

A ROMAN CAMEO WITH THE REPRESENTATION OF GORGO MEDUSA FROM THE COLLECTION OF BOTOȘANI COUNTY MUSEUM

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Cuvinte cheie: Imperiul Roman, camee, Medusa, sec. III AD

Introduction

The current article brings back into discussion a special artifact discovered over 25 years ago and currently located in the deposits of the Botoșani County Museum. It is a cameo with the representation of Gorgo Medusa, which so far has not benefited from an adequate presentation, being brought to the attention of the general public through a short note in a local publication, edited by the Botoșani Directorate for Culture¹.

The depiction of Gorgo Medusa on cameos is one of the most popular subjects for such artifacts and therefore it became the pretext for one of the most famous glyphic series, with a popularity that predates the Empire era and lasts until late Antiquity, being also, one of the favorite symbols in the art of the Middle Ages² and even in the modern times³.

Context of discovery

The cameo was discovered in 1994 (Pl. II, fig. 1, 2), with the occasion of archaeological research carried out in the village of Coțușca (Botoșani County). It appeared in a survey conducted 1 km away from the necropolis of the 4th–5th centuries from Nichiteni⁴ and is currently in the deposits of the Botoșani County Museum, with inventory number 14755-Archeology collection.

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¹ Șovan 2001, 7–8.

² See for example the famous painting created between 1617–1618 by Rubens, *The Head of Medusa*, currently located at Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

³ Timofan 2018, 59–66.

⁴ Șovan 2001, 7.

The necropolis from Nichiteni, Coțușca commune (Pl. I, fig. 1, 2), was discovered in 1961, on the occasion of extensive embankment works on the course of the Volovăț brook to achieve a water accumulation in the place called Mârzâc. The necropolis is located about 800 m north of Nichiteni village and about 1 km south-southeast of Coțușca village, on the left side of Volovăț brook. Artifacts have been discovered in the area that can be classified into: Paleolithic, Cucuteni culture-phase B, Noua culture with Costișa elements, late Hallstatt, Sântana de Mureș-Chernjachov culture and early medieval period (Costișa-Botoșana and Suceava-Șipot-Botoșana cultures)⁵. In 1962, 1964 and 1966, Emilia Zaharia and Nicolae Zaharia carried out preventive excavations in the area of the necropolis from the 4th–5th c. AD., recovering part of the inventory of the graves destroyed during the construction of the dam on the Volovăț brook. In the necropolis, a total of 25 tombs were discovered and researched, of which remarkable is tomb 18, which benefited from a separate publication⁶.

Description. Analogies

The item is a cameo made of onyx in two layers, on its back being visible the second layer, dark blue colored. With small dimensions (length: 12 mm; width: 10 mm; thickness: 6 mm) the artifact can be included in the classic group of cameo with Gorgo Medusa representations. The character's head is rendered by precise and simple cuts. The face is round, the cheeks are full, and the facial features are barely sketched. The mouth is slightly opened, and the bulging eyes were rendered by two angled cuts. The nose is straight, arched starting from the forehead and not respecting the anatomy, the upper part being cut at a right angle without being rounded by sanding.

The hair surrounds the face like a halo and is rendered by small marginal notches in the mass of the white layer, delimiting the head, as well as a network of engraved incisions that suggest the richness of the hair. On the top of the head is rendered schematically, by two grooves that delimit it, the knot formed by the hair, present in other representations too, and in relation to the venomous snakes that form the hair. The fins were cut in the white layer, on either side of the median knot, folded on the head, the plumage being suggested by notches in the rhombic network. The general cut of the cameo gives the representation a pseudo-volume, which is necessary to soften the schematic appearance of the representation (Pl. III).

The use of this motif in art is based on several well-known legends. In Greek

⁵ Zaharia 1961, 23; Zaharia *et alii* 1970, 254; Zaharia, Zaharia 1974, 137; Teodor 1974, 102–103; Teodor 1997, 122; Popescu 1964, 599; Păunescu *et alii* 1976, 92.

