

THE “DANUBIAN RIDERS” ON A RELIEF FROM POTAISSA

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Abstract: This study discusses a fragmentary relief with the depiction of the “Danubian Riders” recently retrieved in the collections of the History Museum of Turda. The fragmentary relief belongs to the category of oval medallions, framed in type B1b, a type mainly distributed in the provinces of Moesia, Pannonia and Dacia. The chronology of these artisanal objects is uncertain, however they are believed to be of a later date, during the first half of the 3rd century AD. The recently discovered item adds to a series of six reliefs previously found at Potaissa, pertaining to different iconographical types. This diffusion of the Danubian cult is related to the military environment influence.

Keywords: “Danubian Riders”; relief; artisanal handicraft; chronology; amulet.

Rezumat: Studiul de față expune un relief fragmentar cu reprezentarea Cavalerilor Danubieni redescoperit recent în colecțiile Muzeului de Istorie din Turda. Relieful fragmentar aparține categoriei medalioanelor de formă ovală, încadrate în tipul B1b, tip răspândit cu precădere în provinciile Moesia, Pannonia și Dacia. Cronologia acestor piese artizanale este incertă, dar se înclină pentru o datare mai târzie, pe parcursul primei jumătăți a secolului al III-lea p. Chr. Piesa în discuție se adaugă unei serii de șase reliefuri descoperite anterior la Potaissa, aparținând unor tipuri iconografice diferite și această difuziune a cultului danubian este pusă pe seama influenței dinspre mediul cazon.

Cuvinte cheie: Cavaleri Danubieni; relief; artizanat; cronologie; amuletă.

The old collections of the History Museum of Turda¹ contain a marble oval-shaped medallion with the depiction of the “Danubian Riders”². How the item was found is unknown, yet it likely comes from the territory of the ancient town at Potaissa or from even the fortress of *legio V Macedonica*.

The preserved sizes of the fragmentary relief are of 5.7 cm in height and 6 cm in width. Certain parts are missing from the lower register and the left side edge, hence the restored object would have had a diameter of ca. 8 cm. It is made of white marble, of macro-crystalline structure and massive compact texture³. In terms of the monument type, it might be either a medallion (round or oval) with the iconographic field divided into two registers or a rectangular tablet with the upper edge curved. The fragmentary state of the relief makes impossible the accurate identification of the monument type.

The central scene of the cult of the “Danubian Riders”, namely the two facing riders, heading towards a goddess in the middle of the image, is sculpted in the main

¹ The item was recently identified and inventoried (inv. no. 21309).

² For the iconography of the “Danubian Riders” see Antonescu 1889; Rostovtseff 1923, 385-415; Tudor 1937, 189-356; CMRED; LIMC VI, 1, 1992, s.v. *Heros Equitans*, 1078-1081 (Popović); Ertl 1996; Tatcheva 2000, 231-245; Nemeti 2005a, 200-216.

³ Macroscopic description - by geologist Luminița Sășăran.

register in an artisanal fashion, sketchily and without any emphasis on details. The rider on the right is better preserved. Although no dress details are rendered, the artist's intention to depict the rider with the Phrygian cap on the head is noticeable. The rider holds the hand rose above the head, bent from elbow, making the spear throwing gesture. Below the horse appears a fallen human individual, trampled by the horse (depicted sketchily as an object in the shape of a cylinder). The scene on the left preserves only the front side of the rider's horse. The goddess is rendered very schematically, with only the round head and, in its front, the fish placed on a *mensa tripes*. The body of the goddess is delimited by the horses' heads, while the lower part with *mensa tripes* is outlined by the arched forelegs of the horses. The lower register is preserved fragmentarily and the surviving parts are difficult to interpret. One may also note, from left to right, an elongated object put over a vessel or a *mensa tripes*, a human silhouette (with also the round head and upper part of the body noticeable) and the upper part of a four-footed animal looking to the right.

