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Three Votive Plaques from Upper Moesia

Abstract: The article proposes a new reading and interpretation of three inscriptions engraved on small bronze plaques in the shape of *tabula ansata* from the Danubian *limes* in Upper Moesia — two from *Pincum* and one from *Viminacium*, associating the inscribed objects with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus. The revised inscriptions also provide new data on the Roman units stationed on the Upper Moesian Danube bank, as two of the dedicators are identified as members of the *ala Flaviana*.

Key words: Latin epigraphy, votive inscriptions, Jupiter Dolichenus, Roman *ala*, Upper Moesia.

Introduction

A fascinating feature of ancient epigraphy is that even the shortest inscriptions containing just a few words or small fragments can shed light on a phenomenon from the ancient past, provide a missing piece of evidence or raise new questions and topics. In an attempt to offer an accurate interpretation, an epigrapher must consider the physical appearance of the text-bearing object, the materiality of the text, consider the context(s) and historical connotations, and scrupulously compare it with relevant analogies. The value of written records is especially high in the regions where informative sources are scarce, as is the case of the province of Upper Moesia, which is in the focus of the present paper. Another characteristic feature of Latin epigraphy is the use of abbreviations that can often be very radical and sometimes very enigmatic, posing difficulties in front of its editor and opening room for more than one interpretation. The present paper is dedicated to such a case. It will attempt to offer a reinterpretation

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of three tiny but interesting inscriptions from the Danubian limes that have not attracted a lot of attention so far.

Three votive bronze plaques from Pincum and Viminacium

In 2003, Professor Miroslava Mirković published an important article, bringing to light eighteen new inscriptions from Viminacium and its environs. Among the published material, there are three particularly interesting inscribed objects that have not attracted much attention from scholars so far. These are three small bronze *tabullae ansatae*: two from *Pincum* (no. 1 and no. 2) and one from *Viminacium* (no. 3).

1. Small bronze plaque in the form of *tabula ansata*, 12 x 6.8 x 0.35 cm. Found in Veliko Gradište (*Pincum*) in 1998. According to the information provided in the edition, it was discovered in a grave among other material, which is not specified. It was kept in the ancient collection of the National Library in Veliko Gradište; now held in the National Museum Veliko Gradište.¹ (fig. 1, fig. 3.)

Mirković 2003, 97, no. 1, with a photo:

*I(nfernīs) D(is) Fl(avius) Am|monius q(uaestor) or q(uinquennalis?) | AL
FL ex vi|su posuit |⁵ pro filio.*

2. Fragmentary bronze plaque in the form of *tabula ansata*, 6,2 x 3,5 x 0,3 cm, upper and right side of the plaque lost. A punctured inscription framed by a punctured inscription field; letters: 3,5-5 cm. It was kept in the ancient collection of the National Library in Veliko Gradište; now held in the National Museum Veliko Gradište (fig. 2, fig. 3).

Mirković 2003, 98, no. 2, photo:

*I(nfernīs) [D(is)] | Domi[tius ±4]|LERIS dec(urio) M or AL? | Fl(avii?)
v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito).*

3. Inscription on a small plaque. According to the information provided to M. Mirković by D. Jacanović, the curator of the museum in Požarevac, the plaque was discovered in a grave (fig. 4). Lost.

Mirković (2003, 98, no 3, drawing) runs:

I(nfernīs) D(is) | S(extus) Alp(inius) Al|cimus.

According to the published readings and the interpretation, the inscriptions are dedicated to the *Inferi dii*: the radically abbreviated formula *I.D.* is expanded by the author as *I(nfernīs) D(is)*. This is a collective name for the under-

¹ I am grateful to the director of the National Museum "Veliko Gradište", Mr. Dragan Bogičić, and to Mr Željko Ivanović, for providing me with excellent photographs of the plaques.



Fig. 1. Inscription no. 1. *Pincum*.

Photo courtesy of: National Museum Veliko Gradište



Fig. 2. Inscription no. 1. *Pincum*.

Photo courtesy of: National Museum Veliko Gradište.



Fig. 3. Inscriptions 1 and 2. *Pincum*.

Photo courtesy of: National Museum Veliko Gradište.

