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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER



A recently discovered cameo and a few considerations on the glyptics from Apulum (Roman Dacia)

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author draws the attention of experts to a new glyptic discovery from Apulum. It is a schematic portrait of the Gorgon Medusa, depicted on a three-layered sardonyx. Based on parallels and the manufacturing technique, the author concludes that the piece originates from the workshops of Viminacium, Upper Moesia. The cameo is dated in the second half of the second century AD, prior the time when the *canabae* of the XIII Gemina legion rose to the status of municipium (ante AD 197). It is the only glyptic piece that bears the image of Medusa that's Dacian origin is certain. From an artistic point of view, it is a modest quality of execution, below the average provincial level. Furthermore, the author makes some remarks on the gems found in the collections of the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia, with a few additions and clarifications regarding the place of discovery and the possibility of the existence of a workshop of *cavatores gemmarum* at Apulum.

KEYWORDS

Cameo, glyptics, Gorgon Medusa, workshop, municipium Septimium Apulense

INTRODUCTION

During preventive archaeological research carried out in May 2018 on 7A Nicolae Labiş Street, Alba Iulia, Romania, a three-layered sardonyx cameo with the representation of the Medusa Gorgon was discovered.

The findspot is located 450 m south-west of the fortress of *XIII Gemina*,¹ within the civil settlement developed around the Roman fortress, the *canabae legionis*, which was promoted to town status in 197 AD, – as *municipium Septimium Apulense*² (Fig. 1). In the last two years, several preliminary excavations have been carried out in this street, prior to the construction of a number of buildings, revealing Roman and early medieval remains.³

During the excavation, Roman features were identified and investigated, consisting of a lime pit, an east-west oriented road (*decumanus*) and three walls of a building of two construction periods.⁴ The high population density of this location and the presence of at least one early stratigraphic layer dating to the first half of the second century AD, confirm that the *canabae legionis*, founded under emperor Trajan, extended its southern quarters up to a distance of over 400 m from the Roman fortification. It furthermore corroborates the information given by Eutropius, who reports that in the reign of this emperor, colonization of

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¹Ota (2012).

²Moga (1998).

³Inel (2007) 61–62; Ota (2012) 153, Pl. XXXIV, 1–3.

⁴In fact, only foundation remains have survived.

