

NOTES ON A STATUE FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF UNION FROM ALBA IULIA

Abstract: This study proposes to re-evaluate a marble statue from the old collections of the National Museum of Union Alba Iulia. It was discovered by A. Cserni during excavations carried out at the Palace of the Governors of Roman Dacia, in 1898. It has been repeatedly published by Á. Hekler and Al. Diaconescu. While the latter author established dating and iconographic prototype of the statue, we believe that further details as discovery place and context, depiction, iconographic attribution and role of this work of art can be offered. Presence of a follower at the feet of the divinity, more precisely the right foot of a character – child, conveys us the idea of depiction of Eros, god of love. Usually, this is depicted beside nude or seminude Venus, and sculptural representation from Apulum is somehow different from iconographic point of view. As we see it, taking into consideration the discovery place, artefacts resulted from the same excavation, artistic eclecticism, religious iconographic influences and official politics of the Roman state, we believe we are dealing with rather an unusual statue of Venera as manner of representation or an image of an empress, wife of a governor or member of a family of municipal authorities from Apulum.

Keywords: Apulum, Eros, goddess, marble statue, prototype, Venus.

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INTRODUCTION

This study reanalyses interpretation of a Roman sculptural art monument of definite historical and archaeological value, in a larger context of understanding worshipping of a religious cult in Apulum, the most important urban centre of Dacia province. We refer to a statue that depicts a feminine character, better said a divinity or member of municipal aristocracy. Currently, it may be admired in the permanent exhibition of the museum, at the first floor.

By this study, we will bring new information in relation to what was known until now about this sculptural creation, meaning data on the discovery context, depiction, iconographic interpretation and significance.

Unfortunately, as with many other monuments part of the old collections, it is not known the exact archaeological context of discovery. The Inventory Book of the museum from Alba Iulia does not record precisely origin of the sculpture (Inventory number R48), being only noted that it entered the collections in 1898 and that it was discovered during archaeological excavations. On inspecting A. Cserni's register of journal entries for heritage assets from 1898, this statue is not recorded among the registered artefacts. Yet, consulting the report referring to archaeological excavations conducted

at the Governors' Palace, we found out that it was indeed discovered in its southern area, in 1898¹, beside a capital, a trunk and bricks bearing the stamp of XIIIth Gemina Legion or anthroponym of Aurelius Conon².

The first researcher that dealt with effective publishing of this work of art, illustrating it in a photo was Á. Hekler, who made it a very sketchy depiction, observing the right foot of a child on the socle³. The finding has already been published for three times by professor Al. Diaconescu, who managed to identify the iconographic prototype and cultural influences exerted on the sculptor⁴.

DEPICTION

The statue is made of Bucova marble and is fragmentary, the head and the right forearm missing (Fig. 1). Its dimensions are very close to those of the human body and it is preserved over a height of 1.45m. Downwards, on the right side, one can notice the right foot of a follower, but also his buttocks. The character, most likely Eros, was sitting at the deity's feet (Fig. 2).

The goddess wore a long *chiton* that covers all her body, over which a *himation* is thrown over, covering her back, abdomen and feet. A plait is twisted in the area of the pelvis, being draped from the back, over the left forearm. The goddess was holding interesting symbols in her hands. Al. Diaconescu believes that in the right hand the character had most probably a quite heavy feature, as the artist felt the urge to add a reinforcement, that supported the forearm⁵. Centre of gravity of the statue rests upon the left foot, stretched, while the right one is slightly bent and extended backwards. The manner of rendering the plaits of *chiton* and *himation*, by their symmetric and elegant arrangement which underlines inclusively some parts of the body, such as the thigh and the right knee, breasts and buttocks, reveals us the grace and feminine beauty of the divinity. At the same time, the divinity is sober, hieratic, even official, upright posture, with stretched forearms. By the manner of arrangement one can notice that the goddess does not watch at her follower from her feet. On more careful examination, the goddess held a round object in her left hand, probably a fruit (apple?), under no circumstances a *patera*.

THE ANCIENT PROTOTYPE

Á. Hekler established that the prototype that inspired the statue is the renowned Grecian work Themis in Rhamnus⁶. The second researcher that tackled this issue, Al. Diaconescu, detailed much more thoroughly the problem of iconographic prototype the source of inspiration for the sculptor, and explained the manner it was used in rendering more deities. Therefore, the statue from Apulum has as prototypes the statues of Nemesis from Rhamnus, work of Greek classicism from the latter half of Vth century BC,

more precisely from 430 BC⁷, but also the Hellenistic one of Themis from Rhamnus made by sculptor Hairestratos around 300 BC⁸. We refer to a type of representation which served as a model during the Roman times for the statues depicting Nemesis, Hygieia or Fortuna in Asia Minor, especially in the area of metropolis Ephesus⁹. Similarly, he believes that the statue from Apulum is iconographically related to a marble statue from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa depicting Hygieia, commissioned by Publius Aelius Theimes, an important character in the life of the community¹⁰.