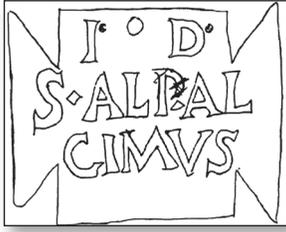


Fig. 4. Drawing of
D. Jacanović.
After: Mirković 2003, p. 98.



Fig. 5. *Tabula ansata*
dedicated to I.O.M Dolichenus
from Egeta (Brza Palanka).
Museum Negotin.

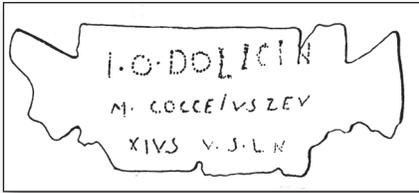


Fig. 6. Dolichenian *tabula ansata*
from Roman castrum *Novae* (Čezava),
Iron Gates.

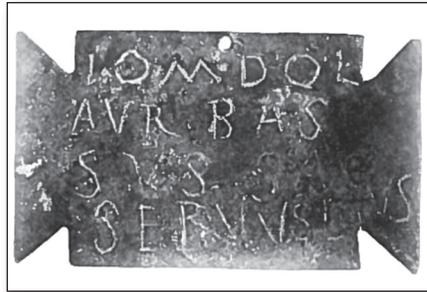


Fig. 7. Bronze Dolichenian *tabula ansata*
from Jasen CCID 104.
Photo: G. Kazarow, *JÖAI* 27, 22, fig. 107.

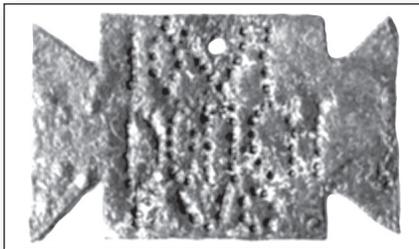


Fig. 8. *Nida*, Frankfurt 2016.
|Photo Martins & Wenzel 2018.



Fig. 9. *Nida*, Germania Superior, *CIL* XIII
7344 = CCID 521. Photo: EDCS.



Fig. 10. *Vetoniana* (Pfunz), Raetia, CCID 480. Photo: EDCS.



Fig. 11. *Vetoniana* (Pfunz), Raetia. CCID 481. Photo W. Slaby, EDCS.

world gods (Kropp 2008, 94; Urbanová 2018, 44), including the spirits associated with death. The most common epigraphic occurrence of the *inferi dii* is in the formula in Roman funerary inscriptions: *Dis Inferis Manibus*, which occurs more commonly in the form of *Dis Manibus*. This formula is typically abbreviated to *D(is) M(anibus)*, *D(is) M(anibus) s(acrum)* or less frequently *D(is) I(nferis) M(anibus)* and (cf. Raepsaet-Charlier 2002). Except for the funerary inscriptions, *Inferi dii* are invoked only in curse tablets (*tabellae defixionum*). For example, CIL XIII 7555 (Kropp 2008): *Data nomina | ad -----inferas ... CIL XIII 7553 Inimicorum nomina || ad -----infe|ros* (Urbanová 2018, 63); *Rogo Mane(s et Di?) inferi, ut (Ma)rius Fronto, (adv)ersariu(s) Sex(ti), sit vanus neque loqui possit contra Sextum* (for more examples: Kropp 2008, 94 ff.; Urbanová 2018).

The editor suggests that the purpose of these three plaques was funerary, assuming that they might have been attached to urns (or sarcophagi?) (Mirković 2003, 107). It is possible that this idea is based on the information about the finding circumstances that were provided to the author at the time of publishing: (*ad no. 1*, p. 107) “in a Roman grave, together with the remains of a cremated person (“in einem römischen Grab, zusammen mit den Überresten eines Kremierten.”) and *ad no. 3*: “in Viminacium in einem Grab gefunden”. However, the internal evidence in the texts of the inscription suggests that the plaques probably had a different purpose. Namely, the inscriptions contain formulas that are typical for votive inscriptions: the first inscription closes with the formula *ex visu posuit* (lines 4–6), stating that the *votum* is made “on account of a vision of a god”. The inscription further explains that the vow is made for the dedicant’s son: *pro filio*. The stereotyped formula *ex visu* (often attested in the form of *ex viso*, cf. Nedeljković 2014) is very common in votive monuments along with similar expressions: e.g. *visu monitus*, *somno monitus* (“on the account of a vision in sleep”) and *ex iussu*, *ex iussu dei ...* “on the account of a command of the

god” (Renberg 2003; Kajava 2014, 414–415; Rives 2014, 429; cf. Szabó 2016). The second inscription (no. 2, line 4) also contains the formula *v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*, which is typical of the same genre, further clarifying that the purpose of the object was doubtlessly votive. Therefore, it would be unusual if these inscriptions were funerary (cf. Rives 2014, 429).