The fragmentary relief from Turda has the preserved sizes of 5.7×6 cm and, if complete, would have been approximately 8×7 cm. The chronological framing of the monument must take into consideration two known types: the circular medallion with two registers and the rectangular tablets with rounded upper edge. The restored sizes of the monument are suitable to both medallions and tablet. Tablet specimens entirely preserved have sizes varying from 9×7.3 cm⁴ to 13×11 cm⁵, while the known medallions are round and oval and vary in sizes from 6.2×6 cm⁶ to 16.4×11 cm⁷. Since, stylistically, the closest analogy for the relief at Turda is a relief from Aiud⁸, we believe that it belongs to the same type. The relief was framed by D. Tudor in the category of rectangular tablets with rounded upper edge, however, the item at Aiud may in fact belong to the category of medallion-reliefs of ovoid shape. Both reliefs are sculpted in a distinct fashion, sketchily, with sharp edges barely delimiting the figures, without any depth, even without deepening the relief field. In addition, the delimited area where these two reliefs were found makes probable their origin into the same workshop. In terms of style and composition, a similar item is known at Suhindol (*Moesia Inferior*), again an ovoid-shaped medallion⁹.

Thus, by the analogy with the items at Aiud and Suhindol, we tend to believe that the relief at Potaissa belongs rather to the type of ovoid (and circular) relief-medallions with the scenes depicted in two registers, type which we named B1b and to which belong items identified mainly in the Danubian provinces (Dacia, Moesia, Pannonia, Thracia etc.)¹⁰.

The presence of this marble relief at Potaissa complies with the diffusion pattern of the "Danubian Riders" reliefs, as defined insofar. In Dacia, stone reliefs predominate (limestone, marble), being shaped as a tablet or rondel, with the field split into

⁴ CMRED, no. 76.

⁵ CMRED, no. 28.

⁶ CMRED, no. 119.

⁷ CMRED, no. 153.

⁸ CMRED, no. 20.

⁹ CMRED, no. 78.

¹⁰ Nemeti 2005a, 210.

registers. In the case of the stone rectangular tablets with three registers, a long time ago it was expressed the view that they are the creation of the Dacian workshops (especially due to their discovery mainly in the artistic centres of the Carpathian area – Tibiscum, Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa, Apulum, Potaissa)¹¹. Regarding the tablets or rondels with two registers, statistically, most come from the provinces of Moesia Inferior and Pannonia Superior. It is also hard to believe that there existed an evolutionary scheme in the multiplying of registers, which would chronologically place reliefs with two registers prior those with three registers (but rather an involution, schematising by returning to essential models). As mentioned when we attempted to define the typological-chronological tree of the “Danubian Riders” reliefs, those with two or three registers may be synchronous and may express regional iconographic variants (due to the presence of a common iconographic theme for the two categories of monuments)¹². The reliefs with two registers (plates with rounded upper edge) are close to the reliefs with two registers depicting the Thracian Rider discovered between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains¹³ and, for this reason, likely derived from them. The dating of these artisanal reliefs is difficult in the context of the missing inscriptions or of finds from accurately dated contexts. E. Will believes that in the medallions’ case, where the lower register may be interpreted as an exergue, the rough division of the upper register highlights the mechanical applying of the principle of the areas in the round or oval shape, procedure which ensures the late nature among the monuments of the “Danubian Riders”¹⁴. We propose as chronological framing the first half of the 3rd century AD.

In terms of the functionality of these small-sized reliefs we tend to believe they are a sort of amulets / charms rather than ex-votos, according to the previous views expressed by several authors from F. Cumont¹⁵ to M. Clauss¹⁶. The absence of dedicatory inscriptions and their sizes plead in favour of such hypothesis.

Insofar, six reliefs with the depiction of the “Danubian Riders”¹⁷ are known to come from Potaissa, all belonging to the category of marble reliefs with the field divided into three registers (rectangular tablets and one medallion). The recently identified item in the deposit of the History Museum of Turda belongs to a kindred variant and completes this series of finds illustrating the religious preferences of the natives in this town. It was noted that ex-voto and amulets with the depiction of the “Danubian Riders” are mainly spread in the military environment, so that we may suppose that these artisanal traditions and religious ideas diffused at Potaissa especially among the soldiers of *legio V Macedonica*.

¹¹ Nemeti 2005b, 357–363.

¹² Nemeti 2015a, 131–132.

¹³ Oppermann 1981, 519–520.

¹⁴ Will 1969, 319.

¹⁵ Cumont 1938, 69–70; Will 1955, 32.

