

A RECONSIDERATION OF THE SO-CALLED ISIS STATUETTE FROM *POROLISSUM*

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Cuvinte cheie: *Porolissum*, *Isis*, *statuetă de bronz*, *preot egiptean Sem*.

Abstract

This study tries to prove the fact that the representation of a so-called Isis bronze statuette published by Al. Matei and found during the archaeological excavations in the Roman settlement of Porolissum is in fact a fragment of a statuary assembly representing a sexual act between an Egyptian Sem priest (this part is missing from the ancient times) and a woman (the artifact in discussion). This kind of depictions is very rare, including Egypt itself and unique in the Danube area of the Roman Empire.

In 1982 the regretted researcher Al. V. Matei from the History and Art County Museum of Zalău (Sălaj county)¹, published some newly discovered artifacts from the sanctuaries terrace of *Porolissum* consisting of: a cameo with the depiction of Pallas Athena found in the north-western corner of the building of the Palmyrean God called *Bel*, a bronze statuette of *Harpocrates* found between the inner and the external wall of the temple on the eastern side, a bronze statuette of Mars found in a pit named conventionally G.1 (fig. 1.)² and most importantly the bronze statuette which the author considered to be a representation of Isis (plate 1 fig. 1–3), found right next to the statuette of Mars at a depth of approximately 82 cm³. It is worth mentioning that all of the artifacts were found in a secondary position especially those

found on the temple's precinct at depths between 20 and 30 cm⁴.

Of all these artifacts mentioned before one of them raised some questions regarding its interpretation, namely the bronze statuette which Al. Matei considers to be a representation of Isis in one of the hypostasis of the myth of Isis and Osiris which illustrates the episode where the goddess mourns her husband Osiris and afterwards tries alongside her sister to find his body⁵. More than that Al. Matei gives an analogy of this iconography, a statue from Louvre in the hypostasis of Isis *lactans* which is my opinion inconclusive⁶. The iconography of the goddess Isis has never before known this kind of a depiction in any part of the Roman Empire throughout the centuries of its domination of the Mediterranean World thus this statuette must be ruled out of the repertoire of Isis' iconography⁷. It is also hard to believe the fact that this representation could be a unique iconographic depiction of Isis as suggested by Al. Matei. But if

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² M.I.A.Z. inv. no. C. C. 751/1980.

³ Țeposu–Marinescu Pop 2000, 27–28, no. 7 dates the Mars statuette in the second part of the 2nd c. A. D. without having an argument for this dating and mentions analogies in Gaul. We cannot accept this dating for sure without a proper argument from the authors mentioned above and I propose to date it for the moment in the extend 2nd–3rd c. A. D. period of time. Another example of a bronze statuette of Mars was found more recently at *Porolissum*, see Mina et alii 2004, 606–616, pl. I–VII.

⁴ Matei 1982, 75–80, pl. I–IX.

⁴ The archaeological situation suggests that in the 2nd c. A. D. there seems to have functioned a temple of *Liber Pater* (Gudea 2003, 217) but then somewhere at the beginning of the 3rd c. A. D. after a massive fire another building was built on top of it and further more extended, becoming according to authors the temple for *Bel* (Gudea 2003, 217–225, fig. 5). See also plate 3.

⁵ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*. Also Matei 1982, p. 77–78, nr. 3, pl. IV–VIII. The iconography of this statuette is also accepted by Popescu, 2004, p. 155.

⁶ Lafaye s. v. *Isis* in *DA* III/1, 577–586 with special regard to page 580, fig. 4098.

⁷ For the iconography of the goddess Isis see: Tran Tam Tinh, s.v. *Isis* in *LIMC* V1/1980, 761–796 pl. II. 3–358.

it is not Isis, one question remains: what does it represent?

The place of discovery of this very one bronze statuette was next to a statuette of Mars in a pit that had been used for gathering waste disposals after sacrifices were made on the altar existing nearby (the pit having 10 m in diameter) which was dug to the south of the altar from which only the foundation was preserved (2×2.5 m). Both of them were linked with the *aedes* by an alley 0.8 m. wide. Al. Matei specifies the fact that this pit had some coins, burned material from the sacrifices, burned bones and ritual depositary of bowls made out of ceramics and a Celtic bronze axe on the bottom of the pit at the depth of 3.75 m. (while the two statuettes were found at a depth of 0.81 and 0.82 m). The pit was leveled later on and a wall of the second phase of the building named conventionally N 4 crossed over the edge of the pit. The new phase was dated in the middle of the 3rd c. A. D.⁸ thusly we argue the fact that the statuette was thrown in the pit in the segment of time between the 2nd c. A. D. and the first half of the 3rd c. A.D.⁹.