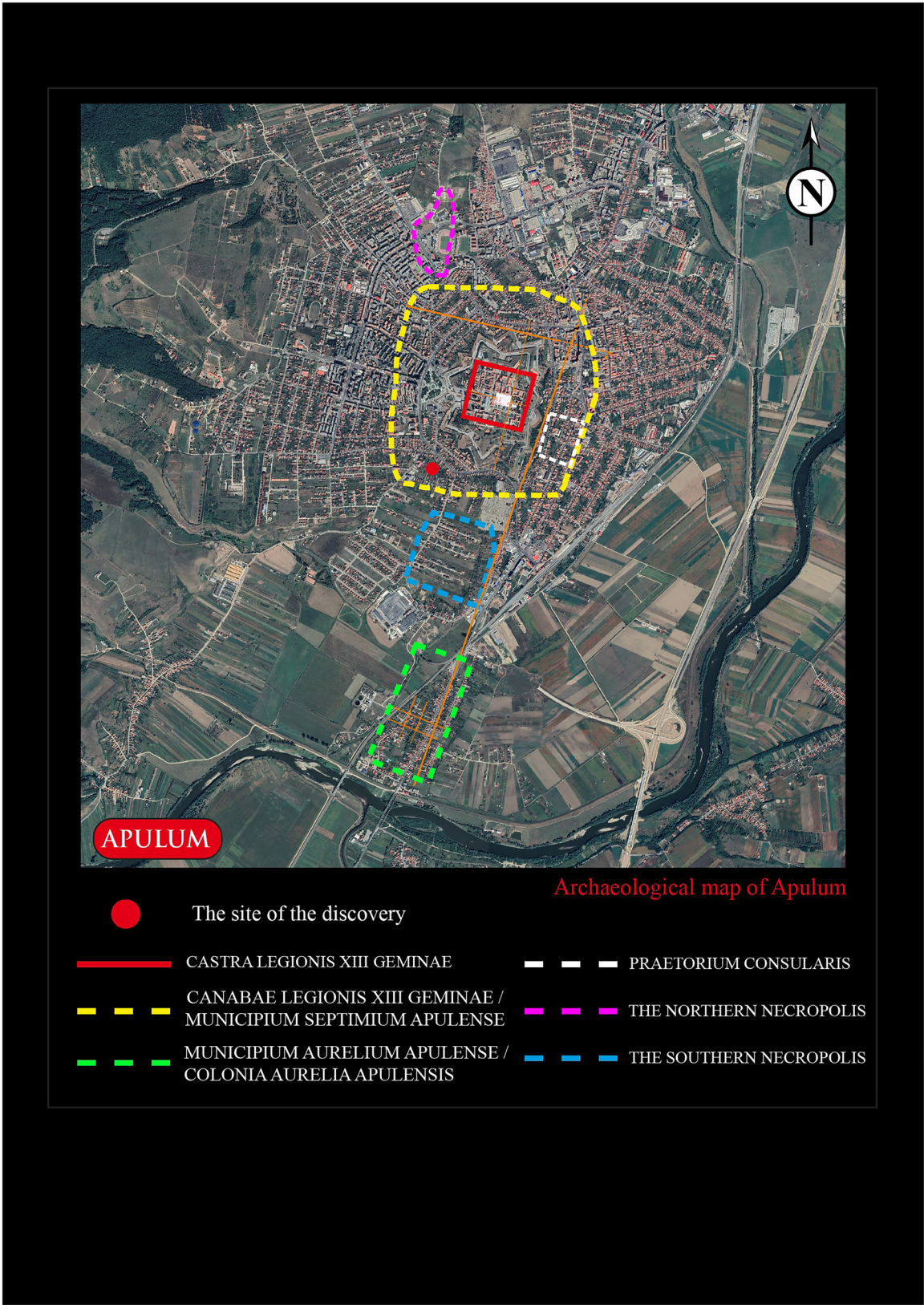


Fig. 1. The map of Apulum with the place of discovery



the newly established province was extensive, with populations arriving from all over the Roman world (*ex toto Orbe Romano*).⁵

A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE ARCHEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE FIND AND A DESCRIPTION OF THE CAMEO

The piece was recovered from the second construction level of an interior road (*decumanus*) in the second Roman town at Apulum, *municipium Septimium Apulense*, which underwent three stages of rebuilding. The cameo had been lost by its former owner when this road was under construction, and found in a gravel layer at a depth of 1.80 m. The dimensions of the piece are the following: h – 1.20 cm, l – 1.10 cm, depth – 1.20 cm. It is worked in high relief, of a three-layered sardonyx, in white (the background), brown (the second layer) and hues of white and light blue (the third layer). The cameo depicts the humanized portrait of Medusa, in an irregular-trapezoid shape. The hair and serpents are marked by zig-zag incisions. The lines of the face and the hair are not symmetrical, thus creating the impression that the figure looks left (right of the viewer). The eyes are round, with the iris marked by an incised dot. The face is oval with full fleshy lips, prominent cheeks, a slightly damaged nose and short chin. Stylistically, this is not

a high-quality piece. It represents approximately an average provincial quality (Fig. 2a–b).

CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMING AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We have attempted, based on archaeological information collected from the field and the available information regarding the development of the *canabae*, the settlement which was promoted to a town status in 197 AD, to obtain an as accurate dating of the piece as possible. Since artifacts of the kind rarely have an archaeological find context, based on style and the way the second–third century AD glyptic pieces were worked, it is nearly impossible to accurately date them. The first such indication is provided by a fragment of a tegula placed in two rows in the first construction layer of the road, at a depth of 2.2 m, bearing the name of the legion and the head of the workshop. Three completions of the text may be suggested, as at Apulum there are three workshop heads recorded with the Flavius *nomen*, obviously coming from the name of the Flavian dynasty: L[(eg)io XIII Gem(ina)]/Fl[avius, - vii Helio(dorus, ori)]; [Martin(us, -i)] or [Vital(is)].⁶ In general, the stamps published in IDR III/6 have no clear find context, their dating being possible based only on the Flavius *nomen*. In my opinion, in the case of being discovered in a first level of habitation, they should be

