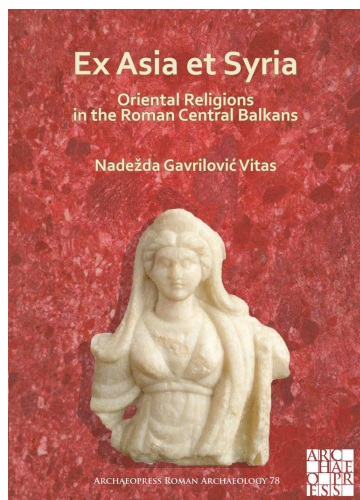


EX ASIA ET SYRIA



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THE BOOK *EX ASIA ET SYRIA. ORIENTAL RELIGIONS IN THE ROMAN CENTRAL BALKANS* is a unique and exceptional work of the author Nadežda Gavrilović Vitas who dedicated her scholarly career to the field of Roman religion and cults. The research of Gavrilović Vitas is based on her vast experience in field excavations, her knowledge of material culture, and a methodology that combines the results of the first researchers in the field and contemporary practices and literature. All these factors contribute to the fact that today, Nadežda Gavrilović Vitas is one of the leading scholars in the discipline, who in this and her previous works makes an effort to present the rich heritage of the Central Balkans in terms of the religious and cultural exchange and influences, especially regarding the Eastern cults. Bearing in mind the author's profile, it was expected that the book *Ex Asia et Syria* would be

of great importance for the study of the Oriental religions in the Roman Central Balkans and an important contribution to the overall perception of religion and cults in the heterogeneous Roman Empire.

The first part of the book is organised into the following sections: Introduction, Geographical Frame and Pre-Roman History of the Central Balkan Roman Provinces, The History of the Research of Asia Minor and Syrian Religions and Cults in the Territory of the Central Balkans, and Cultural Influences and Romanisation, while the discussion is divided into two main chapters with sub-chapters as follows: Asia Minor Religions (Magna Mater, Attis, Sabazius, Jupiter Dolichenus, Jupiter Turmasgades, The Cult of Jupiter Melanus and other Asia Minor Local Gods, Mēn, and Artemis of Ephesus) and Syrian Religions in the Central Balkans (Sol Invictus, Dea Syria, and Theos Hypsistos). The book ends with the chapters: Quarries, Workshops and their Localisation, Palmyrene Funerary Monuments in the Central Balkans, and Conclusion.

The Introduction is important for readers in order to have clearly presented the current state of the arts in the subject field, meaning that the book represents an important part in bridging the gap between the first research of the Eastern cults and religion in the Central Balkans, carried out more than 40 years ago, and contemporary scholarship trends in archaeology. The author points out the sporadic articles published, as well as the individual studies that do not sufficiently explain the importance and extensive scope of the topic. Three further chapters: Geographical Frame and Pre-Roman History of the Central Balkan Roman Provinces, The History of the Research of Asia Minor and Syrian Religions and Cults in the Territory of the Central Balkans and Cultural Influences and Romanisation, explain the complexity of the subject and the importance of this book's venture. The Central Balkans is not a specific geographical term, but its historical, strategic and cultural importance within the Roman state for the researchers is already known and in the last 20 years this region has attracted more attention from various international scholars of the Roman era. Thus, the author tends to add precision by defining this region in terms of former Roman provinces. By describing the tribes once settled there, Gavrilović Vitas provides important information regarding the domestic population and its ethnic diversity which, in connection with the process of Romanisation, contributes to the understanding of the syncretistic processes that occurred between the indigenous deities and those from other cultures. All these topics, together with the history of the research, the issues of which are already tackled in the introduction, comprise the book as a whole, giving an accurate view of the local context in which Asia Minor and Syrian religions and cults appeared, flourished and vanished.

