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The Bronze *Signum* from Timacum Maius and its Cultic Attribution

Abstract: The bronze *signum* discussed in this paper was discovered by archaeological excavation on the site of *Timacum Maius* in 2010. Found in the area of a luxurious Roman-period building, the artefact shows a tapering body with a central conical socket similar to a spearhead socket. It is one of the twenty-three known *signa* of the so-called classical-type. Most of them were found in the context of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, and we also presume the cultic purpose of the bronze *signum* from Timacum Maius. A similar find comes from Jupiter Dolichenus' shrine in Egeta on the Danube limes with an inscription that connects it directly with the Dolichenian cult, and with the First Cohort of Cretans (*Cohors I Cretum*), the unit which had previously been stationed at Timacum Maius. The *signum* from Timacum Maius is most likely also connected with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus and chronologically belongs to a period which is much earlier than the Severan age.

Keywords: Timacum Maius, *signum*, bronze, Roman period, Jupiter Dolichenus, *cohors I Cretum*

Roman *signa*, or standards, usually were military emblems consisting of a flag, metal medallions, discs, figural representations and the like attached to a wooden or metal pole. Their primary purpose in the army was practical, for rallying, directing and controlling the soldiers of a unit. Apart from military *signa*, there were also *signa* intended for cultic purposes. They could be figural or non-figural, and some of them served as holders of sheet-metal votive plaques depicting a deity.

The bronze *signum* discussed in this paper was discovered during the archaeological excavation on the site of *Timacum Maius* in the village of Niševac near Svrlijig, eastern Serbia, in 2010.¹ Apart from being included in the catalogue appended to the book *La région de Svrlijig en Serbie orientale: préhistoire, antiquité*

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¹ Systematic archaeological excavations organised jointly by the Institute for Balkan Studies SASA and the Svrlijig Centre for Tourism, Culture and Sport have been carried out since 2008.

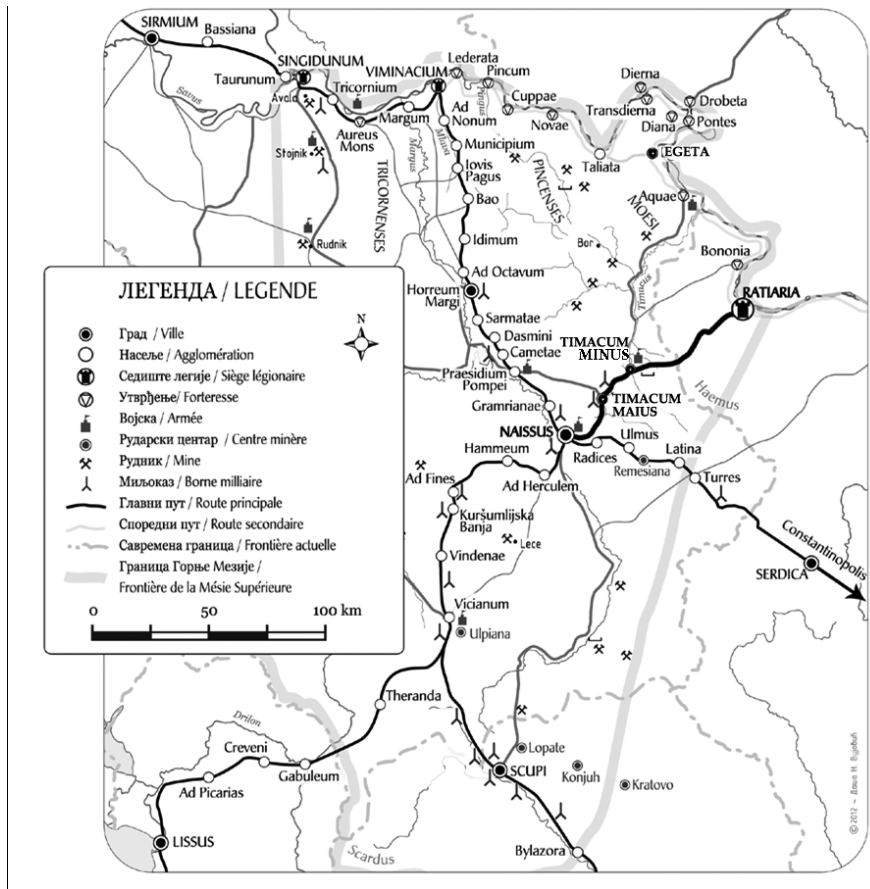
et moyen âge (Petrović, Filipović & Milivojević 2012: 171, no. 12), the *signum* has not been studied in more detail. The site in question, situated twenty-five kilometres northeast of Niš, was a station on the Roman itinerary road *Lissus–Naissus–Ratiaria*, which was the shortest route between the Adriatic coast and the Danube (Petrović, Filipović & Luka 2014: 97–142).

