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THE MAGIC OF THE “LEFT”. A FRAGMENT OF A STATUETTE FROM THE DACIAN FORTRESS ON THE PIATRA CRAIVII IN TRANSYLVANIA (ROMANIA)

Abstract: A fragment representing the left leg of a Roman bronze statuette was discovered in the fortress of Piatra Craivii (Alba County, in south-western Transylvania). A Roman bronze statuette, most likely coming from one of the neighbouring provinces, was surely not a regularly trade good. An alternative way of acquiring it could have been a Dacian plundering raid across the Danube. Another fragment of a Roman bronze statue (the left hand of a life-size statue) comes from the Late Iron Age fortified settlement at Nitriansky Hrádok (in south-western Slovakia) and a fragment of a statuette, this time made of ceramic, was discovered in the Getic settlement at Popești (Giurgiu County in southern Romania). The selective cutting off of the left leg or hand of these statuettes indicates the importance of the symbolical meaning of the left and the right side of the body. On the other hand, the intentional mutilation of some parts of the legs or hands could suggest the practising of particular magical rituals, perhaps related to black magic. The discussed artefacts illustrate another kind of connection between the Mediterranean world and the populations living in the vicinity of the Roman Empire, which is seldom taken into consideration. Moreover, these illustrate the complexity of the mechanisms of interactions that contributed to the circulation of various goods from one cultural environment into another, as well as the different means by which they were transformed and assimilated in the process of transfer.

Keywords: Dacians, Romans, Transylvania, magic, bronze statuette.

Introduction

The name Petar Popović was already familiar to me at the end of the 1980s, when I discovered in the library of the Faculty of History and Philosophy from Cluj-Napoca the newly-arrived book *Le monnaie des Scordisque* (Popović 1987). A few years later, I finally had the opportunity to meet the author in person during a scientific symposium organised in October 1993 at Montana, in Bulgaria. On that occasion, I discovered an outstanding specialist, who was open to discussing a wide range of subjects and to exchange research ideas, including his innovative opinions regarding the archaeology of the Scordisci. Petar had just published a study about the Lesser Scordisci from the Danube's Iron Gates region (Popović 1989-1990), as well as his very important contribution to the analysis of the late Republican bronze vessels from the Scordiscian environment (Popović 1992). These studies, which he offered me as off-

prints, provided the starting point for a number of discussions regarding the relationships between the Late Iron Age communities from the south of the Danube and those living to the north of it. This fruitful dialogue continued during the following decades, either in written form or face to face, not least during a number of conferences, for example at Turnu Severin or Vršač, in 1998 or 2007.

Accordingly, the publication of a volume honouring the outstanding scientific activity of Petar Popović provides a good opportunity to comment on an archaeological artefact discovered in a Dacian fortress from Transylvania which, besides its magical meanings that are discussed below, suggests, up to a point, the range of relationships established by the Dacian communities with the Roman provincial environment south of the Danube. The respective artefact is a fragment of a Roman bronze statuette discovered many years ago in the Dacian fortress of Piatra Craivii (Craiva, Cricău commune, Alba County, RO).

The artefact from Piatra Craivii and its archaeological and historical context

The fragment represents the left leg of a Roman bronze statuette (probably that of a man) which comes from the fortress of Piatra Craivii (Alba County, in south-western Transylvania). The leg was cut off below the knee and the big toe was also cut off. The fragment has a height of 16.5 cm (Gلودariu 1974: 237, no. 11/v, Pl. 47) (Fig. 1).

tance of this community in the exploitation of metal resources (iron, gold, silver and copper) from this region. Their output, including many manufactured goods, was apparently distributed across wider areas. The manufacturing and trading functions of the Piatra Craivii fortress and its civilian settlement facilitated an increased human mobility in the region. This is demonstrated by the presence of a large number of artefacts having distant origins: Greek and Roman coins, bronze vessels, cos-



Fig. 1. Left foot of the Roman bronze statue from the Piatra Craivii Dacian fortress.

The context of discovery is unknown, but the artefact was found during the archaeological excavations carried out between 1960-70 on one of the terraces of the civilian settlement (Fig. 2) (see below).

The Piatra Craivii fortress was investigated systematically in successive stages over several decades (Berciu, Popa, Daicoviciu 1965; Moga 1981; Rustoiu 1996: 59; Moga, Rustoiu 1997; Plantos 2019, etc). It is located on the eastern side of the Apuseni Mountains, on a limestone peak that has a height of 1,083 m, dominating the surrounding landscape and visible from the valley of the Mureş River, which flows about 20 km to the east (Fig. 2; 4). The fortress has enclosure walls built of dressed stone using the Hellenistic technique, similar to other aristocratic residences from the area of the Dacian kingdom's centre of power in the Orăştie Mountains (located ca. 50 km to the south). Several anthropogenic terraces at the foot of the peak host the civilian settlement and the manufacturing areas. One iron smelting kiln, metallurgical workshops and other traces of metal processing were identified in the latter areas, indicating the impor-