In an attempt to better understand the character, purpose, and context of these inscriptions, it would be useful to reconsider the physical appearance of the text-bearing objects along with the textual evidence. Namely, as already mentioned, all three inscriptions are engraved on small bronze plaques shaped as *tabulae ansatae*, each having punctured holes through which the plaques were attached to an object that presumably had a ritual purpose. By their general appearance, dimensions, as well as the inscribed content, they compellingly resemble the quadrangular plaques in the shape of *tabula ansata*, dedicated to Jupiter Dolichenus. Several such plaques were found in relative vicinity, in different localities across the Danubian *limes*. The best-known example is a small bronze plaque, 10 x 14,5 cm (fig. 5), dedicated to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus* from Egeta/Brza Palanka (Vučković-Todorović 1964–1965; AE 1966, 336; AE 1968, 453; *ILJug* 466; *CCID* 95, tab. 25) whose inscription runs as follows: *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) Doli|cheni (!) c(o)hor(s) | I Cretu(m)*. It was found in a structure identified at that time as Dolichenum,² among a range of other artefacts belonging to this cult: statues with inscriptions and other objects, such as a triangular signum (Vučković-Todorović 1964–1965). Another analogous *tabula ansata* was discovered in the Roman military camp in *Novae* (locality Čezava, village Dobra), positioned on the Danube, at about 40 km downstream from *Pincum* (Grbić 2012): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) Dolicin(o) (!) | M. Cocceius Zeu|xius v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* (fig. 6). Farther along the Danube, towards *Ratiaria*, two bronze *tabulae ansatae* were found in the ruins of a *castellum* at the village of Jasen, located at 14 km from Vidin (*CCID* 104–105 = Zotović 1966, 97–98, n. 38, 39) (fig. 7), with other Dolichenian artefacts that include a typical triangular plaque with a relief (*CCID* 103) and a statuette (*CCID* 106).³ Direct analogies can also be found in other provinces, especially in the regions close to a *limes*. For example, a Dolichenian plaque in the shape of *tabula ansata*, found at the Roman town of *Nida* in Upper Germania (Frankfurt-Heddernheim) belongs to this type, (Hampel, Fluegen & Wenzel 2016, 92, photo = AE 2016, 1167; Martins & Wenzel 2018, 253, fig. 3, Archäologisches Museum Frankfurt):

² The purpose of the rounded structure in Egeta is now being reconsidered, see Gavrilović Vitas 2021, 110–111.

³ *CCID* 104: 6,3 x 10,8 cm: *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) D(olicheno) | Aur(elius) Bas|sus sac(erdos) | servus eius* (fig. 7) and *CCID* 105: *I(ovi) O(ptimo) [M(aximo) D(olicheno)] | Fl(avius) Sabin[us et] | Valeria V[---]tinsa d(o)no(?) [d(ederunt)? d(e)?] | suo ex iusso (!) [dei](?)*.