The *signum* was discovered in the area of the luxurious building with a hypocaust and *tubuli*, whose two surviving rooms were explored during the 2010 and 2011 campaigns (Petrović, Filipović & Milivojević 2012: 101ff). Based on the finds of coins of Trajan and Antoninus Pius, the building, which was likely in use until the mid-fourth century, has been roughly dated to the first half of the second century (Petrović, Filipović & Milivojević 2012: 105). However, it may well be of an even earlier date because the discovered coins cannot be taken as the completely reliable *terminus post quem* for its construction. Namely, not far from this building are the remains of a bathhouse (*thermae*) which shows a similar building method and technology, and in the construction of which the First Cohort of Cretans (*cohors I Cretum*) has been ascertained to have taken part. This unit of the Roman army was transferred to the province of Upper Moesia between AD 78 and 80. It was stationed at Timacum Maius and Naissus until it was deployed to fight in Trajan's Second Dacian War, as evidenced by the inscription of a veteran of this cohort settled in Naissus, *Tiberius Claudius Valerius* (Petrović & Filipović 2015: 35–38). After the war, the cohort was transferred back to Upper Moesia, and in the second and third centuries was stationed in *Egeta* (modern Brza Palanka) on the Danube (*AE* 1966, 336 = *AE* 1968, 453).

As already mentioned, the bronze *signum* was discovered in 2010 adjacent to the outer face of the eastern wall of the building with *tubuli*, in a layer of earth containing a large amount of ash and soot (fig. 1). The *signum* had also been exposed to fire, and one of its two finials was missing. The chipped-off piece was discovered at a distance of seven meters, in the room with the hypocaust, i.e. inside the building (fig. 2). This small fragment had not been exposed to fire and, as it turned out during the conservation and restoration of the artefact, it fitted perfectly in place.²

The shape of the artefact is reminiscent of a quiver with its tapering body and a central conical socket similar to a spearhead socket. The circular opening for the pole at its lower end has a ring-like rim (figs 3 and 4). In its upper part is a hole for fixing the inserted wooden pole. The upper third of the body is flattened and at its top is a groove with a surviving rivet. The lower part reveals a casting flaw, a small crevice that was subsequently repaired. Symmetrically welded to the body are two thick S-shaped metal straps, and there are two crosspieces set

² Conservation was carried out by Saša Živić of the National Museum, Belgrade, who supplied us with information about the state of preservation of the artefact and the effect of the fire on it.



Map of Upper Moesia with the sites mentioned in the text

obliquely between their upper ends and the body. Atop the end of each strap is a grooved triangular finial which functioned as a votive plaque holder. All the three grooves are aligned and have preserved rivets. If we disregard the crosspieces and triangular finials, the impression made by the shape is that of stylised snakes; even more so as the view of the *signum* from above shows that the ends of the straps terminate triangularly, much like the heads of venomous snakes. The total width of the artefact is 22.3 cm, the height of the body is 10.9 cm and its diameter at the lower, reinforced end is 3.4 cm.