¹⁶ Clauss 2006, 231.

¹⁷ CMRED, nos. 9–14; Bărbulescu 1994, 166.

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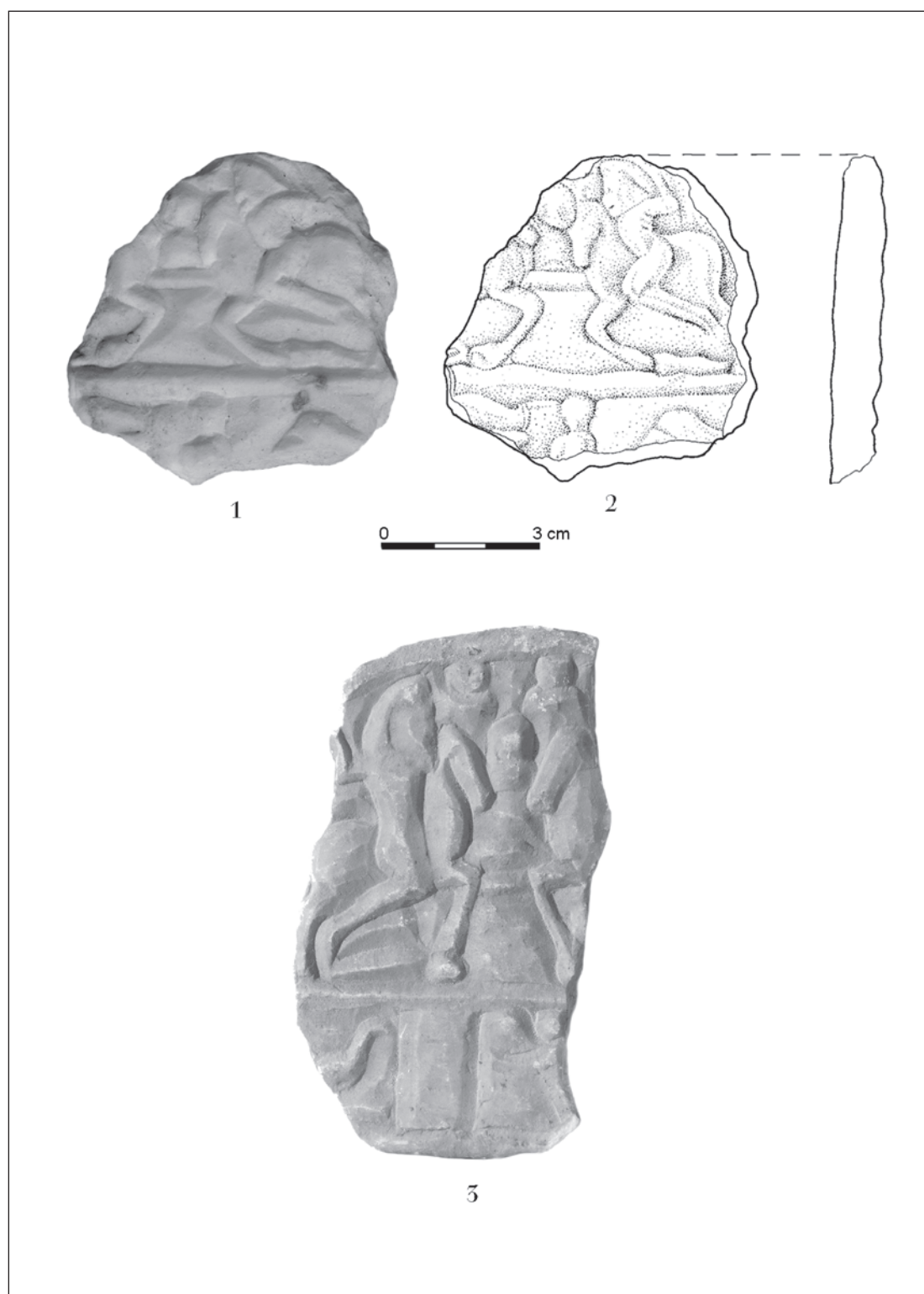
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Pl. I. 1-2. Turda. Photo S. Odenie, drawing A. Bâlc. 3. Aiud.
Photo S. Odenie (MNIT photo archive).