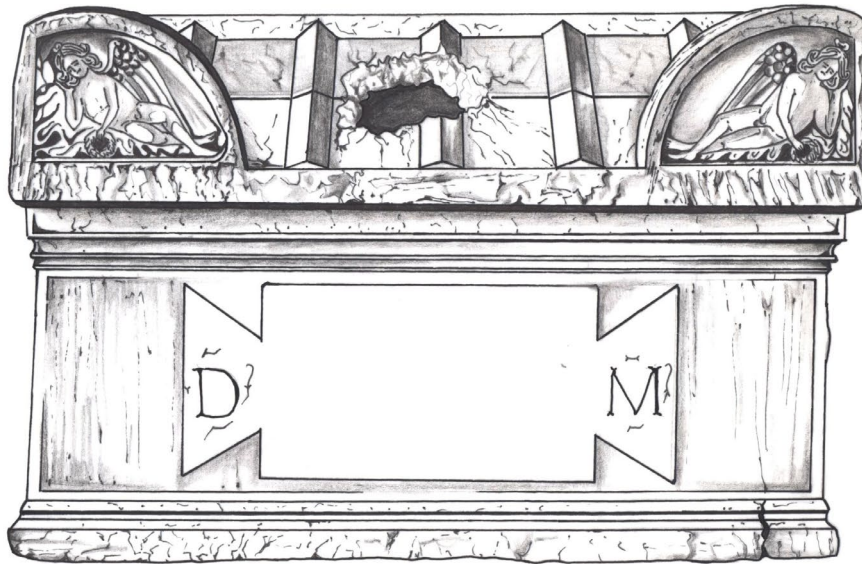


Fig. 6. The sarcophagus of Aelius Iulius Iulianus. Drawing by author



Fig. 7. Detailed images: the acroterions from the left-front corner of the lid and right front corner of the lid



Fig. 8. The representation of Medusa from the lateral side of the lid



Fig. 9. The inscription in a *tabula ansata*, from the front side of the sarcophagus box: detailed image

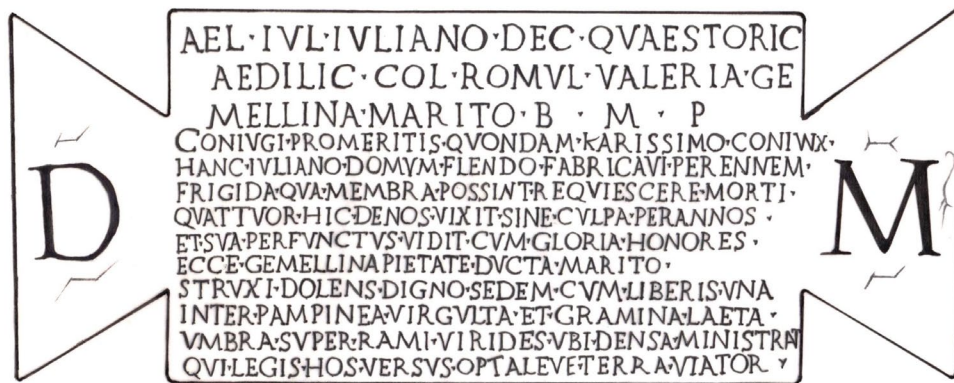


Fig. 10. The inscription in a *tabula ansata*, from the front side of the sarcophagus box: drawing (by author)