The *signum* may be said to be a quite rare find. There is only one other known *signum* of the “classical” type discovered in Serbia (from Egeta on the Danube), while the total number of such finds from Europe and the Near East is twenty-two. Most of these finds, it is true, have a single horizontal crosspiece with a groove into which votive plaques were fitted, and the crosspiece is unfa-

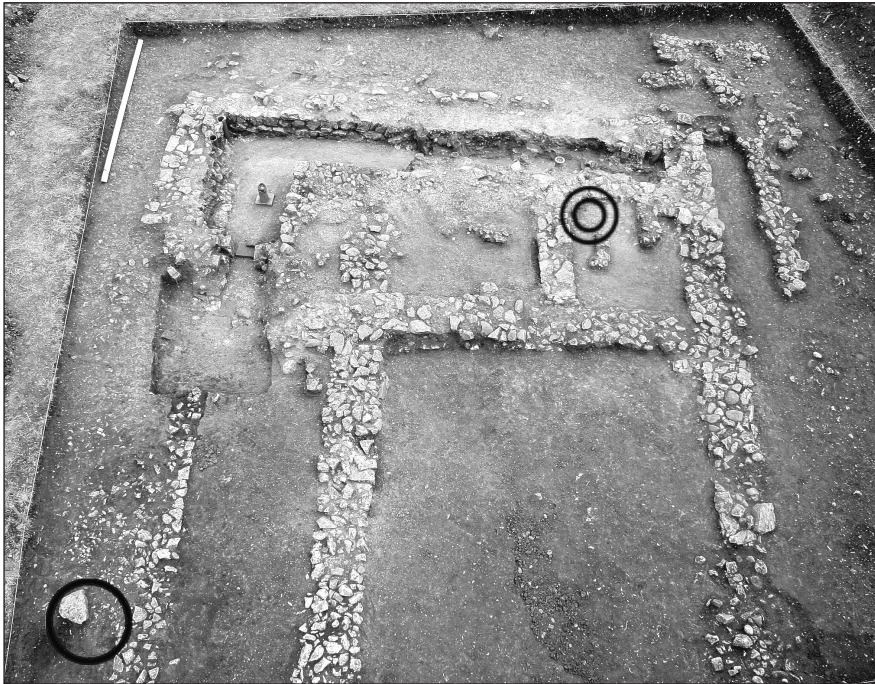
ingly supported by two thick straps which are attached to the conical body and also recall stylised snakes. This “classical” type of the *signum* may be divided into two subtypes: with and without the horizontal crosspiece (fig. 5/IIa and fig. 5/IIb, respectively).

It should be noted that there were also figural *signa*, which seem to have been predominantly used for cultic or votive purposes just like the classical type, but one of the straps is shaped in the form of a dog chasing a hare, while the shape of the other varies and shows a snake, a rosette or a deity. The figural *signa* should undoubtedly be classified as a separate type, but those discovered so far are too few to allow any further classification. To this type (fig. 5/I), in addition to two finds from Serbia – from Belgrade (Jovanović 2007: 32, fig. 4.1; Krunić 1997: 78, no. 82) and Niš (*Naisus-Sirmijum* 1983: fig. 33, no. 33) – belong the *signa* from the environs of Trier (Menzel 1966: 87, cat. no. 212, Pls. 64 and 65) and Bonn, Germany (Menzel 1986: 87, no. 210, Pl. 100), and from Merida, Spain (Menzel 1986: 88), and they all have been dated to the third century.

