

# GENERAL PERSPECTIVE ON SEVERAL ROMAN RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Mihaela MARTIN

University “Eftimie Murgu” Reșița

The ancients believed that the spiritual world could not be seen, it could be only felt<sup>1</sup>. In order to bring this world closer to common people, thus making them believe, symbols were invented. Through symbols the ones that couldn't be seen could be easier expressed and understood. Thus the purpose of a symbol is to communicate meaning, to convey a meaning more than the written word could do, and at a deeper level. Starting from this idea, the aim of this article is to show the important role played by votive terracottas, seen as religious symbols, whilst exploring the symbolism behind them.

Votive terracottas act as an expression of religious beliefs<sup>2</sup>. There is an indisputable connection between the art of crafting these figurines and religion, as crafting these little statuettes represents a possibility of reflection on religion. The depiction of these divinities was one of the most common commands, an *ex-voto*<sup>3</sup> being the way that the ones who ordered them expressed themselves towards certain divinities.

The connection between art and religion is also a way of perpetuating religious knowledge<sup>4</sup>. The role of terracottas, medals and reliefs was to “reveal” the god to the believers<sup>5</sup>, these being symbols of the divine element's presence. Deities were glorified through images, but at the same time, the depiction of these divinities incorporated something from “*the nature and powers of the gods*”<sup>6</sup>.

“*The divine element is not created, but is suggested to the attentive heart*”<sup>7</sup>. Thus the representations of deities had value in themselves. Perhaps the unhandy crafting of clay figurines represented a fairly strong religious sentiment nonetheless. In this situation there are many terracottas portraying Venus, especially as Venus *Pudica*, discovered on the territory of the province. The presence of terracottas with the depiction of the goddess in a military setting was believed to be due to “*the beauty embodied by the goddess*”<sup>8</sup>. The worshipping of the goddess also had an official nature, the goddess being regarded as the ancestress of the gens Julia. The terracottas discovered in castra can be considered to serve as amulettes, symbols of naive beliefs spread among the soldiers, in the power of love. They must be placed in the sphere of popular beliefs, of magic, of the hope of a simple soul. If this idea is accepted, then it wasn't necessarily required that the depictions have a high artistic value<sup>9</sup>, the accent being put on their symbolic values.

The goddess Venus appears quite often in figurines, its number exceeding even the number of her bronze depictions. The high number of terracottas dedicated to her can be explained by

<sup>1</sup> Inman, Newton 2012 p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Ștefănescu-Onițiu 2008, p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 91.

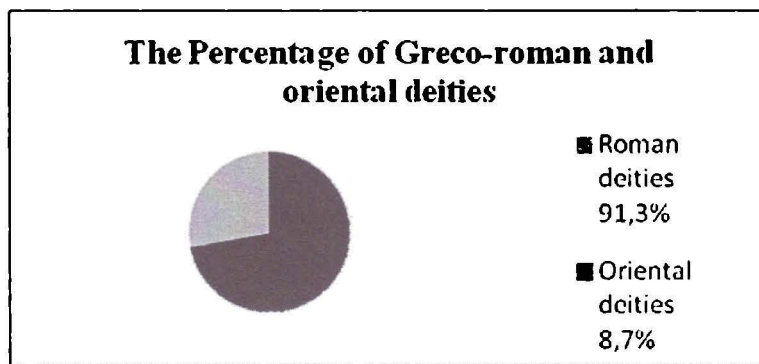
<sup>6</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 103.

<sup>9</sup> Audsley 1865, p. 135.

the fact that the goddess is the protector of life and prosperity in general. Venus is the goddess of love, beauty and last, but not least, of fertility. The same thing can't be said about other roman divinities depicted in terracotas, though. The other roman deities are also represented in terracotas but they are being depicted in a restricted number of figurines. Together with the divinities from the Graeco-Roman pantheon, we encounter, depicted in the terracotas, divinities of Egyptian and Micro-asian origin, as well as reliefs of Danubian knights. The existence of these terracotas, which depict both Micro-asian or Egyptian divinities, is undoubtedly due to the presence of colonists of oriental origin. (The Egyptian divinities had a percentage of 4,7% and the Micro-asian ones of 4%, the rest of the percentage being held by the Graeco-Roman deities – the assumption is based on a study of 256 votive terracottas). Moreover it can be noticed that all clay figurines (256 votive terracottas) depict a higher number of divinities, compared to the images encountered in bronze.



Further on, the terracotas discovered in Dacia respect classic iconography: Venus is nude or appears as *Anadyomene*, Ceres appears holding wheat, Diana is depicted as a hunter, Minerva and Mars have helmets and weapons, Mercury has a net and the well-known caduceus<sup>10</sup>, Pan is depicted as having willy goat legs, Amor and Victoria possess wings, Sol is depicted in a quadriga, Cybele is depicted on her throne and Isis is holding Horus in his arms<sup>11</sup>. Pieces of large proportions haven't been discovered. Almost all figurines represent productions of the local potters and were crafted in special ceramic moulds<sup>12</sup>.

Even if the terracotas are considered to be representations of the religious manifestations of poor people, this isn't entirely true because terracotas have been discovered in castra and urban centres, the exception being rural areas.

