

CONJURING THE GOOD LUCK. THE CHARIOT RACING IMAGERY IN ROMAN SACRED CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *The article is discussing the presence of three ceramic moulds depicting chariot racing scenes in the sanctuary of Liber Pater from Roman Apulum (present day Alba Iulia, Romania) by taking into consideration their morphology, iconography and context of discovery. It is thus argued that, besides their primary function as practical tools, the moulds also gained another unexpected quality as magical instruments for conjuring the good luck.*

Keywords: *Roman Dacia, Apulum, ceramic moulds, chariot racing, magic.*

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PRIZIVAJUĆI DOBRU SREĆU. LIKOVNE PREDSTAVE TRKA KOLA U RIMSKIM SAKRALNIM KONTEKSTIMA

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Apstrakt: *U radu se razmatra prisustvo tri keramička kalupa sa predstavama scena trka kola u svetilištu Liber Patera iz rimskog Apuluma (današnja Alba Juli-ja, Rumunija), uzimajući u obzir njihovu morfologiju, ikonografiju i kontekst nalaza. Na osnovu toga se argumentuje da su kalupi, osim njihove primarne funkcije kao praktičnog alata, stekli i drugo, neočekivano svojstvo kao magijska sredstva za prizivanje dobre sreće.*

Ključne reči: *rimski Dakija, Apulum, keramički kalupi, trke kola, magija.*

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INTRODUCTION

Chariot racing was a very popular form of entertainment in Roman and early Byzantine times, attracting nearly all social categories and being frequently depicted in various artistic media and environments (see, for example, Dunbabin 1982; Bell 2014; Bergmann 2008). As an artistic motif, it appeared on mosaic pavements in baths and villas, and also on richly decorated marble sarcophagi. Much simpler variants of the same motif decorated mass-produced daily objects like coins, lamps, tableware, ceramic decorative tiles and so on. The names of famous racers sometimes appeared on such objects and they were frequently considered heralds of good omen (Dunbabin 1982, 67–70). The diversity of these means of expression and contexts of consumption indicates that the chariot racing imagery had different practical and symbolic functions and meanings which changed through time and from one area of the empire to another.

Starting from these observations, the article is discussing the presence of three ceramic moulds depicting chariot racing scenes in the sanctuary of Liber Pater from Roman Apulum (present day Alba Iulia, Romania) by taking into consideration their morphology, iconography and context of discovery.

THE CONTEXT OF DISCOVERY

The sanctuary of Liber Pater was first identified in 1989 in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis (modern neighbourhood of Partoș in Alba Iulia) by an archaeological team directed by Alexandru Diaconescu (Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca). The site was partially unearthed in 1991 and 1992, while further extensive interdisciplinary investigations were carried out between 1998 and 2003 by an international archaeological team co-directed by Alexandru Diaconescu, Ian Haynes (then at the Birkbeck College London) and Alfred Schäfer (then at the Humboldt Universität Berlin) (Schäfer and Diaconescu 1997; Diaconescu et al. 2005; Haynes 2005). Aside from features belonging to the sanctuary (buildings, courts and cult-related pits), the

investigations also brought to light an earlier-dated „industrial” area and parts of the surrounding street network. All these archaeological contexts produced an outstandingly rich and diverse inventory that includes large quantities of pottery, building materials and animal bones, as well as more than 4500 small finds made of ceramic, glass, bone, stone, iron, bronze and lead, which were analysed in different specialist reports for the forthcoming monograph (some finds and interim reports have already been published: Höpken 2004; Ciaușescu 2004; Egri 2005; Fiedler 2005; 2014; Schäfer 2014; Haynes 2014). Archaeological evidence indicates that the sanctuary was more likely used between the late 2nd century and the middle of the 3rd century AD.