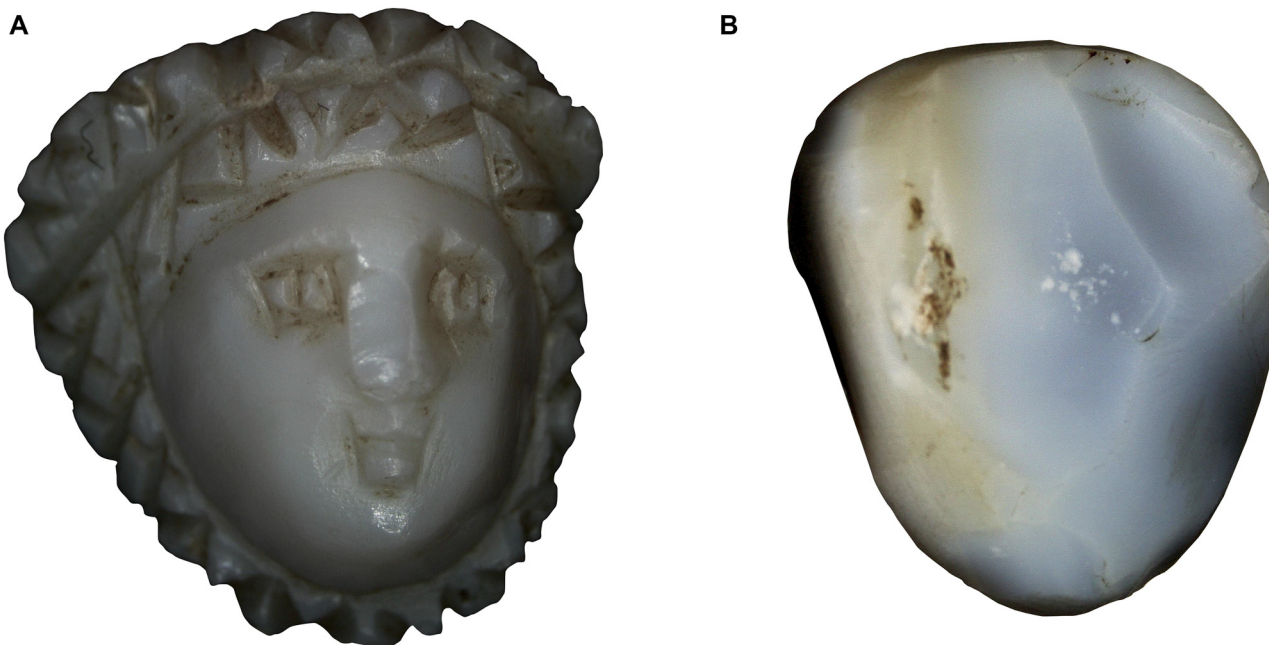


Fig. 2. A-B: Cameo with the image of Gorgo Medusa

⁵Flavius Eutropius, *Breviarium ab Urbe condita*, VIII, 62. Apud [Petolescu \(2000\)](#) 224.

⁶IDR III/6, no. 182–193.

dated to the first decades of Roman rule, since they refer to officials or their successors who were awarded citizenship under the Flavians. However, these tegulas were also in use under emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. In one case, in the excavations conducted in the eastern quarters of the *canabae/municipium* Septimium Apulense, we identified tiles with the stamps of Flavius Martinus and Flavius Heliodorus along with those of Aurelius Menander and Aurelius Enthimus, used in the construction of a large structure earliest under Marcus Aurelius which functioned at least until the time of Septimius Severus.⁷

A tile being discovered in this layer of habitation, with the *nomen* Flavius it may be dated to the first half of the second century AD, prior the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Since evolving to a higher status entailed, among other, also the reorganization of the urban structure, which consisted even in rebuilding the inner roads, it is only logical to presume a date between the reigns of Marcus Aurelius and early Septimius Severus's rule. Since the piece was lost during the construction of the second phase of the road, before the elevation to the rank of municipality in 197 AD, it dates to the beginning of the reign of Septimius Severus, when the province received much attention as the legions stationed there supported the emperor in the campaigns for the takeover.⁸ Thus the *canabae* were the first to benefit from such policies, not excluding the possibility that large-scale civic works to reorganize the urban plan were started precisely to enable them to achieve a higher status in the future.

