

THE MAGICAL GEMS FROM POROLISSUM

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REZUMAT: *Articolul examinează materialitatea magiei la Porolissum, relevantă de gemme magice. O analiză aprofundată evidențiază câteva fațete ale practicilor religioase efectuate în această importantă așezare a Daciei romane.*

CUVINTE-CHEIE: *magie; gemme; Porolissum; Dacia romană.*

ABSTRACT: *The paper examines the materiality of magic at Porolissum as revealed by the magical gems. An in-depth analysis unfolds some facets of the magical practices performed in this important settlement of Roman Dacia.*

KEYWORDS: *magic; gems; Porolissum; Roman Dacia.*

INTRODUCTION¹

At Porolissum there are three magical gems² revealing the presence of the practice of magic.³ This paper examines all three of them in an attempt to better understand the magical practices revealed by these artifacts. The iconography of the Anguipes scheme exists on two of the gems and that of Harpocrates seated on a lotus flower on the third. Unfortunately, like everywhere else in the province of Dacia, the magical gems from Porolissum do not possess a recorded archaeological context, thus the analysis is limited to several commentaries on the iconography, texts, parallels and data revealed by magical papyri relevant to this study.⁴ Furthermore, there is no information to provide any dating, which forces a large chronological range of the 2nd–3rd centuries CE.

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¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Árpád M. Nagy (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest), György Németh (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest) and Caitlín Barrett (Cornell University, Ithaca) for their valuable remarks on previous versions of the text and bibliographic references. All errors or misjudgements occurring in this paper are, however, my own.

² It is not the main purpose of this paper to analyze the theoretical aspects of the usage of terms such as „magic” or „magical gems”. For a selective bibliography on magical gems and their interpretations published in recent years see: Nagy 2002, p. 153–179; Bohak 2008; Faraone 2011, p. 50–61; Gordon 2011, p. 39–49; Nagy 2011, p. 75–81; Quack 2013, p. 177–199, especially p. 180–181; Nagy 2015, p. 205–240; Sfameni 2015, p. 99–109; Dasen, Nagy, 2018, p. 139–178; Faraone 2018; Vitellozzi 2018, p. 181–253. See Nemeti 2013, p. 143–156 and Németh 2015, 393–400 for recent investigations on „magic” in Roman Dacia.

³ A gem depicting Ceres on the obverse and an ant on the reverse, see Țeposu-Lakó 1973, p. 7, no. 23, pl. II/23 (photo), a *gryllos*, see Țeposu-Marinescu, Lakó 1973, p. 13, no. 63, pl. III/63, pl. IV (photo) and one previously unpublished, depicting a lion trampling a bovine skull which minutely resembles a description from the PGM IV 2125–2139 were left aside as they do not correspond the pattern of the modern definition of „magical gems”.

⁴ Few such gems are accompanied with the pieces of information regarding the precise archaeological contexts in the provinces near-by Dacia like Pannonia Inferior or Moesia Inferior. Such examples are encountered for instance at: Tomis, found in graves (see Nemeti 2013, p. 150, no. 9, fig. 126, photo), representing Chnoubis (dated into the 2nd–3rd c. CE) and p. 155, no. 29, fig. 135 (photo), representing the Polymorphic deity, dated, based on a coin found in the same context issued by Probus in Serdica in 277 CE, at the end of the 3rd c.- early 4th c. CE; Dinogetia in the fortress (Nemeti 2013, p. 153–154, no. 20; Nemeti 2013a, p. 87–94; to my knowledge, this is the only gem depicting the Anguipes having recorded a precise archaeological context in the middle and lower Danubian provinces) or Intercisa found next to an urn in a

