

The return of Persephone on an early byzantine round box brooch

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

In the province of Pannonia, in the fortress of today's Keszthely-Fenékpuszta (Hungary), a Romanized Christian population continued to live after the collapse of Roman administration in the fifth century CE. They survived the Lombard and Avar conquests and maintained important trade and cultural relations with the Mediterranean and northern Italy regions. The jewelry found in the graves of women and children in the Horreum cemetery of the fortress testifies to the wealth of the ruling elite and its remarkable Byzantine artistic and cultural influence. The present paper focuses on a round box brooch from grave no. 5 of the Horreum, which stands out among the Pannonian round box brooches for its quality, but the scene it depicts has not yet been identified with certainty. The author argues that the scene is that of Persephone's *anodos*. The image, unusual but not unprecedented in the Christian context and with a rich history in ancient funerary art, might have been inspired by the tragedy of a young girl torn from her mother by death. A wealthy mother buried her child, whose gold earrings with peacocks indicated her Christian identity, and whose collar, modeled after the jewelry of Byzantine empresses, referred to her social status. The polytheistic myth was probably chosen because there is no appropriate scene in the purely Christian iconographic tradition that can clearly express the mother-daughter relationship, the pain of a mother grieving for her daughter, and the hope that one day they will be reunited.

KEYWORDS

Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Round box brooches, Persephone's *anodos*, Pannonia, Early Christianity, Ancient Greek and Late-Antique iconography

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Archaeological, artistic and technological studies of the round box brooches of the Pannonian Avar period raise a number of questions, many of which have remained unanswered concerning the continuity of the Christian population of Pannonia between the fifth and seventh centuries CE, the influx of ethnic groups, and the cultural, artistic, and commercial activities of the people living there.¹ The study is dedicated to one of the round box brooches with the most enigmatic imagery. I will attempt to identify and interpret the image depicted in the round box brooch found in grave no. 5 of the Horreum Cemetery in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Hungary (Fig. 1).² The scene in question has been identified as the Resurrection of Christ,³ Doubting Thomas,⁴ the Adoration of the Magi,⁵ the Raising of Lazarus,⁶ the story of Heracles and Omphale,⁷ the



Fig. 1. Round box brooch from the grave no. 5 of the Horreum Cemetery in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Hungary. Photo: author

¹BIERBRAUER (2004); VIDA (2011); BOLLÓK (2014).

²Balaton Museum Keszthely: 1960.5.5. <https://www.museumap.hu/record/-/record/oai-aggregated-bib5788925;jsessionid=75EBAB0B6FA43EE03FA1F1F1B18EF51E> (Accessed 5 August 2025).

I would like to express my gratitude to Anett Mihácz-Pálfi, archaeologist at the Balatoni Museum in Keszthely, for her selfless assistance with this research. I would also like to thank Gellért Áment for taking the high-resolution photographs of the round box brooch.

³BARKÓCZI (1968) 279.

⁴BONA (1971) 297.

⁵THOMAS (1982) 280.

⁶TÓTH (2022) 253–255.

⁷Glaser (2002) 145–146.

Sacrifice of Isaac,⁸ and the Metamorphosis of Daphne.⁹ A group of identifications is a simple statement without argumentation (Resurrection of Christ, Doubting Thomas, and Adoration of the Magi).¹⁰ Identifications with the Heracles or Daphne scenes take the image out of the purely Christian iconographic tradition and link it to early Christian visual culture, which reinterpreted certain figures and stories from Greek mythology in terms of Christian ideas. The arguments presented below support this interpretative approach.