As noted earlier, with the find from Timacum Maius, now there are twenty-three known classical-type *signa*. The most common are those with the horizontal crosspiece, and even though the crosspiece varies in length – it can be of the same length as the votive plaque or twice as short – all essentially belong to the same variety. The known *signa* of this type were discovered in the Roman provinces of Syria: sites of Tel Dülük 1 and Tel Dülük 2 (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/1, 2); Moesia Superior: sites of Semsen (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/4) and Egeta (Pop-Lazić 1977: 42); Dacia Malvensis: Răcari (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/6); Dacia Porolissensis: Turda (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/7); Pannonia Inferior: Kömlöd 1 and Kömlöd 2 (Gudea 2004: 218, figs. 2/9, 10), Brigetio (Merlat 1951: 93, figs. 17, 18) and Adony, 3 pieces (Banki 1977: 13–14, figs. 1–3); Noricum: Traismauer, 3 pieces (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/21–23), Mauer an der Url, 3 pieces (Hörig & Schwertheim 1987: nos. 294, 295); Germania Superior: Hedderheim, 2 pieces (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/29, 30) and Zugmantel (Merlat 1951: 331, fig. 66); and Britania: Oxford area (Gudea 2004: 218, fig. 2/32). The horizontal crosspiece of some *signa* is supported by the braces whose shape recalls stylised snakes.

On the other hand, the only example of the type without the horizontal crosspiece and thus corresponding to our find is the *signum* from Zugmantel, which was recovered from a shrine of Jupiter Dolichenus. Its body terminates in the shape of the bull's head, while the straps clearly show snake heads covered in scales. The bull is the main animal associated with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, while the snake also occurs on a bronze plaque from Moesia Inferior (Najdenova 1993). Most *signa* were discovered in the context of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, i.e. in shrines dedicated to him (*dolichenea*).

By way of an introduction to the line of argument in support of the presumed cultic purpose of the bronze *signum* from Timacum Maius, which is the central proposition of this paper, it is pertinent to note an important element

Fig. 1 Bronze *signum* in situFig. 2 Orthophoto of the building with *tubuli* with find-spots of the *signum* and its fragment

of the furnishings of the archaeologically explored *dolicheneum* in Egeta on the Danube *limes* (Vučković-Todorović 1965: 173–182). Namely, the material recovered from Jupiter Dolichenus' shrine includes a *signum* that bears a punctured inscription: *Aurelius Gaius cen(turio) I Cretum v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* (AE 1981, 737). That the First Cohort of Cretans was immediately connected with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus and his shrine in Egeta is evidenced by another dedication to him by this army unit (AE 1966, 336 = AE 1968, 453) which was also discovered in the shrine in Egeta. What draws attention apart from the

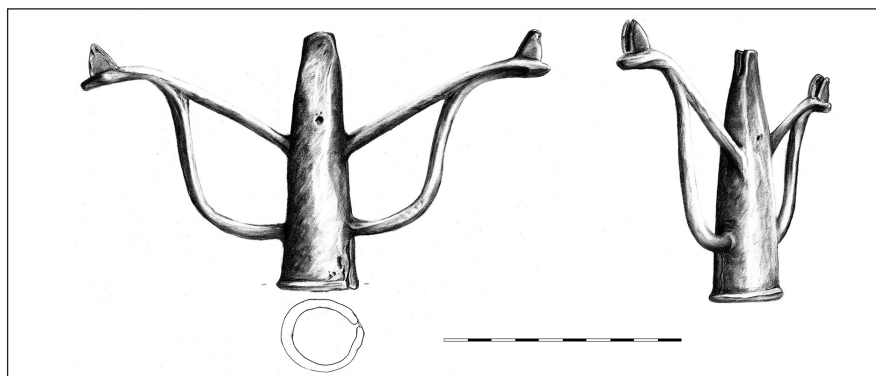
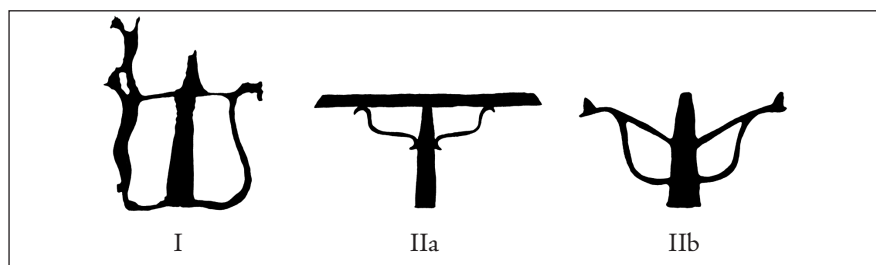