THE ANGUIPES

Several attempts have been made to understand the iconography of the Anguipes both by Romanian and other scholars from abroad, and I shall quote some relevant theories. S. Nemeti while analyzing the Anguipes scheme as encountered in the province of Dacia, considered it the result of a „syncretism” in the melting pot of „international magic”, whose name remains unknown.⁵ Á. M. Nagy argues that the image and its components are equal facets of the same Hebrew root – *GBR* – which roughly approximated the name of the Jewish God, without calling his proper and righteous name.⁶ The origin of the image was the result of magicians who wanted to adopt this mysterious deity into the first rows of their Graeco-Roman magical panoplies and introduce it to non-Jewish audiences as a universal „solar divinity”, but still preserving some of his „hidden” Jewish origins in the iconography, partially avoiding also aniconism for a Jewish audience.⁷ However, the theory of a Jewish origin and subsequent interpretation was heavily disputed by G. Bohak, considering it as the fruit of the imaginations of modern scholars.⁸ In any case, the debate on the iconography and its origin remains largely open.

As said, at Porolissum two gems depicting the Anguipes scheme are known. The first one is an oval gem, now lost (fig. 1). K. Torma published in 1863 his first major contribution dealing with the finds from Porolissum.⁹ Among the discoveries the author presents the collection of gems in the custody of count Andrásy László from Gârceiu (Hung. Szilágygörcsön), consisting of 29 pieces out of which 16 were made of carnelian, 2 of jaspis, 1 of heliotrope and 10 of glass or glass paste, all of them discovered at Porolissum.¹⁰ One of the intaglios depicts the Anguipes, standing to the left in a typical iconographic hypostasis, holding a flail in the left hand and shield in his right one.¹¹ L. Țeposu-David considered that the gem was the same as one published coming from Largiana/Românași,¹² but no consistent evidence exist to validate this assertion.

The second example is an oval shaped and flat surfaced heliotrope gem, depicting the cock-headed

grave Gesztelyi 2013, p. 106, no. 26, fig. 5/26 (photo); Szabó 2014, p. 221–237, fig. 1–2 (photos) depicting a *vox magica* and a scarab dated into the 3rd c. CE, and Gesztelyi 2013, p. 107, no. 27, fig. 5/27 (photo), the latter found in a house, engraved with the *ABLANATHANALBA* palindrome, dated into the 2nd c. CE. For a general view of gems found in a precise archaeological context see Barrett, in press.

⁵ Nemeti 2002, p. 105–109; Nemeti 2005, p. 300–306, both with the relevant bibliographic references. A brief summary also in Nemeti 2013, p. 143–156; Nemeti 2013a, p. 87–94 and Gudea 2016, p. 43, no. 2, p. 106, fig. 2.2 (drawing). The bibliography lists also the known depictions of the Anguipes from Dacia and Moesia Inferior. For the gems from Moesia Inferior see also Dimitrova-Milčeva 1980. For gems depicting the Anguipes from Moesia Superior (more precisely Viminacium) see Šeper 1941, p. 12, nos. 8–9, pl. II, fig. 10 and pl. I fig. 8 (photos). For magical gems discovered in Pannonia see Gesztelyi 1998, including the gem depicting the Anguipes from Veszprémvarsány-Lázi (Pannonia Superior) at p. 141, no. 36 (=CIGP³ 53); Gesztelyi 2001, especially p. 50–51, no. 65, p. 79, fig. 65 (photo) for a gem depicting the Anguipes found in the civil town of Brigetio; Dembski 2005, including the four depictions of the Anguipes from Carnuntum at p. 161–162, nos. 1105–1108, pl. 112–113/1105–1108 (photos); for a gem depicting the Anguipes from Siscia see CIGP³ 71. For the gems with unknown provenance from Pannonia see Gesztelyi 2000, 81–82, nos. 254–255 (photos)= CIGP³ 146–147 and 161–162 (photos and drawings). See also for an overview of textual magical texts in Pannonia in Németh 2012, 225–228.

⁶ Nagy 2002a, p. 159–172, with previous bibliographic references especially p. 164–170.