One particular category of small finds consists of ceramic medallions and moulds for producing medallions which were discovered in different contexts, some directly associated with the sanctuary. Two of the three moulds which are discussed below were discovered within the area of the sanctuary, in a context that is more likely dated to the early 3rd century AD (Egri 2011; Egri 2018, 121), while the third one comes from the early 1990s excavations in the same area, being dated to the second half of the 2nd century – first half of the 3rd century AD (Ruscu 1992, 125–126, Fig. 1; Cociș and Ruscu 1995, 124, no. 29, Fig. 8/1a–b).

THE FINDS

The mould (Fig. 1) discovered during the earlier archaeological excavations in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary is nearly completely preserved (Ruscu 1992, 125–126, Fig. 1). It has a diameter of 122mm and a maximum thickness of 20mm at the rim. The central scene, rendered in negative probably using

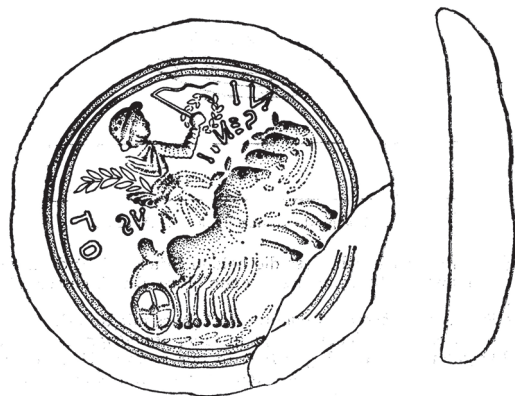


Figure 1. Mould no. 1 found in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (after Ruscu 1992).

stamping tools, is surrounded by a thick raised rim, while the backside is flat. The mould was made of a fine orange ceramic fabric of local origin, which was well fired.

The central motif shows a chariot racing scene with a charioteer in *quadriga* pulled by four prancing horses. He is holding a whip and a laurel wreath in the left hand and a palm branch in the right hand, so the scene apparently depicts the victorious end of a chariot

race. This seems to also be confirmed by an abbreviated retrograde inscription surrounding the human figure, which was originally read GENIIVS NI[CA] LO[GISMVS] (Ruscic 1992), but could be more likely read GENII V[OTUM] S[OLVIT] NI[CA] LO[GISMVS] (Egri 2011).

Two other moulds (Figs. 2 and 3), which were discovered during subsequent archaeological excavations in the same area of the Liber Pater sanctuary, are only fragmentary preserved and are identical in what concerns their fabric, dimensions and iconography.

Both are circular and have a diameter (reconstructed) of 105mm and a maximum thickness of 15mm at the rim, so are slightly smaller than the mould no. 1. The central scene, rendered in negative, is surrounded by a thick raised rim, while the backside is flat. The quality of the image is poorer than that on mould no. 1, some details being quite schematic and others barely visible, which might suggest that the moulds were made by copying an existing medallion or a badly worn pattern rather than using stamping tools. Both moulds were made of a fine, light brown ceramic fabric of local origin, which was well fired.

Though the two moulds were found badly damaged, their decoration can be quite easily reconstructed. In both cases, the central motif shows the same



Figure 2. Mould no. 2 found in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (photo M. Egri).



Figure 3. Mould no. 3 found in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary at Apulum (photo M. Egri).

chariot racing scene with a *quadriga* pulled by four horses in full gallop, while a bit of the charioteer's body is visible on mould no. 3. A pair of palm branches can be seen in the lower register of both moulds, while another is visible above the charioteer on the same mould no. 3. In these cases, the scene is apparently illustrating a moment during the chariot race though the presence of palm branches is also suggesting a victorious end.

DISCUSSION

Ceramic moulds and medallions showing chariot racing were very popular in Gallia (Wuilleumier and Audin 1952, nos. 117–125 and 252–266; Desbat 1980–1981, 119–123, nos. J101–J111; Marquié 2000, 262–264, Fig. 13/40–44 and 14/45–47), though some examples were also discovered in Dacia, in the rural cemetery at Locusteni (Popilian 1980, Pl. 18) and at Apulum in the Liber Pater sanctuary (Ruscu 1992, 125–126, Fig. 1). The image on the first piece was interpreted as a depiction of Sol driving its sacred *quadriga* (Berciu and Petolescu 1976, 56, no. 65, Pl. 28/65) despite the lack of specific attributes which can be seen on another example from Romula (Berciu and Petolescu 1976, 56, no. 64, Pl. 28/64). Most of the moulds and medallions showing chariot racing also bear inscriptions, either good wishes for the New Year or references to racing victories, often including the names of the winners.

