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GODS FROM THE DANUBE AREA: A CASE STUDY OF AN EXCEPTIONAL SNAKE VESSEL

Among ceramic vessels and fragments in the Roman Collection of the National Museum in Belgrade one piece with distinctive decoration – applied zigzag snake-like ornament and medallions with female and male heads and animals – draws special attention.¹

The fragment (**figs. 1–2**) belongs to a large ovoid vessel with conical neck, presumably to the type of crater or urn with two or three handles.² Preserved are, in the first row applied on the neck, a large medallion portraying a male (?) head, with specifically adorned hair and elaborated costume jewellery (**fig. 3**). The face is young, and short ridged lines, grouped horizontally and slightly obliquely, depict short hair combed back from the face, decorated with a cluster of grapes on the forehead and on one shoulder, as well as with other floral decoration (?). The motif on the other medallion is missing. In the second row, just beneath the large preserved medallion, two small medallions are visible: one with indistinct image but probably a representation of a cult activity (or another portrait), and the other with a portrait of a male bearded head. The relief-moulded snake is applied at the juncture between the neck and the ovoid body, meandering as well on the lower part of the recipient, with small dense incised circles representing skin. Underneath, another row of medallions is applied – a small one with an image of a lion, one with an indistinct image, and the third one, larger, with a female portrait (**fig. 4**), with less elaborated and preserved details of the face, but still with a distinctive hairstyle. The coiffure has a central parting and the hair is drawn back over the ears, and covers the ears in a series of horizontal waves, depicted by pronounced ridged horizontal lines, terminating in a bun.

Beside the characteristics of the images presented, and the form of vessel which is typical for the 2nd–3rd centuries, additional data for both the chronological attribution of this fragment, and the identification of figures portrayed, is provided by the hairstyle of the female head portrayed in the larger medallion in the third row. Fashion in hairdressing changed through time, and this portrayal with a central parting and the hair drawn back over the ears (possibly to terminate in a bun at the back of the head), appears to be a stylized attempt to depict the pronounced ridged horizontal waves of the helmet head-dressing style, that were a feature of the late 2nd and early 3rd century coiffure.³ This hairstyle is recognizable as one introduced from the end of the 2nd century, in the time of the Severan dynasty, more specifi-

cally as one associated with images of Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus.⁴

The fragment – categorized by its most prominent feature – belongs to the class of snake vessels, a specific pottery class of early Roman times (1st–3rd centuries), particularly widespread in the western Roman border provinces, from Britannia to Dacia, a well-known and well-studied group, but still a phenomenon deserving attention.⁵ The vessels with applied snake-like decoration are considered to be sacral vessels, usually ascribed to Mithraic cult,⁶ or to the cult of the eastern god Sabazios,⁷ but a possible connection with the cult of Liber Pater cult,⁸ or an indirect relationship with the circles of Mithras or Sabazios-Dionysus circle is established for particular vessels as well.⁹ A connection with Dionysus is also proposed for some vessels found outside the main area of distribution, such as in Greece, where they are also recognized as being in possible connec-

¹ NMB Reg. No. 431/II. The fragment is made of coarse china clay, with addition of mica and small grained quartz and it is fired buff, i.e. dark ochre fired. Dimensions are 22 by 23.5 cm, and the wall is ca. 1 cm thick.

² A similar form is recorded among the pottery of the 2nd–3rd centuries in the region (POPILIAN 1977 pl. XXXIX, 399–404; BRUKNER 1981, vessels with two or three handles type 3–4, T. 103–104; NIKOLIĆ-DJORDJEVIĆ 2000 type II/52) as well as among snake vessels (AMAND 1984 fig. 9, 1–4; GASSNER 1990 fig. 1, 2; SCHMID 1991, 23–25; BOLINDET 1993 fig. 2, 1).

³ K. WESSEL, *Römische Frauenfrisuren von der severischen bis zur konstantinischen Zeit*. Arch. Anz. 1946–1947 (1949) 62–64 Fig. 1 (die Nestfrisur mit bedeckten Ohren, especially Julia Domna).