⁷ Nagy 2002a, p. 168, in his own words: „(...) ‘a solar divinity’ reflecting the influence of many traditions”. See also Dasen, Nagy 2018, p. 148–149 for a brief overview. Some scholars argued for a more unlikely Egyptian origin (i.e. Darnell 2004, p. 385–390). For other recent references on the Anguipes see for example: Cosentino 2013, p. 219–228; Nagy 2014, p. 131–155; Zwierlein-Diehl 2016, p. 235–358; Faraone 2018, p. 14, p. 295, n. 67; Nagy in press.

⁸ Bohak 2008, p. 197, note 152.

⁹ Torma 1863, p. 15–20, pl. III/6–8.

¹⁰ Torma 1863, p. 17, no. 9. All of them are nowadays lost.

¹¹ Torma 1863, pl. III/6 (drawing); Gudea 1989, p. 798, IX. G.4/a, 1–19; Nemeti 2002, p. 106, no. 1; Nemeti 2005, p. 378, no. 336; Nemeti 2013, p. 155, no. 27.

¹² Țeposu-David 1959, p. 464–465; Țeposu-David 1960, p. 530–531, no. 49, fig. 2/50 (photo). For the initial publication of the gem depicting the Anguipes from Largiana/Românași see Gostar, David 1956, p. 135–138, fig. 1 (drawing).



Fig. 1. Anguipes depicted on a lost gem discovered at Porolissum (*apud* Torma 1863, pl. III/6).

Anguipes on the obverse and the Greek letters *EΙΣ Α*, written longitudinally, on the reverse (fig. 2).¹³

The gem was first published in 1959¹⁴ and subsequently in the catalogue of the collection of gems housed by the museum in 1973.¹⁵ In 1979, while doing a new inventory of the collection, it was observed that on the reverse one could distinguish an inscription which stretches on the length on the gem; it was read as *EICA*, and subsequently interpreted as *NEICA*.¹⁶ N. Vlassa reinterpreted the inscription on the reverse as: *Εἰς Ἀ(βρασάξ)*.¹⁷ S. Nemeti attempts to offer a new reading as *Εἰς Ζεὺς Ἀσκληπιός* or *Εἰς Ἀσκληπιός*

and relates the *epiklesis* to healing practices.¹⁸ However, further references to the gem preferred a more positivistic approach regarding the interpretation of the text, simply mentioning the letters.¹⁹ In her catalogue comprising of around 2700 gems, S. Michel gives a number of *voces magicae* starting with *EΙΣ*,²⁰ but none of them are directly followed by the name of a deity starting with the letter „Α”. As seen above, one can easily comprehend why there was no point in revealing the name entirely, only partially,²¹ as the revelation of the „true” name was not at all important. On the contrary, it had to maintain the mystery behind the image. In my view the *alpha* has to be seen as the Greek number one, like in the case of the gold amulet discovered in a grave at Halbtun, Burgerland, belonging to a child.²² Thus the interpretation of the text should be: *εἰς α´*, somehow translated in English as „one (god is) one”. Of course, the text does not reveal any link to Judaism or any form of monotheism, but rather emphasized the power and unicity of the mysterious deity revealed by the iconography on the obverse. Thus, it seems that if for the first gem depicting the Anguipes scheme, the image of the deity for the wearer/user was self-speaking, in the second case it had to be emphasized by the *vox magica* on the obverse.



Fig. 2. Anguipes on the reverse; *vox magica* on the reverse (photo: author).

¹³ Dimensions: 1.7x 1.4x 0.4 cm. History and Art County Museum, Zalău, inv. no. CC 264/1958= 2024, formerly in the Wesselényi-Teleki collection; lunar *sigma*. Height of letters = 0.4 cm.

¹⁴ Țeposu-David 1959, p. 463–467, fig. 1 (mirrored drawing).

¹⁵ Țeposu-Marinescu, Lakó 1973, p. 13, no. 64, pl. III/64 (mirrored photo). The correct photo is on the cover of the catalogue.