Such a varied pantheon that makes a good impression, at least at first sight, through the high number of divinities epigraphically and figuratively attested, is explained by the ethnic diversity of the local population. The "mosaic" of these divinities is an epithet applicable to the "provincial religion" as an ensemble of beliefs.

The religion of the individual contains a few different deities, chosen in terms of ethnic origin of the believers, occupation, social status or own aspirations<sup>13</sup>. Each individual creates his own group of divinities in accordance with different motivations. Sometimes oriental divinities are accepted perhaps because of the inability of other cults to satisfy the one's own need of

<sup>10</sup> Regardie 1984, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Ștefănescu-Onițiu 2008, p. 314–315.

<sup>12</sup> Bondoc 2005, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bărbulescu 1984, p. 139.

spiritual identity<sup>14</sup>. For example the existence of a local temple emphasizes once more the orientation towards the respective divinity (that is probably how a percentage of the clay depictions of Mithras, Aesculap and Hygia are justified).

In regards to the inhabitants of the province, two categories of attitudes can be distinguished, in accordance with an individual's status within society: having an intimate circle of personal divinities that were considered to be protective, and participating, out of a civic spirit, in the official manifestations of Roman cults, treating these gods with respect or tolerance. Tolerance governed the ensemble of religious life, facilitating thus the cohabitation of the numerous cults and diverse tendencies into a rich spirituality<sup>15</sup>.

In a world dominated by gods and goddesses, these representations of deities were powerful evidence of faith ment to honour these superior human forces, about which was known that control the course of natural and human events. The study reinforces once more the idea that votive terracotta is seen not only as a mean of communication but, in the ancient society, it is also seen as a symbol that expresses religious feelings.

An essential characteristic of the Roman religion was the presence of the oath<sup>16</sup> between man and divinity, the commitment that binds the individual to the divinity. At the core of the provincial Roman religion lied man, religion being built after his needs. Thus the emphasis was not so much on the cults themselves, as on the motivation of beliefs<sup>9</sup>, spiritual life requiring to be observed through the perspective of each religious symbol, and each individual.

Roman symbolism through its votive terracottas is a fascinating theme that underline once more the unity in diversity of the Roman world.

## Bibliography

- Audsley 1865 = W. G. Audsley, *Handbook of Christian Symbolism*, Day&Son, Lincoln's Inn Fields, Liverpool, 1865.
- Bărbulescu 1984 = M. Bărbulescu, *Interferențe spirituale în Dacia romană*, Ed. Tribuna Cluj-Napoca, 1984.
- Bărbulescu 2001 = M. Bărbulescu, cap. Cultură și religie, vol. II, *Istoria românilor*, coord. prof. dr. Dumitru Protase, Editura Enciclopedică București, 2001.
- Benea 1999 = D. Benea *Dacia sud-vestică în secolele III-IV. Interferențe Spirituale*, Ed. De Vest, Timișoara, 1999.
- Bondoc 2005 = D. Bondoc, *Tipare și figurine ceramice romane. Muzeul Romanațiului Caracal (figurine ceramice romane de la Romula)*, Ed. Sitech, Craiova, 2005.
- Inman, Newton 2012 = T. Inman, J. Newton, *Ancient pagan and modern Christian symbolism*, Liverpool, 2012, [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).
- Oancea 2008 = C-tin. Oancea, Trei tratate politice din antichitate și însemnătatea lor pentru sesizarea fondului juridic și teologic al legământului sinaitic, in *Revista Teologica*, nr.1/2008, pp.14-25, Andreiana, Sibiu, 2008.
- Regardie 1984 = I. Regardie, *The Complete golden dawn system of magic*, New Falcon Publications, Temple, Arizona, 1984.
- Ștefănescu-Onițiu 2008 = A. Ștefănescu-Onițiu, Producția locală de statuete de teracotă în Dacia Romană, în *Dacia în sistemul socio-economic roman. Cu privire la atelierile meșteșugărești locale*, Centrul de Studii de Istorie și Arheologie "Constantin Daicovicu", p. 312-324, Timișoara, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Benea 1999, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Bărbulescu 2001, p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> Oancea 2008, p. 24.

## GENERAL PERSPECTIVE ON SEVERAL ROMAN RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

*(Abstract)*

The intention of this article is limited to depicting the principal religious symbols and their impact on the daco-roman population, leaving the way open to the thinking process. Therefor an interesting aspect of the religious life in Dacia province is the presence of various symbols, a rather vast subject involving a bibliographical documentation, a knowledge of historical sources and a survey of the featured figurines. In a world dominated by these powerful religious beliefs, the presence of these symbols represents attempts to reconcile the forces superior to man, which were thought to control the course of natural and human events.

All in all an essential feature of the religious symbols is the presence of an agreement, a convention (Bărbulescu 1984, p. 169) between man and divinity which obliges the individual in front of the divinity. At the centre of the roman provincial religion is placed the man, the religion forming according to his needs. Thus the emphasis does not lie on the symbol itself (Bărbulescu 1984, p.130), the spiritual life having to be seen through each individual. The religious symbol is not just a component of the daily activities, but a *sine qua non* condition for the smooth running of the entire religious life.