

TWO GNOSTIC PIECES FROM DUROSTORUM**

Abstract: Obiectul acestei scurte comunicări îl constituie două mici piese gnostice, descoperite fortuit, pe plaja Dunării în zona aşezării romane de Ostrov-Ferma 4. Aşezarea (cod sit 62547.01), se află pe teritoriul societăţii Ostrovit S.A., în dreptul Km 132, D.N. 3A (Constanţa-Bucureşti), la aproximativ 3,5 Km de anticul Durostorum. Printre miile de artefacte ce dovedesc o intensă activitate meşteşugărească se află şi două mici piese din plumb, un inel cu inscripţia IAW şi un mic medalion având pe avers, încadrată de un chenar circular ce se deschide în dreptul torţii, inscripţia IAW/ ° /TPC (P-ul invers, cu bucla spre stânga), iar pe revers, mărginită de 17 perle, inscripţia ABPA / CAZ. Piese prezentate certifică, credem, indubitabil (datorită în primul rând materialului şi execuţiei) existenţa în zonă a unor adepţi ai acestui cult în prima parte a secolului III d. Ch.

Keywords: roman, settlements, Durostorum, Gnostic.

The subject under discussion consists of two small Gnostic pieces made of lead, recovered by chance on the Danube River shore in the area of the Roman settlement from Ostrov-Farm 4.

The settlement (code 62547.01) is found on the territory of Ostrovit Society, S. A. at the Km 132, N.R. 3A (Bucureşti-Constanţa) at approximately 3,5 Km far from the Ancient city of Durostorum¹, and reflects a large amount of archaeological material that proves an intense clay, bronze, lead, gold, bones, and very likely glass processing.²

CATALOGUE

1/ Ring. Drawing board 1a***.

Conservation condition is relatively good.

Flattened and deformed.

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¹ For a more detailed bibliography of the area see C. Muşţeanu, **Ateliere ceramice romane de la Durostorum**, Bucureşti, 2003.

² C. Muşţeanu, D. Elefterescu, *Teracote de la Durostorum reprezentând-o pe Venus*, in **Pontica**, XVIII, 1985, 185-191; C. Muşţeanu, *op. cit.*; D. Elefterescu, *Figuratie bronzes from Durostorum*, in “**The antique bronzes: typology, chronology, authenticity- The Acta of the 16th International Congress of Antique Bronzes, Bucharest, May 26th-31st, 2003**”, Bucureşti, 2004, 151-161; Idem, *Statuete votive din plumb de la Durostorum*, in **Pontica**, XXXVII-XXXVIII, 2004-2005, 221-238.

Gross workmanship, obtained by pouring into a mould with blunted details; the ring is thin and reflects a deformed rectangular profile. The chaton is rectangular in shape, with rounded borders. On its facet, en-framed by two lines (the upper one is plain, while the lower one is pearled) is found the inscription **IAW**. On its laterals, possibly, two starlets. The dorsal side of the chaton presents an alveolate form like a finger, which has avoided the stressing of the ring, anyway too frail, while it has been worn. The frailty of the ring has posed the issue of its usage and wearing time. If we take into account the frailty of this object, we have to concede that, theoretically speaking, we may have to deal here with a pouring pattern (for checking the pattern). In this case, we wouldn't have dealt with a pouring into a used clean pattern, neither a removal of the burr so carefully done.

Chaton's, dim.: L = 13,62 mm; W = 6,20 mm; thickness = 1,68 mm.

Letter's, H = 1,8 mm.

Inv. 39472. Beach, passim 1976. Open ground researches by Dan Elefterescu.

Analogies: Bulgaria, unknown place.³

2/ Amulet-pendant. Drawing board 1b.

Conservation condition is good.

The small ear is missing (we mention that it was broken after its discovery, during the handling).

Poured into a bivalve pattern with well shaped details; circular. On its obverse, en-framed by a circle which opens to its ear, there is the inscription **IAW/TPC** (letter **P** is inverse, with the loop to the left). On its reverse, bordered by 17 pearls, is found the inscription **ABPA/CAZ**.