tance accessories and tableware coming from the Mediterranean area, or brooches and ceramic tableware coming from the eastern and south-eastern areas outside the Carpathians (Rustoiu 2002: 110). Some of these foreign goods also provide some chronological point of reference, dating the Piatra Craivii site between the end of the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD; its end can more likely be related to the Roman campaigns in Dacia under Trajan.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned characteristics of the Piatra Craivii settlement, the presence of the fragmentary bronze statuette could perhaps be related to the use of collected scrap bronze in one of the local metallurgical workshops. However, the presence of fragments resulting from Roman statues in the “Barbarian” environment north of the imperial frontier is very scarce. The local metallurgical workshops mostly recycled scrap metal originating from household utensils, vessels or costume accessories that arrived more frequently in settlements from Late Iron Age Dacia, and which became too deteriorated to be repaired successfully (see Rustoiu 1996: 46; for reusing bronze



Fig. 2. The Piatra Craivii Dacian fortress: fortress – red arrow; civilian area and workshops – white arrow; sanctuaries – yellow arrow; presumed “familial” cemetery – blue arrow (aerial photography Z. Czajlik – June 2011).

sheet for repairing other Late Republican bronze vessels see also Rustoiu 1996: 164-165 with bibliography; for recycling bronze objects in “Barbaricum” see e.g. Günther 1990; for recycling bronze objects in prehistory see e.g. Bray, Pollard 2012). Accordingly, the fragment of a bronze statue must have had another function and meaning.

One important question concerns the way in which this “exotic” piece arrived at Piatra Craivii. A Roman bronze statuette most likely coming from one of the neighbouring provinces was surely not a regularly trade good. An alternative way of acquiring it could have been a Dacian plundering raid across the Danube. One example is the invasion of Moesia in the winter of AD 85/86 (Suetonius, *Domitianus* VI, 1). Along the same lines, Florus (II, 28, 18) also mentions that in Augustan times the Dacians used to live close to the mountains but raided the neighbouring territories whenever the Danube froze over.

On the other hand, the Piatra Craivii fortress was in the territory of the Apulii. The two Roman cities established after the Roman conquest at ca. 20 km from Piatra Craivii, one on the Mureş banks at Alba Iulia-Partoş, and another in the *canabae* of the legionary fort built by the Legion XIII Gemina, a few km to the north-east, perpetuated the name of

this indigenous population. Both urban centres included the local identifier Apulum in their official name (*Colonia Aurelia Apulensis* and *Municipium Septimium Apulensis* respectively). In this context, it has to be noted that the Apulii tribe is mentioned in an elegy of the Augustan age (*Consolatio ad Liviam* 387-388) as the protagonist of a plundering raid in Dobrogea in 15-13 BC (Russu 1961).

It can, therefore, be presumed that the fragment of bronze statuette discovered at Piatra Craivii could have been the result of a plundering raid organised by the Dacian tribe of the Apulii across the lower Danube. Furthermore, the manner in which the statuette was subsequently treated (the cutting off of the left leg of the human figure and also of the big toe) more likely suggest its incorporation into some magic practices rather than any intention of recycling the bronze.

Discussion

It is worth mentioning that another fragment of a Roman bronze statue comes from the Late Iron Age fortified settlement at Nitriansky Hrádok (in south-western Slovakia) (Fig. 3/1). In this case, the fragment consists of the left hand of a life-size

statue, having a length of 18 cm, which was cut off at the wrist, while the ring finger was also cut off (Pieta 1996: 185-186, Fig. 2). K. Pieta has considered that the fragment from Nitriansky Hrádok was acquired as bronze scrap or it was just an “exotic” object brought into the Barbarian environment from the north of the middle Danube, coming either from the Mediterranean area or from the Black Sea shores (Pieta 1996: 185).

Another fragment of a statuette, this time made of ceramic, was discovered in the Getic settlement at Popești (Giurgiu County in southern Romania), in an archaeological context dated to the 1st century BC (Fig. 3/2). The manufacturing technique indicates that the statuette comes from the Mediterranean area. Two fragments of the left leg, cut off below the knee, are preserved. The fragmentary leg has a height of 15 cm (Vulpe 1960: 332-333, Fig. 9/4).

In all of these cases, only the left side limbs of the Greek or Roman statues have been cut off. These were subsequently mutilated in one way or another by cutting off fingers or toes or by removing the foot, as in the case of the ceramic statuette from Popești. The practice indicates that the meaning of these artefacts in the local environment should perhaps be sought in the magical perception of the “left” and the “right” in traditional beliefs.

The ritual opposition “left/right”, the left side being associated with the “bad” and the right side with the “good”, or the left being associated with the female principle and the right with the male one, is known among various populations from the Mediterranean area and elsewhere. The left is also associated with the chthonic domain and the right with the Olympian one; with the left hand were offered libations for the dead and the chthonic deities, while the right hand was involved in the invocation of celestial divinities, etc. More clearly defined by the Pythagoreans, the concept of the “left/right” duality was already present in Homeric poems. At the same time, this duality was related to some rituals performed in Archaic Greek sanctuaries dedicated to the divine siblings Apollo and Artemis, for example at Delos or at Dreros in Crete (Deonna 1935; Deonna 1940; Lévêque,

Vidal-Naquet 1960).