The first main chapter, "Asia Minor Religions and Cults", elaborates on Magna Mater, Attis, Sabazius, Jupiter Dolichenus, Jupiter Turmasgades, The Cult of Jupiter

Melanus and other Asia Minor Local Gods, Mên, and Artemis of Ephesus in the similarly structured sub-chapters. First is a discussion regarding the origin and the core of the deities' cults within the Graeco-Roman/Roman Culture, then specific epigraphic, archaeological materials and architectural remains from the Central Balkans territory and finally the reception of the particular cult within the Central Balkans.

Magna Mater is considered from the context of the Phrygian Mother Goddess's cult and is presented with the various sources, literary works, art works, epigraphy, temples/sanctuaries, descriptions of festivals in her honour, priesthood, sacred animals, attributes, rituals, cultic theology, etc. throughout Roman history, concluding with the emergence of Christianity and the end of the worship of the goddess by the end of the 4th century. Epigraphic and archaeological monuments of Cybele/Magna Mater and her cult in the Central Balkans are connected in two sub-chapters, when the author analyses epigraphic material, the iconography of the goddess, associated archaeological materials and the architecture of temples. Using analogies and written sources, the author associates context and meaning, pointing out her different functions and the various ethnic and social status of the goddess' devotees, as well as the clergy of the cult.

Attis is explained in detail, firstly through the reference on scientific debate known from the previous research about the god's origin and cult, as well as through works of ancient authors, and material and visual culture. Archaeological material of the god Attis in the Central Balkans is mostly associated with funerary monuments, which the author exploited for the detailed iconographic analyses of the *Attis tristis* image, relying on preserved monuments and descriptions of those that have been destroyed. This specific of the Attis image on funerary monuments brought the unique conclusion that the cult of the god in this territory was associated with the familiarity of the Attis image and the possible syncretism with some unknown indigenous god or gods, as well as attested syncretism with already popular deities such as Silvanus, Dionysus/Liber or Mithras, together with the symbolic wish for the salvation of the soul.

The god Sabazius is treated through detailed cited scholarly literature and ancient sources about his Phrygian origin, together with the god's mysteries, iconography and variations of the cult's symbiosis with other deities, such as Zeus/Jupiter or Dionysus. Sabazius was venerated under different aspects and by dedicants of various origin and social status in the majority of the Central Balkans territory, a fact that is attested with epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Here, the god's image is recognisable in its canonical representation, excluding the possibility of syncretism with some other deity.

The cult of Jupiter Dolichenus is represented through the history of the cult's origin in Semitic Baal and its identification with the supreme Roman god Jupiter, its spread across the Roman state thanks to Commagenian soldiers, but also merchants, traders, freedmen and slaves. It is further represented through the god's iconography which, during the process of assimilation, gained its final canonical shape and can testify to some ritual practices, together with particular cult objects: silver plates with the image of Jupiter Dolichenus or Baal and vegetable ornaments, votive hands of the god and triangular votive plates bearing his representation. In the Central Balkans the only kind of the god's cult objects that are not known thus far are votive hands of Jupiter Dolichenus. The cult is also acknowledged with the greatest number of epigraphic monuments, 17 examples, sculptural and statuary finds presenting the god alone or with his *paredra* Juno Dolichena, as well as three temples that have been confirmed archeologically. In a detailed analysis, the author concludes that the majority of finds were confirmed in the Danube Limes area, in Roman fortifications, or in its hinterland, which implies that the army had a leading role in the spread and support of the cult and that the god was venerated as a military and victorious deity, connected not only with battles with an enemy, but in the context of triumph in other spheres of life.

For the presence of Asia Minor cults and the probability of the existence of communities from the East in which the cults were worshiped, two other gods equated to Jupiter are also important: Jupiter Turmasgades and Jupiter Melanus, the chapters on both representing a great contribution to the general research of the topic, bearing in mind that, even today, both remain mysterious for historians of religion. On the other hand, the Anatolian god *Mēn*, in the territory of the Central Balkans represented with two bronze statuettes, can be associated only with some kind of private piety, considering the protective and guiding role of the god in one case, or its syncretic version of *Mēn-Somnus* with a chthonian character or psychopomp role for the other.