DEBATES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Resuming the issue of features held we noticed that it is impossible to identify what she was holding in the right hand. As we recorded above, in the right hand one can notice a round object, likely a fruit, even if it is preserved partially. Taking into consideration that in Asia Minor this iconographic type was used for depicting deities such as Nemesis, Fortuna and Hygieia¹¹, our analysis firstly focuses on these deities. By position of the left hand's fingers, but also by the round object it held, we reached the conclusion that it cannot be Nemesis, as she should have held a *tignum*. By no means is Fortune either, as she should have had a *cornucopia*. Similarly Hygieia, the goddess of medicine, should have hold a *patera* in the left hand. Consequently, it cannot be any of the deities attested in Asia Minor, especially in the area of Ephesus.

It might be Venus, for two reasons: presence of the follower at the left foot of the goddess, who normally should have been Eros; identification of the feature held in the left hand with a fruit, likely the golden apple of beauty received from Paris¹².

A study published by A. Antal in the volume dedicated to the thirteenth International Colloquium of Roman Provincial Art organised in Romania, in 2013 attracted our attention. There is a phenomenon *consecratio in formam deorum*, that occurred at the beginning of the period of the Principality, being firstly followed by the imperial family. It emerged in the Ist century BC with the organisation of the cult of Venus Genitrix by Iulius Caesar¹³, and beginning with IIInd century AD this practice spread in provinces, on quite vast scale¹⁴. What does this phenomenon actually mean? The deceased of the imperial family, but also those of the aristocracy, were depicted similar to gods. According to age, gender and occupation of every deceased a deity was chosen and, therefore, each character ordered a statue by which to be identified with Jupiter (this deity was the exclusive privilege of the imperial family), Mercurius, Hercules, Diana, Fortuna, Venus etc¹⁵.

Debate should also be connected to another type of representation which falls within the same official

¹ We thank our colleague I. G. Nagy for translating articles written by Á. Hekler and A. Cserni.

² CSERNI 1899, 53-54, 63, 65; IDR III/6, no. 148.

³ HEKLER 1910, 18, no. 45, 6. ábra.

⁴ DIACONESCU 2004b, 151-152, no. 19, Pl. LVI, 2; DIACONESCU 2010-2011 (2012), 176-177, Fig. 55; DIACONESCU 2012, 43-44, no. 19, Pl. LXV, 2.

⁵ DIACONESCU 2004b, 152; DIACONESCU 2012, 43.

⁶ HEKLER 1910, 18.

⁷ DIACONESCU 2004b, 152; DIACONESCU 2012, 44.

⁸ STARAC 2005, 198.

⁹ DIACONESCU 2004b, 152; DIACONESCU 2012, 44.

¹⁰ DIACONESCU 2004a 364; DIACONESCU 2004b, 140-142, no. 7, Pl. LVI, 1.

¹¹ DIACONESCU 2004b, 152; DIACONESCU 2012, 44.

¹² FERRARI 2003, 34.

¹³ There are authors that believe that this cult had been introduced by Scipio Africanus, in Rome, earlier and Julius Caesar developed it, further introducing the cult of Venus Victrix. See FERRARI 2003, 868-869.

¹⁴ ANTAL 2015, 55.

¹⁵ ANTAL 2015, 55-56.