Ø = 13 mm; thickness = 1,5 mm.

Letter's H on the obverse = 2,3 mm; Letter's H on the reverse = 2,1 mm.

Inv. 39475. Beach, passim 1976. Open ground researches by Dan Elefterescu.

Analogies: *Ratiaria*⁴, *Viminacium*⁵.

Relatively speaking, many known pieces are attributed to Basilide of Alexandria's Gnostics, most of them being magic gems or small plate amulets.

The quasi-totality of the pieces discovered and published in our country, excepting the two small gold plaques from *Dierna*⁶, belong to the kind of gems

³ N. Markov, **In the tracks of the ancient magic. (55 late antiquity amulets from several private collections)**, Sofia, 2005, B4, an almost identical piece, whose chaton was preserved and regarded as "an amulet in the shape of the eye", had on its back, quite similar to our piece, a thin casting line which was thought to represent a "vulva", late dating (3rd-4th centuries), 54.

⁴ *Ibidem*, B7, even if they do not come from the same pattern, they certainly have the same prototype, the 2nd-4th centuries, 58.

⁵ T. Dimitrijević, *A Gnostic amulet Abraxas*, in **Viminacium**, 10, 1988, 17-20, fig. 1-3, even if they do not come from the same pattern, they certainly have the same prototype.

⁶ D. Benea, A. Şchiopu, *Un mormânt gnostic de la Dierna*, in **Acta Musei Napocensis** (= **Acta M.N.**), XI, 1974, 115-125 and **Inscriptiile Daciei Romane**, vol. III, Ed. Academiei,

with inscriptions or with fantastic representations (*gemmae aabraxeae*)⁷. Such a gem was discovered even in a tomb from *Durostorum* (Silistra) in 1973⁸.

Some Gnostic lead amulets discovered in Bulgaria have been recently published by Nicolay Marcov⁹.

Besides these, there are also known some Gnostic pieces made of lead, in the shape of the plates with inscriptions in Gnostic style (see, for instance, the lead sheet of the great demoniac adjuration, uncovered in a grave from *Hadrumentum*, Africa)¹⁰.

With great reticence, first and foremost due to our lack of knowledge in this field, we suggest as goal of their engendering their usage as funeral appointments. In this case, we consider that they didn't have the time to be used, the discovery area being quite far from the necropolises as well as from the tomb groups from that area.

Taking into consideration that the magic gems are dated in the 2nd-3rd cent.¹¹, a period of time during which the settlement from *Durostorum*-Ostrov (Farm 4) reaches the upper limit of growth, we en-frame our pieces inside these historical limits, most probably in the first half of the third century, when the faith of the Gnostics reached remarkable proportions, touching all the provinces. This is the period when, as pointed out by Doina Benea, "*the Gnostic religion brings to bear a visible influence on the early Christianity, on its ideology*"¹².

1977, nr.42; N.Vlassa, *O nouă plăcuță de aur gnostică de la Dierna*, "Acta M.N.", XIV, 1977, 205-219 and **Inscripțiile Daciei Romane**, vol. III, Ed. Academiei, 1977, nr.43.

⁷ *Porolissum*, black jasper. On one side it presents a fantastic effigy, on the other side an **EICA** text (É. Lakó, N. Gudea, „Despre o gemă gnostică cu inscripție din Muzeul de Istorie și Artă din Zalău” in **Acta Musei Porolissensis**, III, 1979, 449-451); Orlea (*Sucidava*), green jasper, on the obverse there is **ABPAC/ABPACAZ**, on the reverse* (**Inscripțiile Daciei Romane**, vol. II, Ed. Academiei, 1977, nr.317 with bibliography); *Romula*, agate, on the obverse there is a fantastic effigy, on the reverse there is **A/BP/ACA/Z** (*Ibidem*, nr. 492 with bibliography); Col. Capșa-Istrate (uncertain localization, possibly even outside the country) black jasper. On one side, there is a monstrous image; at the head two stars. On the border, there is the inscription **ABPACAZ**. On the reverse there is **A/BAAN/AΘANA/ABAXA/PEY**, and around it, on a frame* **IAW MAPIA** (*Ibidem*, nr. 661, with bibliography).