The bronze statuette depicts a female adopting a dwarfish position on a small mound and surrounded by reptiles in what want to be an environment similar to the one of the banks of the river Nile (the entire pedestal has 6.7 cm in diameter). It is portrayed with a draped cloth, tightened with a belt (*cingulum*) and covering only the inferior part of the body with the exception of the feet. The head is supported by the knees while being slightly turned aside and covered with some sort of a wig. The face is remarkably portrayed with the eyes, nose and mouth perfectly distinguishable. The left arm is not depicted while the right one is with the palm of the hand turned inwards touching the knee and the chin supporting itself on the exterior part of the palm. A peculiar aspect that should be mentioned is the orifice between the legs in the genital area (0.6×0.4 cm) which A. Matei considers to be an exaggerated representation of

the female sex, an aspect which is well remarked by the author.

Returning to the original question of what does this statuette represent only one answer can be given namely that it depicts one part of a statuary assembly of a erotic scene between a woman (which in this case is represented by our female statuette) and an Egyptian Sem priest while having intercourse and joyfully playing a tambourine (the Sem priest is usually depicted with a macrophallus and a distinctive “sidelock”)¹⁰. The Sem priest¹¹ had an important role in the ritual for the ceremonies at funerals in ancient Egypt where he would perform the most important rituals outside the tombs before burial¹². These kinds of depictions were used and found without exception in Egypt which concludes the fact that this artifact must clearly have been an import brought from the Nile area. Unfortunately due to the fragmental preservation of this statuary assembly we are not able to precisely date the period in which it was constructed. Secondly we consider the fact that this artifact had nothing particular to do with the cultic ceremonies of the Palmyrean god named *Bel*. As the wide variety of artifacts found in the pit G.1 show, this particular artifact was nothing less than another bronze piece devoted to the god and then thrown away in a disposal pit¹³.

We now can finally put an end to the uncertainty and pure speculation that surrounded the answer to what does this bronze statuette represent from the iconographical point of view. Before this study it was considered to be an iconographical depiction of Isis in a hypostasis in which the goddess is mourning her husband Osiris after he was killed by his brother Seth. More than that, in the moment of the publishing by Al. Matei of the

⁸ See for more details Matei 1982, 78. Also for the excavations in the area see: Matei – Gudea 1998, 75–88; Gudea 1989, 144–147; Gudea 1986, 98–100; Chirilă *et alii* 1980, 81–101, fig. 1–6, especially 93–94. For the monography of the *vicus militaris* of the fort placed on the Pomăt hill see Tamba 2008, and for the area of the pit Tamba 2008, 345.

⁹ In the pit were found also three Roman coins: two unrecognizable *dupondius* coins at depths of 1.40 and 1.95 m. (see Găzdac *et alii* 2006, 79, no. 86 and 87) and another *dupondius* of Septimius Severus at the depth of 0.5 m (Găzdac *et alii* 2006, 77, no. 40).

¹⁰ This hypostasis is called *symplegma* (gr. trans. “intertwined”) and this scene can be observed in the largest *symplegma* figurines collection from the Brooklyn Museum (s.v. *symplegma* in Pazzini *et al.* 1989). Also a stone figurine (13.3 cm in height) depicting the *symplegma* scene was in the private collection of the French Egyptologist Gustave Jéquier (1868–1946). It dates from the 2nd–3rd c. A.D. and is the best analogy for our statuette from the iconographical point of view. Also for the banquets and *symplegmas* in Nilotic scenes see: Meyboom – Versluys 2007, 182–202, fig. 2–3, 12–15.

¹¹ For the Sem priest in Ancient Egypt see: B. Schmitz s.v. *Sem (priester)* in *LÄV* (1984), 833–836.

¹² We do not see necessary to detail its role in the religious beliefs of the Egyptians in this paper, for more details you could consult Erman 1907, 133–136 (for the Sem priests and their role in the religious ceremonies) and Jéquier 1922, 176.

¹³ Unfortunately we cannot find out for the moment if this statuary assembly was brought to Porolissum intact and in a good state of preservation or if it was broken already before it reached this settlement.

statuette in 1982, the *corpus* that was needed to be consulted regarding the iconography of Isis in the Roman world had not yet been published itself (*Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, the volume in which Isis can be found appeared only in 1990). The result was a total misinterpretation and speculation regarding the iconographical depiction of this statuette. After ruling out this hypothesis we now can firmly confirm that the statuette represents a fragment of a statuary assembly in which an Egyptian Sem priest is having intercourse with a woman while joyfully playing a tambourine (the woman being represented by this statuette while the Sem priest with his macro-phallic depiction has long been lost). In what concerns the dating it is clear that this is an import in the province of Dacia coming from Egypt and manufactured in the Greco-Roman age. Unfortunately the archaeological context does not help us assert when precisely during the Roman era had this statuette been thrown in the disposal pit of the temple of *Bel* from *Porolissum* but it can be stated that this particular statuette served as some sort of an offering.

