Anikó Bózsa – Ádám Szabó, „Ajándék a szépnek!” “Gift for the beautiful!” “Lead mirrors” of the Roman Collection from the Hungarian National Museum

The recently appeared work of A. Bózsa (Ferenczy Museum, Szentendre) and Á. Szabó (Hungarian National Museum, Budapest) is the final result of a long research project in which several archaeologists, museum keepers and graduate students were involved.

The 721 „lead mirrors” from the Hungarian National Museum (Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum) were collected from 1802 until 2007, however the majority of them (689 pieces) came from the black market. It is the biggest collection of this type of material ever published. The German version of the monograph will appear soon as the fifth volume of the Libelli Archaeoloici Series Nova. Preliminary notes and the inscriptions were already published before the apparition of the volume.

The first chapter deals with the morphology of the objects. This is the shortest – although, for a laic reader – the most important chapter of the book. First, the authors begin with the definition of these objects: what are these? Enrolling the foreign denominations (lead mirror, miroir de verre double de plomb, Bleispiegel, Gläserne Konvexspiegel, specchietto in piombo e in vetro) the authors presents also the main ideas and opinions of the recent historiography on these mysterious objects. The small size of the objects (with a diameter of 3-4 cm), the ambiguous form and composition of the so-called „mirror” or glass and the missing of these in some pieces argues the necessity of redefinition of these objects. However, the authors does not present the role functionality and formal typology of the real mirrors in the Roman society, as a comparative analogy, their argument must be accepted by the international literature too. For arguing the more complex functionality of these objects, Bózsa-Szabó present the place of discovery of those few pieces in case we know the provenience. Some of them – from Cuccurdeu, Chastellard de Lardiens, Lachau en Haute-Provence, Orochak, Pautalia or Sucidava – were found in sanctuaries of various divinities (IOM, Iuno, Selene, Aphrodite) or dedicated to them (Isis, Nymphae, Venus, Isis). The votive and magical function of lead objects and their role in popular, domestic religion – especially among female religious practices – is emphasized especially by G. Baratta and G. Kremer. Many of the pieces came from funeral contexts, especially

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v1i4.80
ISSN 2360 – 266X
ISSN–L 2360 – 266X
from the tombs of women and children. The 23 inscriptions – mainly in Greek language – are dedicated to female divinities or persons (Diogenes and Lavinia, as personifications of boys and girls or masculine and feminine attitudes). The decorations – vegetations, geometric forms – are related mainly to Venusian and Dionysian contexts or to astrologic symbolism, especially to Pisces, Cancer and Aquarius. They do not assist too much on the material of the objects, at least, in the recent historiography; the lead (plumbum) is considered exclusively a material for cheap, popular objects of everyday religiosity, mainly magic. Similarly, a general discussion about the symbolic role of mirrors and the miniature objects in the Roman art could give a clue for different kind of interpretations.

Summarizing the first chapter, the authors present a “definition” of the objects. After their opinion the 721 objects presented in the book has different functions, some of them being votive ex votos, others could be amulets with magical connotation and some rare pieces could be interpreted as toys, decorations or medallions. Few of the objects were used as real mirrors. The authors suggest also a terminological change, introducing the more neutral and less problematic “lead frame” instead of the deceptive “lead mirror” term.

Analyzing the forms and typology of the lead frames, Bózsa/Szabó conclude that even if the material of some provinces – such as Dacia, Moesia, Thracia – has very similar iconographic features, the presence of numerous workshops attested in this area (some of them in Apulum and Drobeta) shows a rich, local aspect of a universal form. The influence of Aquileia in the spread of some forms – and indirectly, the importance of the Publicum Portorum Illyrici – is obvious again. Some distinctive forms, such as the star-shaped frames, are present mainly in the Western provinces, which shows in the case of this object type too the influence of the costume system on economic and artistic networks.

The second chapter presents the typology of the objects. In sixty pages (45 – 104) the authors present very carefully, with drawings and numerous analogies all the types and subtypes identified by them. This typology was introduced and created mainly for the collection of the Hungarian National Museum, but some of the terminologies used existed already in the scholarship. The authors identify nine different types and, at the same time, discuss the variants of the verso of the objects. There are three main types: the rectangular, the round and the star-shaped forms. The rectangular form (21 examples) have twelve variations, mainly based on decorative elements. Most of the VTERE FELIX inscriptions came from this category. The round type has five subtypes: round, narrow frames without handle (nos. 22-40), round wide frames without handle (nos. 41-52), round frames with vertical handle (nos. 52-690), round frames with crossed pliers in the back (nos. 691-695) and decorated, round plates (nos. 696-699). The star shaped forms are very rare (found

5. About the magical function of lead objects, see: BARATTA 2012, 23-27.
7. ZACCARIA 2010, 53-78, HAVAS 2013, 66-68.

mainly in the Western provinces: nos. 700-703). There are some examples for verso of the lead frames (nos. 704-718). Some pieces are so small and fragmentary, that they could not be identified by the authors (nos. 719 – 721.).

The third chapter is the massive catalogue of the corpus, presenting carefully all of the 721 pieces, presenting very shortly the inventory number, dimensions, material, and short description of the object and – in rare cases – the provenience of the object (105 – 226 pp.). All of the lead frames are photographed in black and white (retro and verso) in the next chapter (227 – 478 pp.). Some of the pieces are presented only by reproduces photographs, but great part of them are published the first time in this volume. The eighty-nine titles in the bibliography practically is the most complete summary of the historiography of research in the topic.

In conclusion, we can affirm, that the book of A. Bózsa and Á. Szabó is an extremely important contribution for the research, as the first and most comprehensive corpus of this type of objects. They not jut presented an extremely rich material – because of a successful collaboration with Hungarian and foreign scholars and authorities of heritage protection – but introduced a new and more accurate terminology and typology of this object type, which need to be used for the future research. The photographs – although are in black and white and not always in the best quality – serve a detailed corpus for researchers. The German version of the book is a great urge for such a valuable work.

References

BARATTA 2012
BARATTA 2014
BLÄNSDORF 2010
BÓZSA/SZABÓ 2014
FACSÁDY 2013
Facsdány, Á., „Forma bonum fragile est…” Szépítkezés a római korban (Beautifying in the Roman Age) (Budapest: Archaeolingua).
GOTTSCHALK 2012
Gottschalk, R., Miniaturen in Frauenhand – zu den sogenannten Mithrassymbolen, Archäologische Korrespondenzblatt 42/1, 83-93.
HAVAS 2013
Havas, Z., A publicum vicesimae libertati bronz bélyegzője

KREMER/HOLZNER 2012

NÉMETH-SZABÓ 2010

WRIGHT 2000

TALBERT 2015
Talbert, R., *Roman portable sundials: the Empire in your hand.* (forthcoming)

ZACCARIA 2010