⁸ I. Popović, P. Donevski, **Gold and silver jewelry from Durostorum burials**, Svishtov, 1999, 29-30. M5, cornelian gem attached to a gold medallion. On one side it is a fantastic effigy, on the other, an inscription (?) **ΘEO** (?)**S/MS/RSOST**. (?) **S?SOTH** (?). Tomb dated on monetary basis (bronze coin probably from Probus), in the second half of the 3rd cent., 29-30.

⁹ N. Markov, *op.cit.*, B1-2 and B6.

¹⁰ Cf. D. Benea, A. Șchiopu, *op. cit.*, 122, note 38 and N. Vlassa, *Interpretarea plăcuței de aur de la Dierna*, in **Acta M.N.**, XI, 1974, 126.

¹¹ I. Barnea, *Abrasax (abraxas)*, in **Enciclopedia Arheologiei și Istoriei Vechi a României**, București, 1994, 20.

¹² D. Benea, A. Șchiopu, *op.cit.*, 123-124 (*gnosticismul exercită o influență pregnantă asupra creștinismului primitiv, asupra ideologiei sale*).

We assert this regardless of whether or not these pieces have been permanently or occasionally worn, or whether they had funeral destinations; moreover, if we admit to the utmost a negative, even derogatory goal (see, by the way, the maleficent significance of the material)¹³, these pieces clearly and undoubtedly certify the presence of Gnostics in the area.

We assert this bearing in mind that pieces modestly made on a stand without an inherent value could not be taken over and passed on outside of experts' circle, of those who know, or at least recognize the message. We cannot agree with the assertion of the late Nicolae Vlassa made in one of his articles of 1980¹⁴ with regards to a gem found in the Constanta museum, and we quote, "*Otherwise, the obviously magic character of the object is defining it, par excellence, as a talisman acting 'for the bearer', with magical virtues, working for the one (and not only for the one) for whom it had been conceived from the moment of manufacturing*", adding also that the assertion was used for the chronological en-framing of the pieces; on the contrary, we consider that it is exactly this magic character that could have constituted sometimes the reason for the passing on to an endeared person, to a descendent in the family, or to a rival or a successor. This kind of situations entitles us to believe that, in principle, they can lead in the course of time to the losing or even (to the) changing of the meanings, beside the possibility of using the gems only for their artistic value, and automatically to make less certain the assertion about the existence of some followers of this cult based only on such discoveries. This assertion was corroborated (sic) by the same author in one of his articles in 1974: "*It was shown the almost impossible perseverance by which the Gnostic tradition was perpetuated-over the Byzantine era- and deeply during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, being particularly applied to the manufacturing of occult amulets and talismans. But, in such case, it does not seem to be impossible for a share of amulets, gems, and talismans – defined as being Gnostic*

¹³ It is both known and recognized that there is a clear connection between magic destination and the fact that, as pointed out by N. Vlassa, "throughout the history of ancient magic (and especially in the Semite-Greek-Alexandrian, Gnostic and Paleo-Christian magic), the lead was considered, par excellence, a maleficent metal, being under the sign of Saturn and Mars // în întreaga istorie a magiei antice (și mai cu seamă în cea semito-greco-alexandrină, gnostică și paleocreștină) plumbul a fost considerat, prin exelență, un *metal malefic*, stând sub semnul lui Saturn și Marte". (N. Vlassa, *O nouă plăcuță de aur gnostică de la Dierna*, "Acta M.N.", XIV, 1977, 218 and J. Marqués-Rivière, *Amulettes, talismans et pantacles*, Paris, 1938, 306, cf. N. Vlassa, *Interpretarea plăcuței de aur de la Dierna*, in *Acta M.N.*, XI, 1974).