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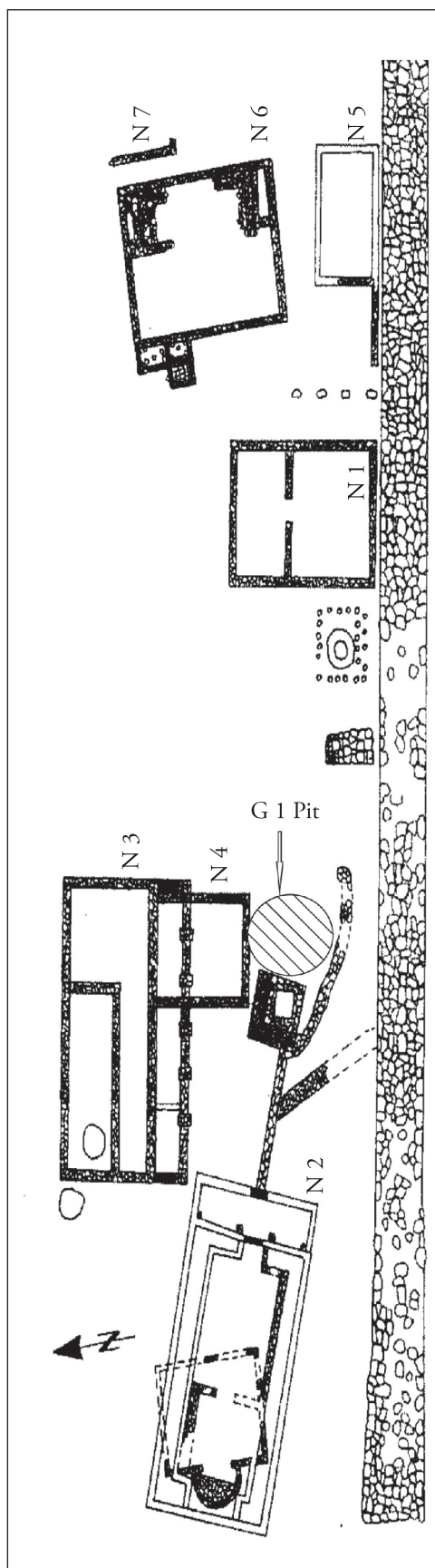


Pl. 1. The bronze statuette from *Porolissum* representing a woman adopting a dwarfish position: a) front view, b) view from behind and c) detail. Photo by the author.

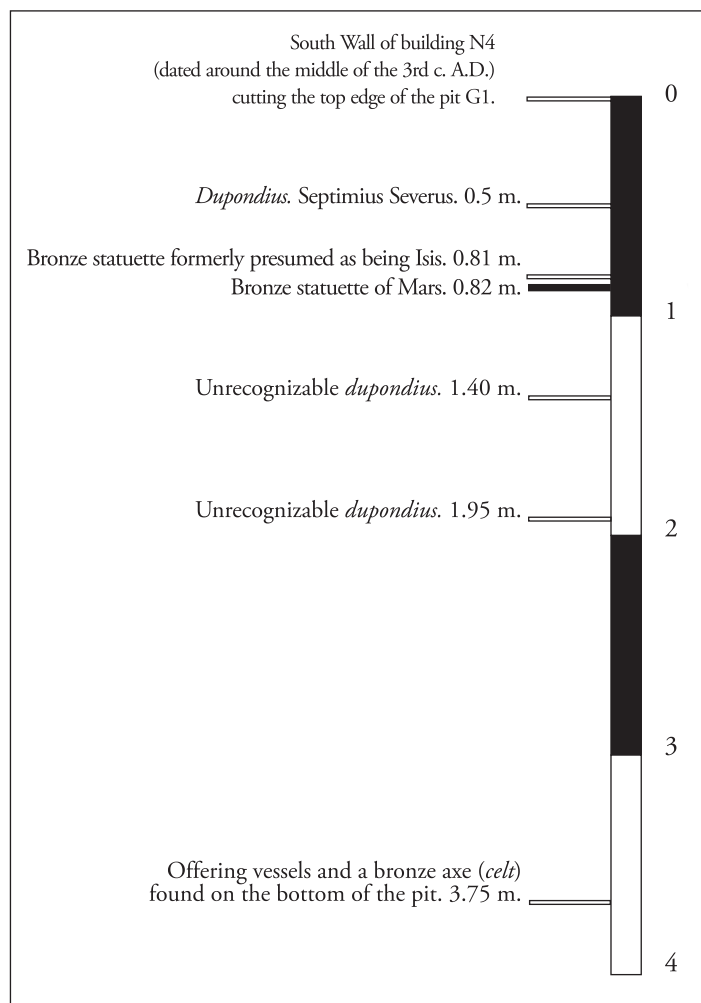


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Pl. 2. Hypothetical reconstruction of a fragmentary statuette assembly of an Egyptian Sem priest, while having intercourse with a mistress (upper register). Image depicting a macro-phallic figure, perhaps a *Sem*-priest, identifiable by his side lock, and his lover, the male kneeling, his head turned to his right, holding a tambourine above his phallus, the female seated with her head turned to her left and resting on his phallus, a small cup in her left hand, on an integral plinth (http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5078768, accessed on 25. 04. 2012).



Pl. 3. Plan of the buildings found on the terrace and the place of the pit G. 1 (redrawn after Al. Matei).



Pl. 4. Hypothetical reconstruction of the pit named G. 1. in which the artifact was found alongside other artifacts.