¹⁶ Lakó-Gudea 1979, p. 449–450, fig. 1 (photo). See also Gudea 2016, p. 43, no. 3, p. 106, fig. 2.2 (drawing).

¹⁷ Vlassa 1980, p. 65–68, pl. IX-X (mirrored photo of the obverse and photo and drawing of the reverse). See also Nemeti 2002, p. 106, no. 5 and Nemeti 2005, p. 378, no. 337, who follows the reading of N. Vlassa: *EΙΣ Α(BRASAE)*.

¹⁸ Nemeti 2005, p. 303; Nemeti 2005a, p. 398, no. 1, taf. VI/Abb.1–2 (illustration made after N. Vlassa).

¹⁹ CIGD 65, text: *EΙΣΑ*; Michel 2004, p. 242, 3.A.1. k), no. 5, text: *EICA(?)*; Nemeti 2013, p. 153, no. 19, text: *EΙΣ Α(...)*. For other, unreliable interpretations and presentations of the gems depicting the Anguipes from Porolissum and the one from Românași see Rusu 1991, p. 93, pl. XII/9 and 12 (drawings).

²⁰ Michel 2004, p. 501. None of the occurrences are related to the Anguipes. Since then, Á. M. Nagy pointed out that since Michel's work was published, just in the next decade, around one thousand more such magical gems were published (Nagy 2015, p. 210).

²¹ See Michel 2004, p. 239–249, for the gems which fit into the same iconographic pattern but are engraved with different *voces magicae*.

²² See Taeuber 2014, p. 231–235, text: *Συμα/ Ἰσραήλ Ἀδω/νὲ Ἐλω/ῆ Ἀδω/ν(ἐ) α´* (a Jewish prayer from Deut. 6,4, transliterated in Greek, the so-called Shema Yisrael). See p. 232–233 for the interpretation of the *alpha*. For an English translation see latest Németh 2012, p. 225–226.

HARPOCRATES

Another lost oval gem discovered at Porolissum is one depicting Harpocrates,²³ coming from the same Andrásy László's collection, which K. Torma found extraordinary and illustrated (fig. 3-left).²⁴ Harpocrates is rendered seated on a lotus flower (missing in Torma's drawings), facing to the right, in what should have been its typical iconographic frame, holding the flail with his right hand at the back and facing his left one to his mouth, somehow resembling the depiction of a gem from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu (see fig. 3-right).²⁵



Fig. 3. Left. Harpocrates standing on a lotus flower (*apud* Torma 1863, pl. III/8). Right. CBd-2361. The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database (2010-), developed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, editor-in-chief: Á. M. Nagy. Retrieved from: classics.mfab.hu/talismans/cbd/2361 on 25-01-2019.

Such depictions of Harpocrates seated on a lotus flower facing to his right are known already from Roman Dacia:²⁶ one made of green jasper,²⁷ one made of green glass²⁸ and finally one made of red carnelian.²⁹

²³ For the pieces of evidence referring to the Isiac cults at Porolissum see Deac 2012, p. 159–174.

²⁴ Torma 1863, p. 17, no. 9, pl. III/8 (drawing); Ackner, Müller 1865, p. 200, no. 941, text, $\lambda\lambda$, maybe transcribed as $A(th) L(eolam) A(donai)$; Gudea 1989, p. 798, IX. G. 4, text: XXX; p. 1175, pl. CCCXI/G4.20 (drawing). The latest author tries to identify the figure as a naked woman standing to the right, holding a scepter in her right hand and a flail in her left one.

²⁵ Inv. no. 84.AN.1.74. See Michel 2004, p. 270, 19.1.d. nos. 1–2 (listed twice); CBd-2361. Unknown place of discovery. For the iconography of Harpocrates on gems see Michel 2004, p. 269–276, 19.1–10.