The popularity of Artemis of Ephesus in the Greek-Roman world is well known, as well as her connection to other Asia Minor goddesses such as Cybele/Magna Mater, which could be the reason this popularity is not testified with material from the Central Balkans. Only two gems and the decoration of an oil lamp can be associated with the Ephesian Artemis, specifically the chthonian dimension and apotropaic and soteriological functions of the cult.

The second discussion chapter, "Syrian Religions in the Central Balkans", is dedicated to the elaboration of the cults of Sol Invictus, Dea Syria and Theos Hypsistos, and in the same way as the first part explains the deities' cults within Graeco-Roman/Roman culture and the reception of a particular cult in the Central Balkans.

As an introduction to the cult of Sol Invictus, the author summarises the debate about the cult's Syrian or indigenous origin, continuing with a detailed description of its connections with Roman emperors, imperial ideology and its diffusion within the army. Although the Sol Invictus veneration was sometimes intertwined with other *dii militares*, such as Mithra or Jupiter Dolichenus, the cult is attested in the territory of the Central Balkan Roman provinces on epigraphic monuments and various archaeological material, such as two marble heads, a bronze applique, a relief mirror and thirteen gems, among which the author identifies three iconographical types: Sol standing, Sol driving a quadriga and Sol's bust. The discussed material is mostly located in the Limes area and larger urban centres like Singidunum, Viminacium and Naissus, suggesting the cult's popularity among the army with aspects of a victorious and invincible god, the one who brought peace and prosperity, but also respected by civilians as the divinity of light, energy, success and the omnipotent protector and invincible guardian.

The cult of Dea Syria is explained from the context of a local cult that was promoted and favoured mainly by residents of Syrian origin – such as traders and slaves, but could not compete the widespread cults of Isis or Magna Mater, to which the iconography of the goddess was similar. Similarly, the equation of the Syrian goddess Atargatis with the more favoured goddess Magna Mater in the Central Balkans resulted in only one certain epigraphic monument and possibly another votive monument from the southern parts of the territory. However, the author wished to deepen the research of Dea Syria's cult by examining the third monument in which the goddess is associated with the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus. This concise review of the Glamija-Rtkovo funerary monument provided very important insights into the theology, rituals, clergy and religious community associated with the goddess cult on the Danube Limes and in the Central Balkans.

The cult of Theos Hysistos in Graeco-Roman culture, as the author states “raises so many debates in scholarly literature, even today”, and that is why the majority of opinions are presented as a short summary of the “real” question of the cult's origin, characteristics, deity's aspects, worshippers etc. in the Central Balkans area, which is elaborately detailed within the examination of the single votive monument discovered so far.

Before conclusions, the author offers an overview of quarries and workshops, mapping their locations within the Central Balkans, while identifying possible imports as well. An important chapter on Palmyrene Funerary Monuments in the Central Balkans is included in the book as it is necessary to analyse and interpret these in detail, since all three funerary monuments have only been published thus far in catalogue form. The chapter identifies the territory of the Singidunum for-

traces or its vicinity as the location of their discovery, with the Palmyrene origin of all three monuments pointing to their presence in the Central Balkans as being due to the migration of Syrians into the Roman provinces of the territory, which happened in several waves.

The conclusion, as a separate chapter, unifies conclusions from discussions, together with general insights into the specificity of the Central Balkans and its inhabitants, which contributed to certain cults being more or less accepted or adopted, and lasting for a specific period of time. The precise period of time is, sometimes, not difficult to define, while in some cases the duration of the cult's presence has remained a mystery. What is known for certain is that with the spread of Christianity, Asia Minor and Syrian cults, like other pagan cults, lost their battle to survive and were eventually prohibited by law.

For the conclusion of this review, it is worth repeating that the book *Ex Asia et Syria, Oriental Religions in the Roman Central Balkans* achieved its goal: to present the Central Balkans territory as valuable for a better understanding of Asia Minor and Syrian cults, their diffusion, and their importance for the Romanised or indigenous population and the integration of this region into the complex Greco-Roman cultural sphere.