⁴ In sculpture: V. POULSEN, *Les Portraits romains II. De Vespasien à la basse-antiquité* (Copenhagen 1974) cat. 724 Pl. CCVIII–CCIX. In pottery: V. SWAN, *Legio VI and its Men: African Legionaries in Britain*. Journal Roman Pottery Stud. 5, 1992, 20 cat. 115 Fig. 6, 115.

⁵ SCHMID 1991, 54.

⁶ ULBERT 1963, 65; POPILIAN/POENARU-BORDEA 1973, 248; D. BENEÄ, *Câteva fragmente de vase votive descoperite la Drobeta (Drobeta 1976) 55–61; POPILIAN 1976, 66–74; AMAND 1984, 107; V. RUPP, Eine römische Keramik im Rhein-Main-Gebiet. Schr. Frankfurter Mus. Vor- u. Frühgesch. 10 (Frankfurt 1987) 230 Taf. 52; GASSNER 1990, 653; BOLINDET 1993, 128.*

⁷ ULBERT 1963, 65; POPILIAN/POENARU-BORDEA 1973, 249; SCHMID 1991, 68; BOLINDET 1993, 128.

⁸ D. ALICU, *Vases décorés de serpents découvertes à Sarmizegetusa. Latomus 39, 1980, 725* (connection with Mithras, Asklepios and Liber Pater); GASSNER 1990, 653.

⁹ A. JOVANOVIĆ, *Nalaz kulturnih posuda iz rimskog perioda u Landolu kod Smedereva*. Smederevo VI/2, 1995, 113; CVJETIĆANIN 2001, 96.



Fig. 1.

tion with the cult of Demeter.¹⁰ In addition, an assumption about their association with private, domestic cults, where the snake provides protection for house and household, has also been made.¹¹

Usually, snake vessels are decorated with a combination of applied and/or stamped geometric, floral and zoomorphic decoration,¹² and those with anthropomorphic presentations are not that common, including data recorded in adjacent provinces.¹³ The figures applied on the vessel can probably be identified, judging by their attributes, as those of Dionysus, as we assume for the head presented in the large medallion in the first row,¹⁴ while the male bearded head is probably of Silenus,¹⁵ and the less elaborated female one could be one of the goddesses of vegetation or a Maenad. However, given that indigenous gods and goddesses of vegetation were during Roman times among the first to be replaced in the territories of Dacia, Pannonia and Moesia by the cult of Liber Pater and Libera Mater,¹⁶ and the popularity of the cult,¹⁷ we assume that this presentation on the fragment from the National Museum collection is related to Liber Pater. Additionally, as the hairstyle of the female head suggests a connection with Julia Domna, i.e. with the Severan dynasty, and since from the reign of Septimius Severus Liber is officially one of the *dii patri*,¹⁸ our supposition has strong corroboration, and we assume that the representations in question are those of Liber Pater, Silenus and Libera.

Identification of the decoration applied on this vessel-fragment points to the amalgamated cult of Dionysus and Liber Pater,¹⁹ connecting this vessel with the group of sacral wares already known in the Dacian and Upper Moesian cultural circle, which are combined manifestations of gods of the Roman pantheon, eastern influences and local cos-

mogony.²⁰ But is that all? Could these presentations be related to the idea of *imitatio deorum* and depiction of emperors, and be an expression of some state program or propaganda? Presentations from the cult of Dionysus and Liber Pater cult are especially connected at the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century with the imperial cult of the Severan dynasty, as examples from Pannonia illustrate.²¹ Further research will perhaps allow an establishment of these connections.

Beside the specific decoration, what distinguishes this vessel-fragment from most of other parallel finds is its fabric. As far as we know, although this fabric of coarse china clay, i.e. white or buff sandy clay, is common for the 2nd and 3rd centuries especially in the Middle and Lower Danube provinces,²² among published examples,²³ besides those found at the Iron Gates *Limes*, at Diana²⁴ and Campsa,²⁵ there are no documented sacral wares of this fabric, with the probable exception of three fragments discovered at Romula and Orlea, in Dacia,²⁶ and in Hotniza, Lower Moesia.²⁷

¹⁰ J. MARTY, *Cults, Snakes, and Vases*. RCRF Acta 29/30, 1991, 351–354.