²⁶ In Pannonia such depictions are known for instance at Mursa (see Selem 1980, 22–23, no. 37) or Carnuntum (Dembski 2005, p. 162, 1108a).

²⁷ Found at Micia (Vețel); housed by the National History Museum of Transylvania, inv. no. 4623; Țeposu-David 1964, p. 257–264, fig. 1/1 (photo); Popa 1979, p. 33–34, no. 46; Michel 2004, p. 269, 19.A.1.a, no. 6; Cristea 2014, p. 120–121, no. 7.

²⁸ Unknown place of discovery; housed by the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy, inv. no. 61/O; Gramatopol 1974, p. 67, no. 371, pl. XVIII, 371a-b (photos); Nemeti 2013, p. 154–155, no. 25, fig. 134, a-b (photos); Cristea 2013, p. 136–137; Cristea 2014, p. 121, no. 10. On the back side there is engraved the name of CABAW.

²⁹ Unknown place of discovery; housed by the Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu, inv. no. 1105; Țeposu-David 1960, p. 528, no. 6,

In the last two decades or so, some attempts were made in identifying magical gems that correspond, both iconographically and textually, to the sources written in PGM,³⁰ continuing the pioneering work of Morton Smith.³¹ I will turn my attention to the case where Harpocrates is mentioned. Á. M. Nagy³² and P. Vitellozzi³³ refer to two different gems depicting Harpocrates sitting on a lotus flower on the obverse and the divine name Abrasax written on the reverse, that correspond to the requirements mentioned at the end of a love charm from PGM LXI. 1–38, translated as follows:

*And whenever you perform this spell, have an iron ring with yourself, // on which has been engraved Harpocrates sitting on a lotus, and his name is Abrasax.*³⁴

It would be highly speculative to advance a certain reading of the three elements based on a drawing (be it letters, Hieroglyphs, *charaktêres* or animals for that matter), but the fact that they were encircled by an *Ouroboros* does stress their magical power.³⁵ In terms of the magic papyrus cited above, one might suggest that different formulas were used in other *praxeis* which circulated in different areas of the Graeco-Roman world, and in some versions *Abrasax* was changed with other elements such as the one depicted on the gem from Porolissum.³⁶

CONCLUSIONS

Corroborating all the data available one is able to draw a series of conclusions. We have to understand these gems at Porolissum (and everywhere else for that matter) as the end pieces in a chain of complex sets of practices broadly defined by modern scholars as „magical” which involved workshops/*officinae*,³⁷ agents diffusing „magic knowledge” (practitioners/magicians?), and finally, „consumers” of

fig. 1/13 (photo), where the author initially identifies the deity as Isis; Tēposu-David 1965, 97, no. 29, Pl. IV, fig. 3 (impression), where the same author reveals the correct iconography, that of Harpocrates; Popa 1979, 34, no. 47a; Cristea 2014, p. 121, no. 12.

³⁰ Nagy 2002, p. 153–179; Sfameni Gasparro 2003, p. 13–47; Sfameni 2010, p. 435–473; Sfameni 2015, p. 100–101; Vitellozzi 2018, p. 181–253.

³¹ Smith 1979, p. 129–136.

³² Nagy 2002, p. 179, B.13, giving as example a corresponding gem published in Philipp 1986, p. 75, no. 96.

³³ Vitellozzi 2018, p. 203, 1.14, fig 14 (photo), giving an example Henig 1994, p. 223–224, no. 495=Michel 2004, p. 269, no. 19.1. a) no. 9 and SGG II, 105, no. Pe 5, pl. 30, fig. 14= Vitellozzi 2010, p. 413, no. 512.

³⁴ The last part in column 2, line 32: καὶ ὄνομά ἐστιν αὐτῷ Ἀβρασάξ. Translated by E. N. O’Neil in Betz 1992, p. 290–291. The same translation can be found also in Vitellozzi 2018, p. 203. So-called „magic” rings were found in near-by provinces for example in Pannonia: Szabó 2015, p. 189–194.