Fig. 3 *Signum* from Timacum Maius (drawing by Saša Živanović)

fact that both Egeta and Timacum Maius yielded a rare find of the same type, a *signum*, is that the inscription from Egeta mentions the First Cohort of Cretans, the unit which had been stationed in Timacum Maius. More importantly, both the *signum* and the cohort are connected with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus. Even though the cohort came to be stationed in Egeta quite some time after it had been first deployed to Upper Moesia and stationed in Timacum Maius and Naissus, and under different circumstances, the possibility should not be ruled out that the *signum* from Timacum Maius may have been linked to the cult of the Syrian deity. The more intensive expansion of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus into the province of Upper Moesia has been frequently linked to the Severan dynasty, which is to say to the late second and early third century (Vučković-Todorović 1965: 178; Zotović 1966: 49; Zotović 1967: 67). It is known, for example, that the First Syrian Cohort of Thracians (*cohors I Thracum Syriaca*) was garrisoned in the Roman military camp at *Timacum Minus*, present-day Ravna³ in the Timok river valley, the first station after Timacum Maius on the Roman road towards the Danube and Ratiaria, before the Dacian Wars. From an inscription discovered in Timacum Minus (*IMS III/2, 23*) we learn not only of the tribune *Vecilius Modestus* under whose command the First Syrian Cohort of Thracians was transferred there from Syria but also about the soldiers and veterans who, on completion of their term of service, settled in the environs of the *castrum* at Timacum Minus.⁴ Some of them might have been worshippers of the Dolichenian cult.

³ Timacum Minus yielded a statuette of Jupiter Dolichenus on a bull, with no inscription, cf. Vulić 1941–48: 92 and 201.

⁴ For information about the Roman fortification at Timacum Minus and the units it was garrisoned with see *IMS III/2*; Petrović & Jovanović 1997: 18.

Fig. 4 *Signum* from Timacum MaiusFig. 5 Proposed typology of figural and non-figural *signa*

This assumption may find corroboration in the discoveries made during the interwar excavations of Timacum Minus by Nikola Vulić which included a group of high quality statuettes of white marble (Vulić 1941–48: 91–94, nos. 196–205; Jovanović 2007: 183–186). It may not be far-fetched to assume that this group of objects found in one place once adorned a *dolicheneum* (Petrović 2015). The assumption is based on their iconography but cannot as yet be supported by epigraphic evidence.

In conclusion, let us connect a few dots. The *terminus post quem* for the spread of the Dolichenian cult in Upper Moesia is difficult to establish with precision. There must have been ethnic intermingling and migration even before the Severan age and, consequently, there must have been newcomers from the East both among the soldiers and in other social groups such as traders,

craftsmen, miners, freedmen and slaves. *Signa* were often linked with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, as shown by, among other things, the find from Egeta with the inscription of the First Cohort of Cretans. This unit is known to have been stationed at Timacum Maius shortly before the Dacian Wars, almost at the same time when the First Syrian Cohort of Thracians was stationed in nearby Timacum Minus, where there most likely was a shrine of the Syrian deity.

If all these data are taken into account, the possibility should not be ruled out that the *signum* from Timacum Maius was also connected with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, which may give grounds to reconsider the usual dating of the spread of the cult in Upper Moesia to the Severan age. We believe that the spread of the cult had begun much earlier, perhaps as early as the late first century, which is suggested by archaeological evidence though as yet uncorroborated by epigraphic evidence. On the other hand, the bronze *signum* from Timacum Maius, as well as the building in which it was discovered, may be chronologically linked to the presence there of the First Cohort of Cretans in the last decades of the first century.

UDC 904(497.11):739.5(37 *Timacum Maius*)
73.045 *Jupiter Dolichenus*

Abbreviations

AE – *Année épigraphique*, Paris.

IMS – *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure*, Belgrade.

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