⁶ Șovan 2011, 61–66.

mythology, Medusa, also called Gorgo, is one of the three Gorgons, described as monstrous supernatural beings with hair made of venomous snakes and whose gaze could turn any living thing, or according to some legends only men who looked at them, into stone⁷. According to another legend, known to us thanks to Ovid, Medusa was a beautiful girl possessed by Poseidon at the altar of Athena, which attracted the wrath of the goddess, who then turned her into a monstrous deity⁸. After Perseus managed to decapitate her, her head retained its magic and was therefore was given to Athena, to decorate her shield.

Its image in art has undergone various transformations over time, due to the development and transposition of some variants of the myth. In a first phase, the image of the head of Medusa was integrated in the art through the representation called *Gorgoneion*. Thus, between the 8th–4th c. BC, a semi-human deity appears in the foreground with a monstrous figure, bulging eyes and a grinning mouth, with its tongue sticking out⁹.

Hellenistic art, and then Roman art, transformed the Greek *Gorgoneion* and adapted it to the needs of society, imposing the type of Medusa with a human face. She now appears more humanized, with a rounded face, we could say – the face of a beautiful woman with rich hair, doubled by snakes and fins, and was named by specialists Medusa Rondanini¹⁰. The transformation begins in the Hellenistic era and is finally imposed during the time of Augustus¹¹, gradually spreading throughout the Empire. Under the effect of these transformations, Medusa becomes a tragic, almost human character¹², whose main advocate is none other than Ovid¹³.

In a recent paper on the use of this motif in Roman art in the Balkans, B. Milovanović and J. Anđelković Grasar demonstrated that it was used mainly but not entirely, for the protection of women¹⁴, which would explain the presence of cameos with this motif, fitted in various women's jewelry¹⁵. Such cameos were used to decorate rings, medallions, chains and necklaces, as well as earrings¹⁶.

Used mainly for its apotropaic function, the image of the Medusa became one of the favorite series in Roman glyptics, especially on cameos¹⁷ and less

⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* 270–288, and Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliothēke*, 1.10 and 2.4.

⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4, 753–803.

⁹ Milovanović, Anđelković Grasar 2017, 168.

¹⁰ Henig 1974, 20; Timofan 2018, 65.

¹¹ Milovanović, Anđelković Grasar 2017, 168; Henig 1974, 20.

¹² Karagloulou 2018, 9–10.

¹³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4, 753–803.

¹⁴ Milovanović, Anđelković Grasar 2017, 168.

¹⁵ See the gold earrings with cameos from Drobeta or Tomis.

¹⁶ Popović 1989, 54.

¹⁷ Marshman 2015, 25; Aparaschivei 2018, 95.

on intaglios. It almost always appears in the form of a head without a body, on its own or as a component part of the mythological scene of her killing by Perseus. Studying the cameos discovered in Upper Moesia, I. Popović came to the conclusion that such jewelry was worn both for apotropaic reasons and also as prestigious ornaments¹⁸.

Due to its versatility, the motif was used to decorate military equipment, jewelry, architecture, art (frescoes, mosaics, sculpture), or even to decorate funerary architecture (sarcophagi, funerary steles, altars), the representation thus gaining psychopomp valences and being considered from this point of view a protector of the soul or of his resting place, representative for the afterlife and for the victory over death¹⁹, or even associated with luck as a bringer of good luck for the living²⁰.

With such an ancient origin, it is not surprising to see the extensive patronage and involvement of this type of representation in many areas, from the immediate protection of the owner, to the protection of the house, travels, and even attributing reproductive values specific to the fertility cult²¹.