¹⁴ N. Vlassa, *Interpretarea unei geme magice greco-egiptene*, *Acta M.N.*, XVII, 1980, 493, („De altminteri, caracterul evident magic al obiectului îl definește, prin exelență, ca un talisman acționând „la purtător” cu virtuți apotropaice funcționând pentru cel (și numai pentru cel!) căruia îi fusese zămislit din momentul confecționării”), the stranger seems to us the assertion on „Christianized” gem, especially as it practically conceals a good chapter of the author, whose conclusions were stressed in a previous article (Idem, *Două noi piese paleocreștine din Transilvania*, *Acta M.N.*, XIII, 1976, 229-230).

– which are found in the great collections referring to a museum, to come really from periods which are sensitively subsequent to the Ancient era”¹⁵.

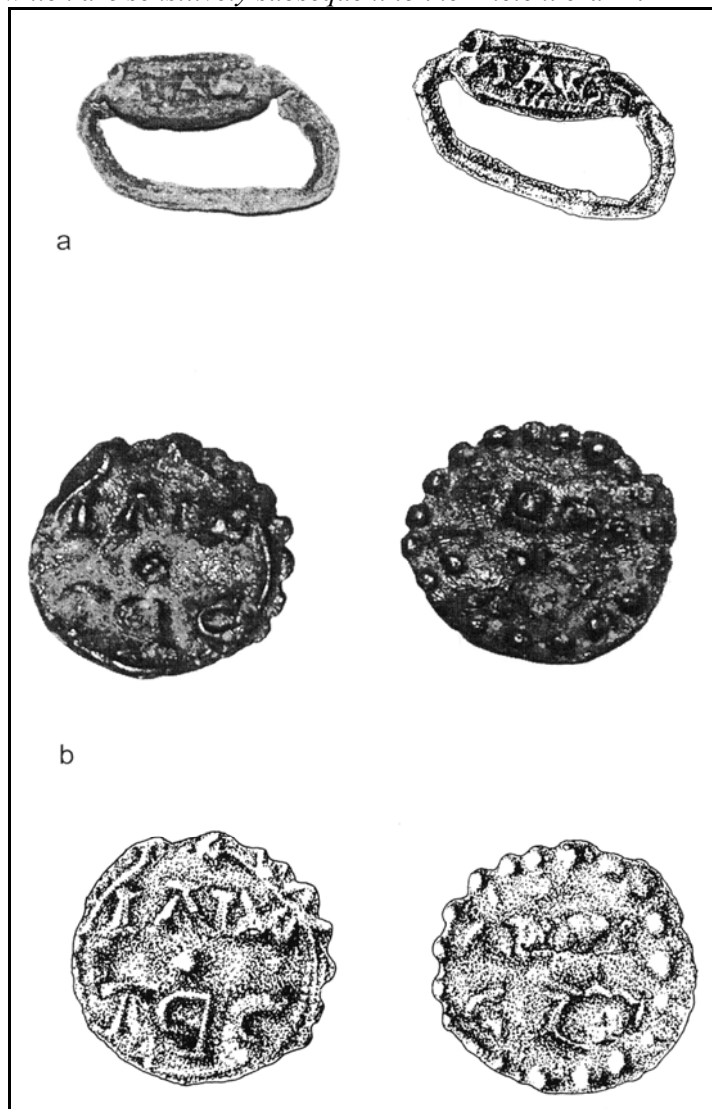


Fig. 1. a. Ring drawing board; b. Amulet pendant drawing board.

¹⁵ Idem, *Interpretarea plăcuței de aur de la Dierna*, în **Acta M.N. XI**, 139-141. (...s-a arătat aproape incredibila tenacitate cu care tradiția gnostică se perpetuează - peste epoca bizantină – până adânc în Evul Mediu și Renaștere, aplicată fiind mai ales la confecționarea de amulete și talismane oculte. Or, aceasta fiind situația, nu ni se pare imposibil ca o parte din stocul de gemeni, amulete și talismane definite ca gnostice, aflate în marile colecții muzeale, să provină în realitate din perioade sensibil ulterioare epocii antice).