The primary function of these moulds is still debated in archaeological literature. The oldest hypothesis connects them with the production of ceramic bowls, pitchers and beakers decorated with medallions having different subjects in some workshops from Gallia, and also in Pannonia and Moesia. These ceramic vessels imitated the bronze ones made in the Hellenistic tradition (Vertet 1969, 93–134), and are dated mainly to the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD (Desbat 1980–1981, 182). In Dacia, the pottery workshops from Romula (Popilian and Poenaru-Bordea 1973, 239–257) and Apulum (Egri 2011) also produced such vessels.

However, independent ceramic medallions that were never attached to a vessel were also found in different contexts, indicating that such moulds could have also been used to produce ceramic *oscilla*, small decorative or votive reliefs. This hypothesis has been proposed in the analysis of ceramic plaques and medallions discovered at Palmyra and Dura-Europos. It has been convincingly argued that the small mass-produced images of the most common divinities were sold to the faithful for use in household worship, perhaps being sometimes set into the walls to provide protection, while others were brought to the sanctuaries as votive offerings (Downey 2003, 13–15). Some of these small ceramic reliefs could have also been sold as souvenirs, especially if they were associated with a well-known sanctuary.

Another hypothesis suggests that most of the round ceramic moulds found in the Lower Danube region were used for decorating *liba* or *crustuli* – the cakes used in the Liber Pater cult, but also for the feasts of other divinities, for example the *Matralia*, or for the New Year feasts. Along the same lines, it has been suggested that cakes decorated with chariot racing scenes were perhaps sold at the hippodrome (Alföldi 1938, 1–14; Ruscu 1992, 129–131; Bouma 1996, 275–277, with further ancient and modern bibliography). One argument could be that most of the moulds from the Lower Danube region are larger than those used to cast the medallions which decorated the aforementioned ceramic vessels. Another argument could be the raised rim of these moulds, which allowed the casting of a thicker positive having a smooth circular rim; this was not really needed by a medallion that was meant to be applied on the body of a vessel before firing.

However, irrespective of their primary function as moulds for producing either ceramic medallions or decorated cakes, there is another question regarding their presence in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary. In the case of mould no. 1, it has been previously presumed that ritual cakes were baked for the feasts or communal meals within the sanctuary (Ruscu 1992). Still, none of these moulds comes from the large cult-related pits containing the remains of these meals and of other rituals performed within the sanctuary (Fiedler 2005; Egri 2011). At the same time, they are not related stratigraphically or contextually to the pottery workshop which predated the existence of the sanctuary in the same area.

Thus, the answer to this question can be more likely found in the contractual nature of the Roman religion, on one hand, and the perception of the sacred space as a means of interaction between the mortals and the supernatural beings, on the other hand. The sanctuary was the sacred space where the faithful was able to communicate with the divinity, to seek help for all sorts of issues through prayers and sacrifices, and to fulfil vows made to the divinity through votive offerings. Furthermore, the divinity was sometimes called into action to influence the outcome of coming events through magical practices involving spells, charms and representational figures, among other things (Belayche 2007, 287–289). To put it simply, the sanctuary was a gate providing access to the supernatural power, irrespective of the titular god of the respective sacred space.