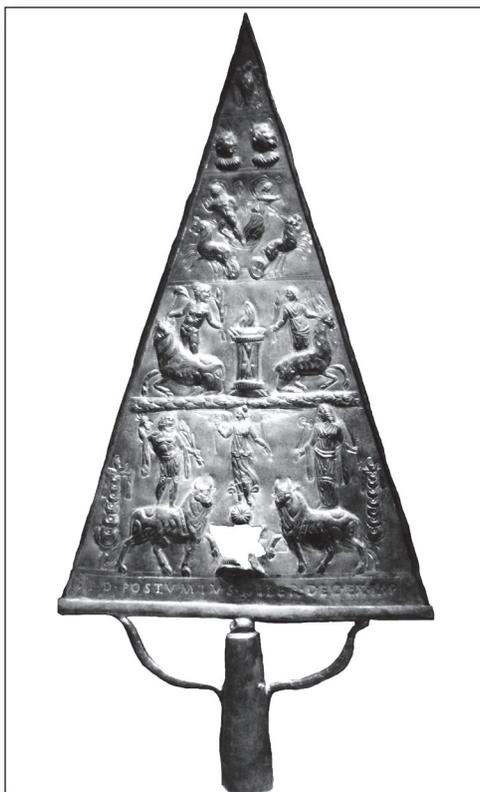


Fig. 12 a-b.
 Votive standard from Mauer an der
 Url (AE 1939, 268 = CCID 298).
 Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, available
 at Wikimedia Commons under
 CC-BY-SA-4.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KHM_-_Iupiter_Dolichenus_Mauer_Dreiecksvotiv_2b.jpg

Iovi | *Dolich*|*eno* (fig. 8); *CIL* XIII 7344 = *CCID* 521 (fig. 9): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) | Dol(icheno) | Masiac(ius) | Sequens | ex i(ussu) sol(vit)*. Next, two plaques from *Vetoniana* (Pfunz) in *Raetia*: *CIL* III 11926 = *CCID* 480 (fig. 10): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) | Doloceni (sic!) | Demittius | sacerdos | d(onum) d(edit)*, *CIL* III 11927 = *CCID* 481 (fig. 11): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) | Duliceno (sic!) | ubi fer(r)um | [nascit]ur || T(---) || F(---)*; *CIL* III 11928 = *CCID* 482: *[Io]v(i) | [D]ol(icheno?) | [---]* from *Municipium Claudium Virunum/Zollfeld* in *Noricum* (*CIL* III 6015, 4 = *CCID* 343): *I(ovi) O(ptimo) D(olicheno)*. The list of analogies goes on. Also, there are examples of typical Dolichenian triangular votive standards with the inscription fields between two *ansae*.

In the light of these analogies, the dedication I.D. in our plaques from *Pincum* and *Viminacium* may be understood as *I(ovi) D(olicheno)*. The name of the deity is typically attested as *I(uppiter) O(ptimus) M(aximus) D(olichenus)*; also, there are many epigraphic attestations of the variant *Iovi Dolicheno*, as well.⁴ For example, the triangular votive standard from *Mauer an der Url* (*CCID* 295) runs as: *I(ovi) D(olicheno) Postumius Celer dec(urio) ex imp(erio)* (fig. 12). The theonym is frequently attested in a vulgar form: *Dulcenus*, *Dolicinus*, etc. (Vágási 2020; cf. Grbić 2012). The fact that another inscription dedicated to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus Dulcenus (sic!)* was discovered at *Pincum* supports the proposed interpretation. It is the inscription on a small statue base (12,5 x 5,6 x 8 cm) with traces of the lost statue. It was found at the Roman fortification in 1899 and published in 1901 by Ladek, Premerstein and Vulić (*CIL* III 14503, 1; *AE* 1902, 20). It was long considered lost, before it was rediscovered relatively recently in the Banat Museum of *Timișoara* and it was published — for the first time with a photograph — by Romanian scholars Calin Timoc and Imola Boda (Timoc & Boda 2016).⁵ Based on this inscription, it is assumed that there was a sanctuary or a shrine dedicated to the cult of *Dolichenus* at *Pincum* (cf. Gavrilović Vitas 2021, with bibliography). The inscription was set up by two *leg(ionis) sig(niferi)*, the standard-bearers in the legion *VII Claudia*, *Aelius Silvanus* and *Aelius Leonides*. Another inscription was found at *Kličevac*, a village not far from *Viminacium* and *Pincum* (Petrović 2004, 217–224). Other attestations in this stretch of the Danubian limes include many sites such as *Novae* (Čezava), *Diana* (Karataš), *Rtkovo*, *Egeta*, *Aquae*, *Jasen*, *Pojejena de Sus*, *Drobeta*.

The proposed interpretation may be reinforced by reconsidering another important aspect: who were the people who made these vows? In the commen-

⁴ Cf. e.g. *CIL* XIII 7343 = *CCID* 520; *CCID* 462; *CCID* 301.