In temperate Europe, the dual symbolism of certain anatomical parts is suggested, for example, by the different positioning of the hands of several stone statues, like those from Hirschlanden or Glauberg (Armit, Grant 2008), or by a number of objects (pendants, brooches or ceramic vessels) depicting human body parts (the left or right hand



Fig. 3. 1. Fragment of a Roman bronze statue from the fortified settlement at Nitriansky Hrádok (after Pieta 1996); 2. Left foot of the ceramic statue from settlement at Popești (after Sirbu 2006).

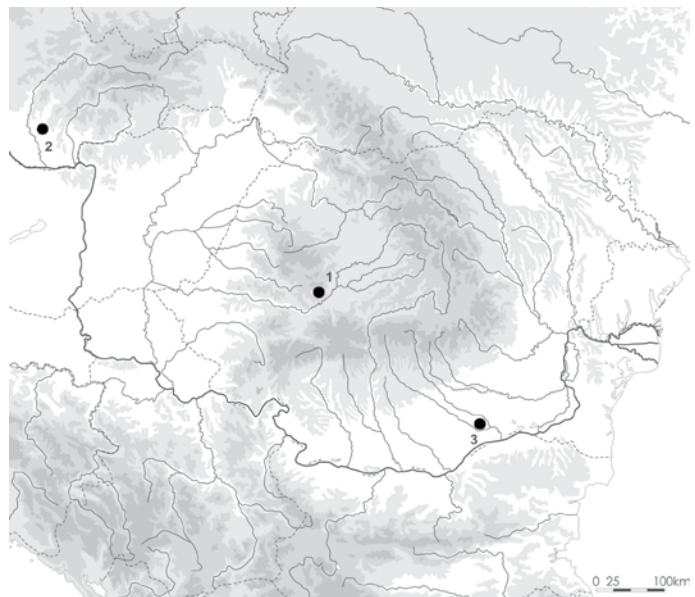


Fig. 4. Distribution map of the fragments of statues mentioned in the text: 1. Piatra Craivii; 2. Nitriansky Hrádok; 3. Popești.

or foot) (Feugère 1998; Schönfelder 1999: 537-538, Fig. 1; Čižmář 2008; Čižmář 2012: Fig. 6-8; Rudnicki 2014: 43, Pl. 6/17 etc.).

The wearing of finger-rings on a particular hand could also be related to the practice of ascribing different meanings to the left and the right side of

the body, or to the magical, ritual or medical representation of the human body. Such concepts are attested, for example, among different Mediterranean populations. Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* X. 10), citing Appian, mentions that the custom of wearing the ring on “the finger of the left hand which is next to the little finger”, encountered among both the Greeks and the Romans, originated from Egypt where it was believed that a fine nerve connects this finger with the heart. The Latin author concludes “that it therefore seemed quite reasonable that this finger in particular should be honoured with such an ornament, since it seems to be joined, and as it were united, with that supreme organ, the heart” (Rolfe 1927; Ogden 1990: 107).

In the case of the leg fragment of the statue from Piatra Craivii, and in those of the other examples mentioned above, subsequent mutilations were also carried out. These interventions could suggest their use in certain magical practices. This situation is somewhat similar to that of the human figurines made of clay, wax, lead, etc that are attested in the Mediterranean area and also among the indigenous populations from the northern Balkans, the lower Danube basin or the north-western Black Sea coast (the so-called “voodoo dolls”, as they are named by modern authors, or *kolossoi* in the ancient Greek literature), which display traces of intentional mutilation, decapitations, prodding marks, twisted limbs, etc (Faraone 1991; Ogden 2002: 71-79; Németh 2018; Rustoiu 2019: 239-257 etc). All these interventions, more likely accompanied by incantations or curses, indicate the practising of certain magical rituals. The selective preference for the left leg or hand could have played a particular role in these rituals.

Conclusions

It can, therefore, be concluded that the fragment of bronze statuette discovered many years ago in the Piatra Craivii Dacian fortress, in south-western Transylvania, was less likely part of a scrap metal batch collected for recycling. The statuette could have been acquired during a plundering raid of the Dacian Apulii in one of the Roman provinces south of the lower Danube. The selective cutting off of the left leg of this statuette indicates the importance of the symbolical meaning of the left and the

right side of the body. On the other hand, the intentional mutilation of some parts of the leg could suggest the practising of particular magical rituals perhaps related to black magic. The incidence of other left side limbs cut off from other statues in the indigenous environment across the Roman frontier indicates that similar rituals were perhaps also performed by other communities. Lastly, the discussed artefacts illustrate another kind of connection between the Mediterranean world and the populations living in the vicinity of the Roman Empire, which is seldom taken into consideration. Once more, this illustrates the complexity of the mechanisms of interactions that contributed to the circulation of various goods from one cultural environment into another, as well as the different means through which they were transformed and assimilated in the process of transfer.

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