In this case, the individuals who chose to bring these particular moulds to the sanctuary sought the help of the divinity to obtain something which could not be within the ability of a mortal, namely to harness the good luck. They have done that by performing a ritual of correspondence aiming to „guide” the divine power. The iconography of these moulds suggests the subject of their request: to gain success at the racecourse, either as charioteers or as passionate supporters of a certain charioteer. Liber Pater has no obvious connection with chariot racing, even if the Dionysian imagery of the 3rd century AD often incorporates chariot processions, so the sanctuary was more likely chosen for this action due to either the personal, trusted relation between the god and these individuals, or

its reputation as a powerful sacred space. It is less likely that the moulds were brought to the sanctuary as part of a curse spell aiming to damage the adversaries (see the later-dated examples from Carthage and Berytus in Belayche 2007, 289, Fig. 20/2), since the required accompanying *defixio* is absent. The inscription on mould no. 1, mentioning the fulfilling of a vow made to an unspecified *genius*, seems to suggest that votive medallions were sometimes mass-produced to also give thanks for success at the hippodrome.

It can be therefore concluded that, besides their practical function as tools for casting ceramic medallions or baking celebratory cakes, the moulds in question had also gained another unexpected quality as magical instruments for conjuring the good luck. The main reason behind their functional and symbolic transformation was their imagery depicting one of the most popular public activities from the ancient Roman world – the chariot racing.

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Conjuring the good luck. The chariot racing imagery in Roman sacred contexts

Summary

Chariot racing was a very popular form of entertainment in Roman and early Byzantine times, attracting nearly all social categories and being frequently depicted in various artistic media and environments (see, for example, Dunbabin 1982; Bell 2014; Bergmann 2008). As an artistic motif, it appeared on mosaic pavements in baths and villas, but also on richly decorated marble sarcophagi. Much simpler variants of the same motif decorated mass-produced daily objects like coins, lamps, tableware, ceramic decorative tiles and so on.

The diversity of these means of expression and contexts of consumption indicates that the chariot racing imagery had different practical and symbolic functions and meanings which changed through time and from one area of the empire to another. Starting from these observations, the article is discussing the presence of three ceramic moulds depicting chariot racing scenes in the sanctuary of Liber Pater from Roman Apulum (present day Alba Iulia, Romania) by taking into consideration their morphology, iconography and context of discovery.

The sanctuary of Liber Pater was first identified in 1989 in the Colonia Aurelia Apulensis. Archaeological excavations were performed first in 1991–1992 and then in 1998–2003, unearthing features belonging to the sanctuary (buildings, courts and cult-related pits), and also an earlier-dated „industrial” area and parts of the surrounding street network.

One particular category of small finds from the sanctuary consists of ceramic medallions and moulds for producing medallions which were discovered in different contexts. Two of the three moulds which are discussed below were discovered within the area of the sanctuary, in a context that is more likely dated to the early 3rd century AD, while the third one comes from the early 1990s excavations in the same area, being dated to the second half of the 2nd century–first half of the 3rd century AD.

These three ceramic moulds are decorated with chariot racing scenes. Moulds and medallions with a similar imagery were very popular in Gallia, though some examples were also discovered in Dacia. Their primary function is still debated in archaeological literature. The oldest hypothesis connects them with the production of ceramic bowls, pitchers and beakers decorated with medallions having different subjects in some workshops from Gallia, and also in Pannonia and Moesia. However, independent ceramic medallions that

were never attached to a vessel were also found in different contexts, indicating that such moulds could have also been used to produce ceramic *oscilla*, small decorative or votive reliefs.

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However, irrespective of their primary function as moulds for producing either ceramic medallions or decorated cakes, there is another question regarding their presence in the area of the Liber Pater sanctuary. The answer can be more likely found in the contractual nature of the Roman religion, on one hand, and the perception of the sacred space as a means of interaction between the mortals and the supernatural beings, on the other hand. In this case, the individuals who chose to bring these particular moulds to the sanctuary sought the help of the divinity to obtain something which could not be within the ability of a mortal, namely to harness the good luck. They have done that by performing a ritual of correspondence aiming to „guide” the divine power. The iconography of these moulds suggests the subject of their request: to gain success at the racecourse, either as charioteers or as passionate supporters of a certain charioteer.

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