⁵ Thanks to this discovery it is now known that the marks on the upper side show traces of four hooves that, according to the authors, “suggest a moving bovine, which can only be the Dolichenian bull ridden by a deity” (Timoc & Boda 2016, 122).

tary of the inscription no. 1, M. Mirković interprets the agglomeration of letters *AL FL* in the line 4 as an unattested toponym or a previously unattested imperial domain. Assuming that *AL* could be read as *AE*, the author proposes that it could stand for *Ae(liana)*, *Ae(lia)* analogously to *Aeliana Picensia* — an attested imperial domain whose administrative centre was most likely in the homonymous settlement *Pincum*. Accordingly, the author proposes that the letters *FL* should be read as *Fl(aviana) / Fl(avianum)*, associating this with the toponyms *Flaviana* and *Augustoflaviensia* in Moesia Prima attested in *Notitia dignitatum* (Or. XLI 13 and 33). The position of the latter, not far from Margum and Pincum, is indicated in the text of the *Notitia: contra Margum in castris Augustoflavianensibus*. The author suggests that the whole region of Viminacium and Margum may have been named *Flaviana* or *Flavianum*.

Taking *Fl* as a toponym, the author interprets *Q* in line 3 as *q(uaestor)* or *q(uinquennalis?)*, a magistrate of the hypothetical *Aelia Flaviana*. Next, in lines 3–4 of the inscription no. 2, the first edition gives *dec(urio) M (?) Fl(---)*, proposing that the attested person *Domi[tius ±4] | LERIS*, could also have been a municipal *decurio*. Finally, a municipal role can be assumed for *S(extus) Alp(inius) Alcimus*, the dedicant of the inscription no. 3 found in Viminacium, although this is the only inscription out of the three that does not specify the occupation of the dedicant. Namely, this person is most probably identical with a namesake *decurio* of the *municipium Aurelium Augustum Margum*, attested in a votive inscription from the Roman *municipium Margum* (*IMS* II 315), in the environs of Viminacium (*IMS* II, p. 208–211; Mócsy 1970, 144–145). The placename is attested on brick stamps found at Veliko Gradište (Premerešin & Vulić 1903, Bbl. 56, nos. 83–83, drawing, cf. Bbl. 12 = *AE* 1903, 299): *Pinco, Cast(ra) Pinc(ensia)*. However, the letters *AL* in plaque no. 1 are very clearly visible; there is no trace of any upper horizontal *hasta* that could belong to an *E*. Therefore, the assumed reading *AE* does not seem probable, which influences the interpretation of the inscription in question, as well as the reading of the following inscription no. 2. Given that the reading *AL* is certain, the letters *AL FL* should probably be expanded as *al(a) Fl(aviana)*. Consequently, the persons attested in inscriptions 1 and 2 should be considered as members of an auxiliary unit, an *ala*, and not municipal magistrates of an unattested town/region called *Flaviana* (?), especially since the inscriptions were found at *Pincum*, whose ubication at Veliko Gradište is fairly certain (cf. Kanitz 1892, 23–24; Mócsy 1970, 51; 1974, 96; Petrović 2019, 75–76)⁶. As already mentioned, Pincum was an administrative centre of the *metalla Aeliana Picensia* (Dušanić 1977, 76; *BMC* III, 533, no. 1853, 1853; Mirković 1968, 103). This might have been the capital of the hom-

⁶ There have been sporadic archaeological finds, see e.g. Cunjak 1986, 57–58; Jacanović 1990, 110, sl.1.

onymous *civitas Pincensium*, located in that part of the province (cf. Nikolić 2018 for the bibliography), although reliable data are missing. In the seventeenth century, Count Marsigli witnessed the existence of a Roman castrum with rounded towers, 45,5 x 45,5 m. Already at the time when Felix Kanitz visited the site, only one wall was still visible (Kanitz 1861, 201; 1892). If the proposed interpretation is correct, the revised view of the dedicatory aspects becomes more likely, considering the incredible popularity of the cult of Juppiter Dolichenus among the members of the Roman army in the second and third century CE, and taking into account the new insights into the mechanisms of its spread,⁷ the interpretation of the monuments.