THE GLYPTICS FROM APULUM IN RELATION THE CRAFT IN DACIA IN GENERAL

Several years ago, a lot of glyptic pieces from the museum's collections in Alba Iulia⁹ were published in the pages of an exhibition catalogue. The work was critically reviewed by M. Buora, who iconographically reinterpreted some of the engraved gems in the collections of the museum¹⁰ and concluded that four of them were made in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹¹ A few pieces from the collection of the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia have undergone mineralogical and petrographical tests, determining that the raw material originates from the Trascău Mountains (the Western Carpathians),¹² which makes me believe that there existed a local workshop in Apulum.¹³ It would add to

those existing in Romula¹⁴ and Porolissum.¹⁵ It is assumed that there is such a workshop in Micia¹⁶ and Tibiscum.¹⁷

I have to make some clarifications regarding the origin of a many of the gems of the collections of the museum of Alba Iulia.

Most glyptic pieces analyzed in the aforementioned catalogue are part of the J. Fehér¹⁸ collection, a former banker from Sebeș, who compiled the collection in the first part of the 20th century.¹⁹ Other engravings come from the area of *municipium Aurelium/colonia Aurelia Apulensis*,²⁰ without a known archaeological context. Only the engraving with the image of Mercurius comes from the old collection of the museum in Alba Iulia.²¹

Nevertheless, an issue often encountered by the specialists examining the glyptics of Roman Dacia concerning the find context, which is unknown for the majority of pieces.²² The same applies in the case of Tibiscum as well, where only three gems discovered in the fort and Roman town have clear archaeological contexts.²³ In addition, many are not certain to originate from the Trajanic province.²⁴ In contrast with the topic of the scale of romanization, the high level of urbanization and the impressive number of the units quartered in Dacia, glyptic art is poorly published.

¹⁴It seems that the largest semi-precious stone processing workshop in Dacia operated here. See: Tudor (1967) 224, Hadji Vasinca (2007) 202.

¹⁵Țeposu-Marinescu and Lakó (1973) 18.

¹⁶Hamat (2010) 236.

¹⁷In the glass workshop identified in the military *vicus* carnelian beads were discovered and, therefore, it was assumed this semiprecious stone was also worked for glyptics. Hamat (2017) 428.

¹⁸Upon the simple examination of the MNUAI Inventory Register, pieces nos. 138, 139, 140, 141, 143, 145, 146, 147, 150, 155, 156 and 158 come from this collection.

¹⁹Which included many lamps, coins and stamped tile material. Some were published by Cl. L. Băluță. See: IDR III/6; Băluță (2003); Băluță (2004) 301–307.

²⁰Lux (2011) no. 142 (Partoș, 27 str. Glina str.), 144 (acquisition), 152 (Partoș excavation site, 1973, without location), 157 (fieldwalk in Partoș by Cl.L. Băluță in 1987).

²¹Lux (2011) no. 151.

²²We quote here a few well known works, analysing the collections of museums like those at Zalău, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu and Caracal: Țeposu-David (1960, 1965); Tudor (1967); Țeposu-Marinescu and Lakó (1973). In a synthesis study published almost one decade ago, Ana Hamat emphasized such inconvenience. See: Hamat (2010) 237.

²³These are three gems discovered in the town and large fort at Tibiscum, generally dated to the third century AD based on the find context. See: Hamat (2017) 418–428, 431–432, no. 3, 5, 8.