trend with religious significance firstly, but also artistic. Similarly in the second century of our era, more precisely in its latter part, appear representations in the shape of the statue of Venus Genitrix, an example being the statue of probable funerary characteristic of it discovered in Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, kept over a height of 1.40 m, work of sculptor Claudius Saturninus¹⁶. The prototype is a statue of Venera, work of the Grecian sculptor Callimachos from the end of the Vth century BC¹⁷, which was copied during the Roman period, an illustrative example being a cult statue of Venera Genitrix made by Arkesilaos and put by Julius Caesar in the temple dedicated to her in Rome, on 26th of September 46 BC¹⁸. Another renowned statue is that from province Noricum, from the time of Hadrian, kept in the museum from Klagenfurt¹⁹. Venus was acknowledged by Julius Caesar as ancestor of Julian dynasty, and thereby she became the protectress of the Roman state and nation, and in the domestic area, of family and marriage²⁰. There are enough analogies at the level of the Empire, we remember those discovered in the excavations from the theatre from Vicenza, which illustrate empresses of Julio-Claudian dynasty, meaning Antonia Minor (niece of Octavianus Augustus and mother of Claudius) and Agrippina Minor (wife of Claudius and mother of Nero), but also one of Sabina, wife of Hadrianus kept in the collections of the Archaeological Museum from Ostia Antica²¹. Another marble statue, 1.46m height, whose head is missing, is kept in the collections of Glyptotheca of Carlsberg²². These official images, which reflect the phenomenon *consecratio in formam Veneris*, indicate that aesthetical values such as chastity and modesty²³ were promoted. The policy of Octavianus Augustus of regenerating the Roman society by promoting some moral virtues and concepts was also continued in the IInd century AD.

Resuming our statue, beside the similar sculptural works discovered around Ephesus, a fragmentary statue of the same iconographic type with that from Apulum was recently published. Only a part of the *torso* and a fragment from the lower part are still preserved in the Roman *forum* from Pula, Dalmatia²⁴. Also this fragmentary statue, made of marble, is evidence of imperial propaganda from the second third of the ISt century AD and might represent according to the author one of the empresses of Julio-Claudian dynasty, depicted as Fortuna, equally as empresses Antonia Minor, Agrippina Minor and Agrippina Maior are rendered by numerous statues throughout the whole Empire as the goddess of fortune²⁵. Similarly also the discovery place, in the public square, indicates the same official character of the statue which, according to estimation of its reconstitution, would have been 2.23 m height, much oversized in relation to height of human body²⁶.

¹⁶ BIANCHI 1977, 128-133, Tav. XXXI; ANTAL 2015, 56-57.

¹⁷ GRAMATOPOL 1982, 131.

¹⁸ SÉCHAN 1892, 735; IMPERIAL ROME II 2002, 50-52.

¹⁹ BIANCHI 1977, 129, Tav. XXXII.

²⁰ SÉCHAN 1892, 735.

²¹ ANTAL 2015, 58.

²² IMPERIAL ROME II 2002, 50, no. 3.

²³ ANTAL 2015, 60.

²⁴ STARAC 2005, 197-200.

²⁵ STARAC 2005, 198-200.

²⁶ STARAC 2005, 198-200.

CONCLUSIONS

Our statue is interesting from more points of view. More aspects be taken into consideration: discovery place and context, the iconographic models that circulated in the Antonine period, phenomenon of *consecratio in formam deorum*, the official politics of the Roman state. We consider that we are not referring to a funerary statue. Bearing in mind that it was discovered in an official environment, in the area of Palace of the Three Dacia Governors, the statue might represent Venus depicted in an iconographic manner typical of some statues from Asia Minor by which are depicted Nemesis, Hygieia or Fortune, but also an empress from the Antonine family, or, maybe, even a member of the family of a governor or local authority in the likeness of Venus.

Firstly we refer to artistic eclecticism, adapted to requirements of local commissioners. As it was already mentioned²⁷, we agree that also this statue is the work of the sculpture workshop from Ulpia Traiana which made the statues of Venus Genitrix signed by Claudius Saturninus, and Hygieia by Publius Aelius Theimes. The marble it is made of has greenish lines, specific to Bucova quarries. The archaeological context evidenced by A. Cserni, affirming that it was retrieved next to a trunk, capital and tegular material bearing the stamp of XIIIth Legion Gemina and anthroponym Aurelius Conon²⁸, allows us to narrow initial dating proposed by Professor Al. Diaconescu²⁹, and to date it to the end of Antonine period. Anyway, there is a contemporaneity between the statue from Apulum and those two from Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa.

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- ²⁷ DIACONESCU 2004a, 364.
- ²⁸ CSERNI 1899, 53-54, 63. It is widely accepted that such anthroponyms are dated starting with rule of Marcus Aurelius. See: IDR III/6, no. 148.
- ²⁹ We refer to mid Antonine period or, probably, late. DIACONESCU 2004b, 152. Probably he did not have access to excavation report published by A. Cserni in 1899. See: CSERNI 1899, 53-68.



Fig. 1. Statue of Venus or a woman like a Venus aspect
<http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org/monument.php?id=19301>
 Copyright:© Muzeul Național al Unirii Alba Iulia
 Photo: Ortolf Harl (2010)

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Fig. 2. Detail with the image of right foot of Eros.