GRAVE NO. 5 IN THE HORREUM CEMETERY IN KESZTHELY-FENÉKPUSZTA

In the fourth century CE, large fortifications were built in Pannonia to the west of the Roman Empire's border defense system, the *limes*.¹¹ One of these was the fortress excavated at Keszthely-Fenékpusztá, near Lake Balaton (*Pelso*), whose Roman name is disputed, but is often referred to as *Valcum*.¹² Excavations in the quadrangular fortress and its immediate surroundings, which display urban features, have shown that the fortress was a place of continuous activity, even after the end of the Roman administration in the fifth century CE. The mixed population that lived there over the next few centuries had extensive relationships with the western Mediterranean regions and areas of northern Italy and the eastern Alps. The graves show that the upper class were Christians who, in the sixth century, built a large three-nave basilica and buried their women with Byzantine-style jewelry.¹³

Vilmos Lipp began the excavations at Keszthely-Fenékpusztá and Keszthely-Dobogó in 1883 and published their results in 1884 and 1886.¹⁴ Árpád Csák discovered the early Christian basilica in 1908, and Aladár Radnóti and Károly Sági excavated it between 1947 and 1959.¹⁵ In 1959, about 50 m south of the basilica, László Barkóczi discovered the large Horreum, on the eastern side of which Barkóczi and Sági found a small cemetery with a total of 31 graves: Barkóczi excavated graves no. 1–18; Sági no. 19–31.¹⁶ While the graves of the basilica were looted, the graves of the Horreum survived in good condition. In grave no. 5,¹⁷ the focus of the present investigation, which is oriented east-west, Barkóczi found the skeleton of a child 117 cm tall but almost completely decomposed in a wooden coffin with a clay pot at its feet. The deceased wore gold crescent-shaped earrings, a silver box brooch in the shape of a disc with a gold-plated center, a gold cloth pin with a silver stem around the neck, and a gold-plated bronze ring on the right hand. The décolleté of the dress was decorated with a gold-jeweled collar made of triangular granulated plates on one side, and red garnet and glass inlaid plates

⁸PANNUTI (2012).

⁹LUKÁCS (2022).

¹⁰For further references, see BOLLÓK (2014) 273.

¹¹VÍSY (2018).

¹²MÜLLER (1987).

¹³MÜLLER (2020).

¹⁴LIPP (1884a); LIPP (1884b); LIPP (1886).

¹⁵HEINRICH-TAMÁSKA-MÜLLER-STRAUB (2012) 38–39.

¹⁶BARKÓCZI (1968) 278–286.

¹⁷VÍDA (2011) 420, fig. 2.

and lapis lazuli plates on the other. The lower edges of the triangles were set in circular sockets with glass inserts, from which the pearls probably hung, but were destroyed by the acidic soil (Fig. 2).¹⁸

The pair of earrings is decorated with peacocks flanking a lily¹⁹ (?), a stylized tree of life²⁰ (?) or perhaps a cantharus with a simplified representation of a plant growing from it (Fig. 3).²¹ The silver pin ends in a rectangular gold terminal with the inscription BONOSA on one side, whereas the other three sides are decorated with six vertical bead inserts (Fig. 4).²² The inscription gives the object an intimate personal character. As this may be the name of the deceased girl, I refer to her as Bonosa, knowing that the attribution is hypothetical.²³ The edge of the silver-plated brooch is framed by a beaded wire, and the gilded central field, which depicts four figures, is also framed by a beaded wire in a convex border. The brooch measures 3.9 cm in length and 0.9 cm in thickness. The pin is missing from the back of the clasp, but its original placement is clearly visible.

Barkóczi did not attempt to identify the exact scene of the brooch, but he was the first to suggest that it could be the Resurrection of Christ.²⁴ According to him, the cemetery, which had strong Byzantine connections, was used by the Roman population that fled Sirmium in large



Fig. 2. Gold jeweled collar from the grave no. 5 of the Horreum Cemetery in Keszthely-Fenékpusztá, Hungary. Photo: author

¹⁸Archaeometric analysis of the necklace: HORVÁTH–RÁCZ (2016) 311–317. Photos are available here: <https://zellwerk.hypotheses.org/717> (Accessed 5 August 2025).

¹⁹BARKÓCZI (1968) 279.