²⁴These are pieces in the collection of the Romanian Academy, published by M. Gramatopol. This collection was compiled over a long time, the glyptic pieces being an ever-present merchandise in the trade with antiquities of all times, hence, they may come from both the territory of Roman Dacia, as well as from the neighbouring provinces. See: Gramatopol (2011).

⁷Ota and Lascu (2011) 215; Ota (2012) 145–146.

⁸Ardevan (1998) 49.

⁹Lux (2011) no. 136–159.

¹⁰From the catalogue Lux (2011) one *intaglio* no. 152 bears the portrait of Minerva, not of Mars; that no. 156 renders a capricorn, not an antelope. See: Buora (2012) 182–283

¹¹Those in Lux (2011) no. 148–149, 153–154; see: Buora (2012) 284–287.

¹²There are five samples from Roman date *intaglios* certifying the use of jasper, opal and chalcedony. See: Anghel et al. (2016) 86–96, 100.

¹³Obviously, the presence of these gems worked from local raw material is indirect evidence of an *officina* of the type at Apulum.



PARALLELS

Close parallels are found at Augst,²⁵ in Upper Germania, Ratiaria, in Upper Moesia, and Novae (two pieces), in Lower Moesia, the last three dating to the third century AD,²⁶ at Drobeta, in Dacia,²⁷ and in Barbaricum, from the northern Pre-Roman Dacia, at Coțușca-Nichiteni.²⁸ It is believed that the workshops of Viminacium produced most of the cameos with the portrait of Medusa discovered within the Moesias.²⁹ The cameo here would frame in type 2 Popović, defined by “hairstyle rendered in zig-zag, symbolizing the serpent-shaped locks”.³⁰ A very close parallel, almost identical, of two-layered opal, with unknown place of discovery, is found in the collections of the National Museum of Belgrade.³¹ Two other analogies, with a similar technique, yet still with unknown place of discovery, come from the collections of the same institution.³² The first parallel caught my attention, as it is very similar, almost identical to the piece I discovered, which suggests it is a product of the Viminacium workshop. The gems discovered at Ratiaria and Novae also show similarities, particularly in the way the hairstyle is depicted with schematized zig-zag incisions, which result in certain rhombuses. Other four cameos with the portrait of Medusa, with unknown place of discovery, much more elaborate stylistically, different from the piece discussed here, are part of the collection of the Romanian Academy Library, published by the late M. Gramatopol.³³ As I mentioned before, they probably originate from the provinces south of the Danube, although I cannot definitively rule out their Dacian origin. Nevertheless, all these cameos portraying Medusa are not comparable with those produced during the Julio-Claudian dynasty.³⁴

CONCLUSIONS

The piece examined here is the only glyptic piece depicting the image of the Medusa Gorgo that definitely originates from the province of Dacia, and it also has a clear archaeological context, which chronologically places it into the second half of the second century AD, prior 197 AD, when the canabae of the 13th Geminia legion was granted the status of municipium. Compared to other cameos depicting

Medusa, the piece is rather stylistically modest, reaching at most the provincial average level. This is due to the schematic depiction of the hairstyle and the lack of symmetry between the planes of the face and the hair. This image of Medusa fulfilled an apotropaic function to the holder. It is an imported piece, which most probably comes, based on stylistic parallels, from the workshops of Viminacium, in Upper Moesia.

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²⁵Riha (1990) 128, Taf. 5/64.

²⁶Dimitrova-Milčeva (1980) 108–109, no. 311, 313, 317.

²⁷Bălăceanu (2006) 54, 164.

²⁸Hamat and Kovacs (2020) 399–412, Pl. III. According to the authors, the provenance of the cameo is from Viminacium workshops.

²⁹Popović (1989) 54.

³⁰Popović (1989) 55.

³¹Popović (1989) 65, no. 18.

³²Popović (1989) 65, no. 17, p. 68, no. 28.

³³Gramatopol (2011) 141, no. 356–359, Pl. XVII.

³⁴Furtwängler (1964) 313, 332; Furtwängler (1965) 244, 248, no. 4, 6, 47, Taf. L and LII.



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