¹¹ SCHMID 1991, 68. The snake is also recognized as an attribute of the highest Geto-Dacian deities (BOLINET 1993 note 90) and Illyrian ones (A. STIPČEVIĆ, *Kulturni simboli kod Ilira – građa i prilozi sistematizaciji*, Posebna izdanja ANUBiH. Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja knj. 10 [Sarajevo 1981]).

¹² AMAND 1984, 38–56; BOLINET 1993, 134–136.

¹³ ULBERT 1963, Abb. 1 (male masks); POPILIAN/POENARU BORDEA 1973 Fig. 1,1; 4,3–4 (human heads); BOLINET 1993, 136 (applied medallions with presentations of Liber and Libera, Pan, Silenus, Mihras and anthropomorphic figures).

¹⁴ C. GASPARI, *Dionysos/Bacchus*. LIMC 3.1 (Zürich, München 1986) 420–566.

¹⁵ C. MUȘTEANU, *Vase cu figuri dionisiace de la Durostorum*. Stud. și Cerc. Istor. Veche 37/2, 1986 fig. 1,1–2; SULTOV 1976, 51–53 (2nd–3rd century).

¹⁶ BRUHL 1953, 190, 215–216.

¹⁷ C. POPESCU, M. Popescu, *Le culte de Liber Pater en Dacie romaine*. *Thracodacica* 16/1–2, 1995, 227–235.

¹⁸ BRUHL 1953, 191–192.

¹⁹ Mysteries associated with Dionysus extended over the Graeco-Roman world, and could be found under the name and the power of different gods, such as Orpheus, Sabazios, Mithras, Bacchus, but also combined with and identified as Liber (BRUHL 1953, 250–267).

²⁰ CVJETIČANIN 2001, 93–113. The cult of Liber and Libera was widespread especially in Dacia, Pannonia and Moesia, as inscriptions confirm, where it replaced (or gave its name to) indigenous cults of deities of vegetation and fertility, respected as Liber Pater and Libera Mater (BRUHL 1953, 215–220).

²¹ A. JOVANOVIĆ, *Rimska posuda sa medaljonima iz Čuruga* (Summ. A Roman Vessel with Medallions from Čurug). *Glasnik Srpskog arheološkog društva* 20, 2004, 211–212.

²² D. BOJOVIĆ, *Rimska keramika Singidunuma* (Beograd 1976) 35–36 cat. 518–523; POPILIAN 1976, 90 Pl. XXXVII; BRUKNER 1981, 41 type 7, T. 101; M. GARAŠANIN/M. VASIĆ/G. MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ, *Pontes – camp et pont de Trajan*. *Fouilles de 1980*. *Djerdapske sveske* 21, 1984, 60–71; N. JEVREMOVIC, *La céramique des ramparts Sud et Ouest découverte sur le site Diana-Karataš*. *Ibid.* 4, 1987, 59–68; V. IVANIŠEVIĆ/S. NIKOLIC-DJORDJEVIĆ, *Novi tragovi antičkih fortifikacija u Singidunumu – lokalitet Knez Mihailova 30*. *Singidunum 1* (Beograd 1997) 102 Fig. 33; S. NIKOLIC-DJORDJEVIĆ 2000, 197–198.

²³ *Ibid.* 183–184; CVJETIČANIN 2001, 93–95.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 93; 97 cat. 1–9 fig. 1,1–4; 2,5–9.

²⁵ *Comori arheologice in regiune Portile de Fier* (Bucuresti 1978) 217, I. 208; *The Iron Gate Archaeological Treasure*, *Narodni muzej* (Beograd 1978) 239 cat. 212 (3rd century).

²⁶ POPILIAN 1976, 68 cat. 293; 296 Pl. 37–38.

²⁷ SULTOV 1976, 63 fig. 3.



Fig. 2. M. 1:3.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

This specific fabric, although its origin is not known, allows us to place its provenance in the Iron Gates region of the Danube, and to determine its chronological attribution to the 2nd or the beginning of the 3rd century. Those are the times when Eastern influences are rather visible in the evi-

dence from Upper Moesia, and the times when the Eastern Mediterranean (Hellenophonic) population is present in Moesia, in both military and civilian environments. Furthermore, those are times of extreme importance for the military history of both Dacia and Moesia.

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