The unit mentioned in these inscriptions could be identified as *ala Gallorum Flaviana* (Matei-Popescu & Țentea 2018, 21–23; Ferjančić 2018, 657). This *ala* was possibly stationed in Moesia from the times of Vespasian; it was attested in Lower Moesia in military diplomas from the year 92 CE. Also, it is attested in brick stamps in the Roman fort *Carsium* (Hârșova, near Constanța) as *ala Gallorum Flaviana* (AE 1992, 1496), as well as *ala Flaviana* (AE 1998, 1145). Based on the evidence from military diplomas, it is assumed that the unit was transferred to the north of the Danube, to Lower Dacia, at the beginning of Hadrian's reign; its departure was most probably connected to the conflicts with the Iazyges and the Roxolani in 117–119 CE (Ferjančić 2018, 65). Already in 126, the *ala* was transferred to Upper Moesia (AE 2014, 1648), where it was subsequently attested in diplomas from 132 (RMD 247), 135 (AE 2017, 1762), 136/7 (AE 2015, 1887), 144–146 (RMD 402), 151 (RMD 405) 145–154 (AE 2008, 1741), 160 (AE 2014, 1651), 161 (RMD 55) (Ferjančić 2018, 65–66, Table 21). The earlier literature offers no hypotheses on where the unit might have been stationed.⁸ If the reading of the inscriptions of our two plaques is correct, it would be an indication that the *ala* was possibly stationed either in *Pincum* or at least in that area during its stay in Upper Moesia. Because of its position on the Danube bank, at the mouth of the auriferous *Pincus flumen* (the Pek River), the place had an important administrative, military, and strategic role even in the period when that stretch of the Danube ceased to be the border of the Empire. Thanks to the record in *Notitia dignitatum* we know that *Pincum* hosted *cuneus*

⁷ The immense popularity of the cult of Juppiter Dolichenus in the second and third century CE is reflected in the cult's popularity in contemporary research, which produced a very extensive bibliography. Important new developments in the research field are marked by the work of Anna Collar, who applied the social network theory to explain the popularity and spread of the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus among the members of the Roman army, see Collar 2011.

⁸ Matei-Popescu & Țentea (2018) assume that it was stationed within action range of the *legio VII Claudia*, namely *Viminacium*.

equitum Constantiacorum (Not. dign. XLI 12) and *cuneus equitum Delmatarum* (Not. dign. XLI 18) in the late period.

The dedicator of the first inscription, *Flavius Ammonius* was *q. al(ae) Fl(aviana)*, which could be read as *q(uaestor) al(ae) Fl(aviana)*. In the auxiliary units (*alae, cohortes* and *numeri*), the *quaestor* was an officer in charge of the regiment's treasury, a *quaestura*. One of the main tasks of the *quaesturae* of the equestrian units may have been the purchase and upkeep of horses (Davies 1969, 429–59, esp. 448). For example, among the attested cases of this position is the famous “captor of the Decebalus”, *Ti. Claudius Maximus*: one of his offices, listed in the inscription from Philippi, was *qu(a)estor equit(um)* (Speidel 1970, 144 with note 19 = AE 1969/70, 583). Also, a rich dossier of inscriptions from Dacia and Lower Moesia mentioning *quaestura*,⁹ sheds some light on this institution in the Roman army regarding the collective *vota* of the soldiers (Schmidt Heidenreich 2020).

Considering all the described analogies, the distribution of the Dolichenian monuments in the stretch of the Danube bank between Viminacium and Ratiaria, which, furthermore, closely resemble the appearance and the expression, on one hand, and the absence of direct analogies that would speak in favour of the reading *Inferi Dii* on the other, and I propose a new reading of the inscriptions:

Inscription no. 1:

*I(ovi) D(olicheno) Fl(avius) Am|monius q(uaestor) | al(ae) Fl(aviana) ex
vi|su posuit |⁵ pro filio.*

Inscription no. 2:

*I(ovi) D(olicheno) Domi[tius Va?]|leris (sic) dec(urio) al(ae) | Fl(aviana?)
v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito).*

Inscription no. 3:

I(ovi) D(olicheno) | S(extus) Alp(inius) Al|cimus.

Abbreviations

AE — *L'Année épigraphique*, Paris.

CIL — *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin.

CCID — Hörig, Monika Schwertheim, Elmar *Corpus Cultus Iovis Dolicheni*, Leiden 1987.

RMD — *Roman Military Diplomas*, London.

⁹ CIL III 798; AE 1912, 5 (*Ad Mediam*, Mehadia), AE 1983, 847 (*Micia*), AE 1950, 16 (*Cumidava*), AE 2015, 1151 (*Resculum proveri*).

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