We find analogies for our artifact in many of the provinces of the Roman Empire. Among these, we note various locations in Britannia²², at Augst²³ in Germania Superior and Cologne in Germania Inferior²⁴, in Gallia at Alesia, Metz, Beaurains, Boitray²⁵, in Gallia Belgica at Augusta Treverorum²⁶, at Viminacium, Margum, Aquae, Osijek, Kavadar and with unknown place of discovery in Moesia Superior²⁷, also in Ratiaria and Novae from Moesia Inferior, discoveries dating in most cases to the 3rd c. AD²⁸. On the Romanian territory, cameos with the effigy of Medusa were discovered at Ibida²⁹, Apulum³⁰, possibly at Micia³¹, and at Drobeta such cameos were embedded in two earrings³², while at Tomis they decorate a pair of ear-

¹⁸ Popović 2010, 60; Marshman 2015, 25.

¹⁹ Milovanović, Andelković Grasar 2017, 168; Karaglou 2018, 8; Timofan 2018, 65.

²⁰ Henig 1974, 20.

²¹ Milovanović, Andelković Grasar 2017, 168.

²² Henig 1974, 20; Marshman 2015, 25.

²³ Riha 1990, 128, Taf. 5/64.

²⁴ Krug 1981, 184, 239.

²⁵ Guiraud 1988, 201.

²⁶ Krug 1995, Taf. 52.

²⁷ Popović 1989, 65–68; Milovanović, Andelković Grasar 2017, 174–175.

²⁸ Dimitrova-Milčeva 1980, 108–109, no. 311, 313, 317; Guiraud 1988, 201.

²⁹ Aparaschivei 2018, 96–97.

³⁰ Ota 2020.

³¹ Țeposu-David 1960, Fig. 1/26. Unfortunately, the image is not very clear.

³² Bălăceanu 2006, 164.

rings and a ring³³. Along with these, we must mention the gems and cameos from the collection of the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy, published by M. Gramatopol³⁴. In roman art from Dacia, Medusa is a very powerful motif³⁵.

Discussions on the dating

The subject of the representation of Medusa is a very popular one both during Greco-Roman antiquity and after the spread of Christianity³⁶, being used in various representations, including in the modern period.

The fact that this subject is so popular on representations, especially related with women's jewelry, is also due to the fact that the look of Medusa, according to some parts of the legend, turned to stone only male subjects and therefore wearing such jewelry was primarily about protecting women against destructive male force³⁷. Another reason for using such cameos is the symbolism associated with the cult of fertility and, why not, even the main function of jewelry as prestigious objects³⁸.

From the point of view of typology, the head of Medusa can be represented in several variants.

Type I

Represented sideways, the type being illustrated by a series of cameos, mostly made of glass and dated from the late Hellenistic period to the early period of the Empire³⁹. This typology also includes the Medusa from Ibida, as well as a cameo from the Hermitage Museum collection, along with other artifacts discovered in Asia Minor⁴⁰, as well as the Strozzi Medusa from the British Museum collection⁴¹, the Apolophanes' Medusa⁴², or the Medusa from the Farnese collection⁴³.

³³ Lungu *et alii* 2012, 40, no. cat. 35, Pl. XIV/35 and 97, cat. 8, Pl. XLV/8.

³⁴ Gramatopol 2011, 141, no. 356–359; 687–700, Pl. XVII and XXV–XXVI.

³⁵ Alicu, Rusu 1974; Ota 2009, 459–461; Timofan 2018.

³⁶ Milovanović, Andelković Grasar 2017, 167.

³⁷ Milovanović, Andelković Grasar 2017, 173.

³⁸ Hamat, Dinulescu 2014, 96.

³⁹ Aparaschivei 2018, 96–97.

⁴⁰ Aparaschivei 2018, 96–97; Plantzos 1999, no. 468; Spier 1992, no. 232; See also Walters 1926, nos 1830, 1832; Richter 1971, nos 241, 242, 243, 687; Vollenweider 1966, Pl. 17.7.

⁴¹ BM no. 1867, 0507.389 (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1867-0507-389).

⁴² Spier 1991, 93.

⁴³ Sena Chiesa 2009, 94.