³⁵ For a detailed list of bibliographic references on the *Ouroboros* as a „common enclosing device used on magical gems” see latest Deac, Petcu 2017, p. 13, n. 36. It has to be added that the *Ouroboros* depicted beneath a deity on gems is encountered mainly in the case of the Polymorphic deity (see Michel 2002, p. 1–40, abb. 1–23).

³⁶ Another example is the one cited at note 28. See Nagy 2002, p. 157–164, who stresses upon the variety, flexibility, adjustment and constant modifications of the *praxeis* by the magicians, and thus the relative small series of same gems; the author also considers that most probably a large part of the PGM’s originated from the same library (p. 157 with previous bibliographic remarks). K. Dosoo argues that, based on paleography and history of acquirement, only a part of them belonged, in reality, certainly to the „Theban Magical Library” (Dosoo 2016, p. 251–274). In regard of PDM/PGM LXI, K. Dosoo concludes in his own words: „[...] there is no positive information linking this papyrus to the Theban Library, [...] it seems most reasonable to consider it as a unique text” (Dosoo 2016, p. 268). See also on the topic the very pertinent enquiry made by Richard Gordon on the PGM’s and PGM Suppl. (Gordon 2012, p. 145–180). Thus, although the scientific community largely believed there was one magic library, it turns out to be more than one, which already highlights the variety of the magical practices/instructions revealed by the different magical papyri, either from the „Theban Library” or others. On the topic of the diffusion of the Graeco-Egyptian magical tradition outside Egypt see Bohak 2016, p. 357–381.

³⁷ For the discussion on the existence of a workshop/*officinae* manufacturing gems at Porolissum see: Tēposu-Marinescu, Lakó 1973, p. 17–18; Gudea 1989, p. 202, p. 439, fig. 94; Hamat 2018, p. 715, n. 64. See also Tassinari 2008, p. 251–317 for a discussion on the glyptic workshops/*officinae* in the Roman Imperial period all around the Roman Empire.

magic (ordinary individuals). The magic gems analyzed in this paper were produced in local workshops/*officinae*³⁸ and were engraved according to instructions made by specialized practitioners, whom, in turn, relied on their libraries.³⁹ Eventually, the gems ended up in the hands of „consumers” of magic, as said earlier, ordinary people, who may or may not have perceived or used the magical gems as they were instructed by the practitioners/magicians.⁴⁰ In any case, in terms of the „magical functionality”, the easiest, but rather insufficient answer, is that the gems depicting the Anguipes scheme had some sort of an apotropaic role, while the one depicting Harpocrates is related to love spells.

ONLINE DATABASES

CBd The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database <http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/>

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³⁸ 708 gems depicting the Anguipes scheme are known so far and based on typological reasons and the ones from Porolissum fit in the simplest scheme (observation provided by Á. Nagy based on one of his forthcoming paper). This is the reason why I consider that the gems were produced locally and subsequently were introduced into the process of transforming them into a *telesma* as described above.

³⁹ For different hypotheses regarding the relationship between magical objects and papyri see the bibliographic references at note 2. For instance, the example highlighted by the gem housed by the Museum of Fine Arts (inv. no. 53.169) at Budapest, depicting the Anguipes, engraved with the text *WC ΠΠΟΚΕΙΤΑ[Ι]*, namely *ὡς πρόκειται[ι]*, translated as „as in the model” or „as it is prescribed in the model”, envisages once more the presence of models of magical libraries (Nagy 2002, p. 161–162, fig. 8; Michel 2004, p. 247, 3.A.3 h) no. 12; Vittellozzi 2018, p. 183–184). See also Wendt 2016, 114–145 and Faraone 2018, p. 255–257.

⁴⁰ For the use of amulets, a term that broadly encompasses magical gems see latest Bohak 2015, p. 83–95. The author argues also that these amulets could have been produced also by common individuals for self-usage (p. 93).

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