Type II

Frontal representation, typical for cameos from the second half of the 2nd c. until the beginning of the 4th c. AD⁴⁴, originating in the beautiful cameos of the first century, associated mainly with the Iulio-Claudian dynasty⁴⁵. This type was divided by I. Popović into four variants, depending on certain stylistic features⁴⁶.

Type III

The representation of Perseus as the victor, with the head of Medusa in his hand. This type is predominantly represented on intaglios and less on cameos.

As in Greek art, the apotropaic function associated mainly with the image of Medusa led to the prevalence of type II, to the detriment of other types of representations⁴⁷.

From a stylistic point of view, our variant belongs to type II and to I. Popović variant 3⁴⁸. The closest analogy for the Coțușca-Nichiteni cameo is an opal cameo, discovered at Viminacium and dated to the 3rd century⁴⁹. Therefore, we propose as a restricted dating of this artifact, the period of the 3rd century.

As for the origin of the artifact, it was certainly made in one of the workshops that operated in the Empire during the 2nd–3rd centuries, certainly nearby. Therefore, we could propose, based on stylistic similarities, as a place of origin the workshop from Viminacium⁵⁰.

How this cameo ended up beyond the borders of the Empire is one of the questions we don't have and will probably never have an answer to. Trade, spoils of war, or dowry, all these situations are plausible given that it is a precious, prestigious object. It should also be noted that, being considered an important object, the sex of the owner is not predestined, the cameo could have been owned equally by women or men.

Conclusions

The onyx cameo with the image of Medusa, discovered at Coțușca, is part

⁴⁴ Popović 1989, 55; Milovanović, Anđelković Grasar 2017, 173.

⁴⁵ Karaglou 2018, 22.

⁴⁶ Popović 1989, 55.

⁴⁷ Nr. 87.AN.24 Getty Museum (<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/12867/unknown-maker-cameo-gem-with-perseus-holding-the-head-of-medusa-set-into-a-ring-roman-25-bc-ad-25/>) or 1867,0507.383 British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1867-0507-383).

⁴⁸ Popović 1989, 12.

⁴⁹ Popović 1989, 65.

⁵⁰ Popović 1989, 54.

of the glyptic series of cameos with the image of the Gorgo Medusa, very widespread during the 2nd–4th centuries. Based on stylistic details and analogies, it can be framed chronologically in the period of the 3rd century AD, being certainly a product of the workshops from the Roman Empire, which operated during this period. Most probably, the place of birth for our artifacts is the workshop from Viminacium. The functionality of this particular object remain still unknown, as well as its owner, but we can presume that it was used as a prestigious object from someone related with the habitation in the area Cotușca-Nichiteni, from the 3rd–5th c. AD.

The qualities of diverting the effect produced by the *evil eye* on the wearer seem to survive in human consciousness until the Byzantine period⁵¹ and therefore the loss of meaning of the motif occurs much later, but not completely, as evidenced by the use of such cameos to decorate relics or even royal crowns in the medieval period⁵².

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⁵¹ Henig 1974, 20.

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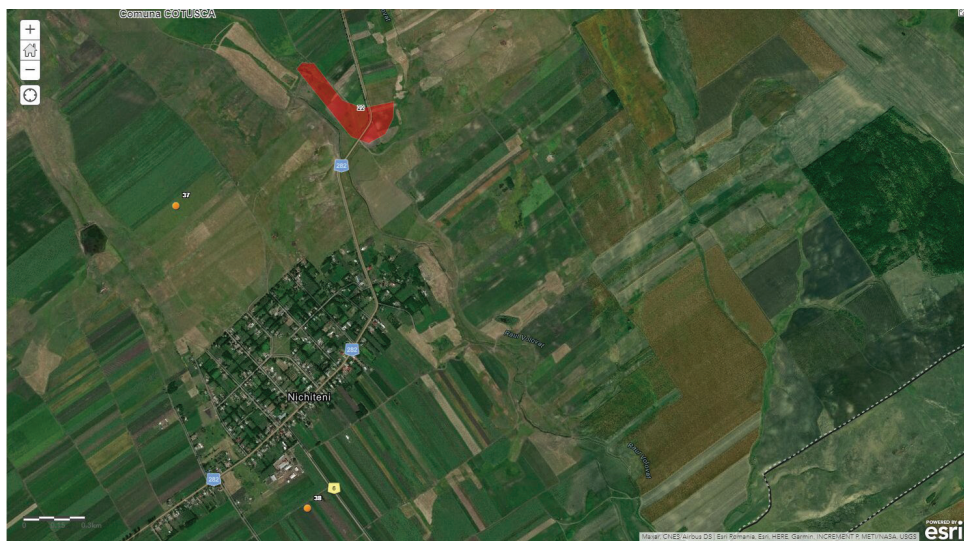
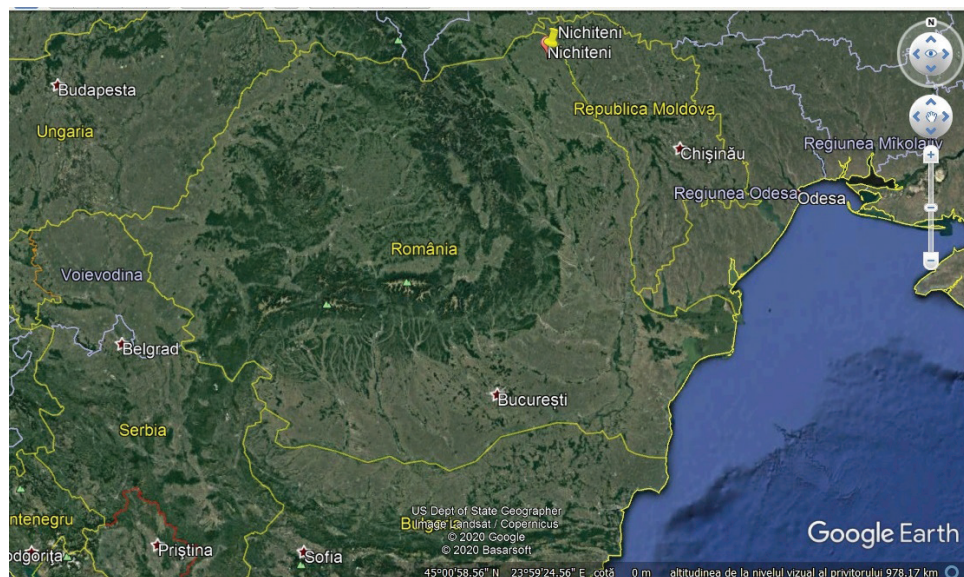
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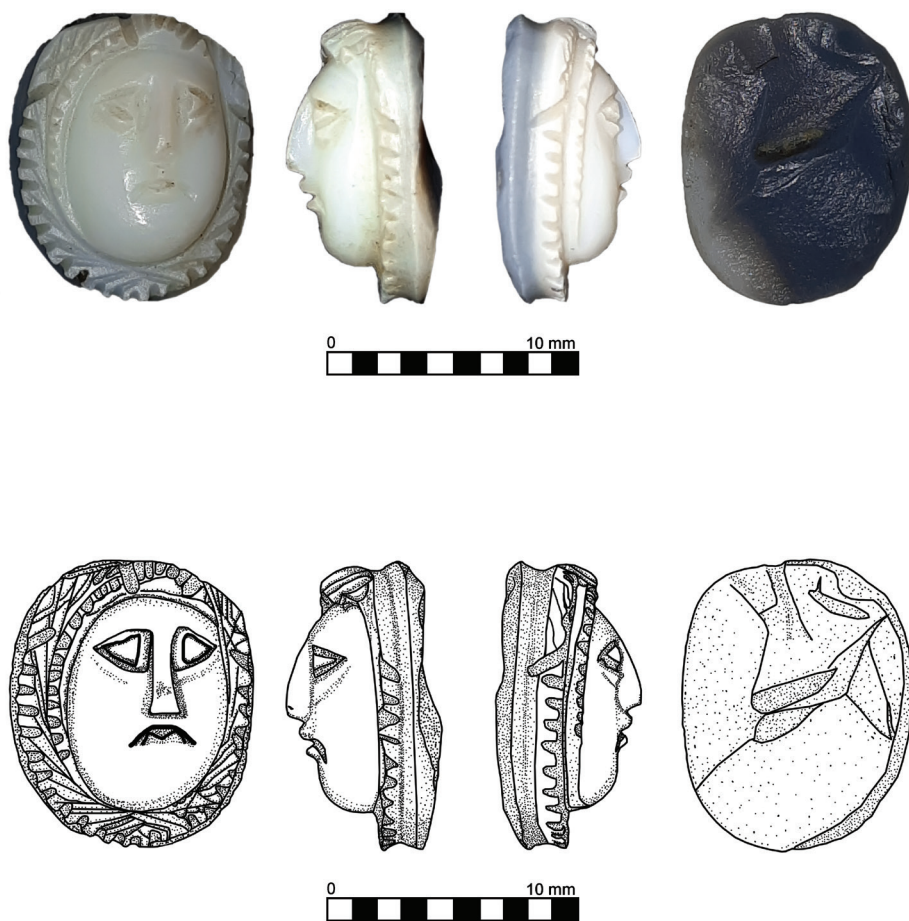
O CAMEE DE EPOCĂ ROMANĂ CU REPREZENTAREA GORGONEI MEDUSA, AFLATĂ ÎN COLECȚIA MUZEULUI JUDEȚEAN BOTOȘANI

Rezumat

Prezentul articol readuce în discuție un artefact special, descoperit în urmă cu peste 25 de ani și aflat în prezent în depozitele Muzeului Județean Botoșani. Este vorba despre o camee cu reprezentarea Gorgonei Medusa, care până acum nu a beneficiat de o prezentare adecvată, fiind adusă în atenția publicului larg printr-o scurtă notă într-o publicație locală. Cameea a fost descoperită în 1994, cu ocazia cercetărilor arheologice efectuate în satul Coțușca (județul Botoșani). Piesa a apărut într-un sondaj efectuat la 1 km distanță de necropola din secolele IV-V, de la Nichiteni. Este vorba despre o camee realizată din onix în două straturi, fiind datată în secolele II-III d.Hr. Reprezentarea Gorgonei Medusa pe camee este unul dintre cele mai populare subiecte pentru astfel de artefacte și, prin urmare, a devenit pretextul pentru una dintre cele mai celebre serii glifice, cu o popularitate care precedă epoca Imperiului și durează până în Antichitatea târzie fiind, de asemenea, unul dintre simbolurile preferate în arta Evului Mediu și chiar în epoca modernă.



Pl. I. Fig. 1. The map of Romania with Cotușca-Nichiteni village location detail. / Harta României cu localizarea satului Cotușca- Nichiteni. Fig. 2. The map with the village and the necropolis from Cotușca-Nichiteni. / Hartă cu satul și necropola de la Cotușca-Nichiteni.



Pl. II. Fig. 1. The roman cameo from Cotușca Nichiteni, photography by Adela Kovacs. / Cameea romană descoperită la Cotușca-Nichiteni, fotografie Adela Kovacs. Fig. 2. The roman cameo from Cotușca Nichiteni, drawing by Adela Kovacs. / Cameea romană de la Cotușca-Nichiteni, desen de Adela Kovacs.



Pl. III. The roman cameo from Cotușca Nichiteni. Details, photography by Adela Kovacs. / Cameea romană de la Cotușca-Nichiteni. Detalii, fotografie de Adela Kovacs.