²⁰HEINRICH–TAMÁSKA–MÜLLER–STRAUB (2012) 54.

²¹The depiction is extremely popular in Christian art, from early Christian catacomb paintings to 6th–7th century disc brooches from the south-western Balkans and southern Italy. For the latter, see BOLLÓK (2014) 270.

²²Balaton Museum Keszthely: 1960.5.3. <https://www.museumap.hu/record/-/record/display/manifestation/oai-aggregated-bib5788969/ccf6f853-2435-4adb-85ee-41618777cf88/solr/0/24/1/3/publishDateOrder/ASC> (Accessed 5 August 2025).

²³The inscription has also been linked to a virgin named Bonosa who was martyred during the reign of Septimius Severus, which attributes an apotropaic function to the pin, see BLAY (2020) 172, 1136; 239, 1533. However, no convincing arguments support this hypothesis. The more plausible assumption is that the owner's name is written on the personal object. The earliest references to the veneration of Bonosa also date from the sixth century. See *The Martyrdom of *Bonosa* (BHL 1425). Online resource. <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.13822631.v1> (Accessed 5 August 2025).

²⁴BARKÓCZI (1968) 279; (1971) 187.



Fig. 3. Gold crescent-shaped earrings from the grave no. 5 of the Horreum Cemetery in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Hungary. Photo: author



Fig. 4. Cloth pin with the inscription BONOSA from the grave no. 5 of the Horreum Cemetery in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Hungary. Photo: author

numbers to escape the Gepids in the sixth century CE, more precisely between 536 and 582 CE at the latest, when the Avars conquered Sirmium. This means that the people buried here lived for a time with the Lombard and Avar populations.²⁵

Based on the location of the Horreum cemetery and the analysis of its grave goods, Tivadar Vida concluded that the necropolis testifies to the presence of an elite, cultivating both late antique Roman and Christian traditions in the inner fortress near Lake Pelso (today Balaton, Hungary) in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. The community, whose distinguished ladies were buried with high-quality Byzantine-style jewelry, had extensive links with the Mediterranean and south-eastern Alps, Dalmatia, and northern Italy. According to Vida, Romanized inhabitants that remained in the area in the fourth and fifth centuries CE formed the nucleus of the population, maintaining contact with the western Mediterranean after the end of the Roman administration, but after the Avar conquest, significant groups from the Balkan region under Byzantine rule may have come to them with new contacts and customs.²⁶ On the basis of

²⁵BARKÓCZI (1968) 310.

²⁶VIDA (2011) 416–418.

parallels, cloth pins from the former Iustiniana Prima (Leskovac, Serbia) and Jelica Gradina (Serbia), necklaces from Sadovec (Bulgaria), Vida dated grave no. 5 of the Horreum necropolis to the period before the Avar conquest, that is, to the middle of the sixth century CE.²⁷ He considered the round brooch to be an imported object and interpreted the gold ring with serrated decoration as the forerunner of the decoration that later spread throughout the Carpathian Basin.

Ádám Bollók came to similar conclusions about the Romanized Christian population of Pannonia by studying the so-called Keszthely-Pécs group of round box brooches of the Avar period. He provided a thorough summary of the history of research into the question of the origin of the brooches under study, which is worth recalling briefly for the sake of our narrower topic.²⁸ First, Lipp found three such objects at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta and Keszthely-Dobogó and considered their Byzantine origin to be probable. András Alföldi considered the disc brooches, together with similar finds found later, to be the product of Pannonian workshops, later Nándor Fettich named Pécs as the center of these workshops, while Joachim Werner and Sági considered the disc brooches, decorated with biblical scenes and Christian symbols, to be of Eastern Mediterranean, Byzantine origin. Sági located the brooch workshop in Sirmium, which was under Byzantine rule between 567 and 582 CE. According to Ferenc Fülep, the early Byzantine objects may have originated in both Siscia and Sirmium, but the later were of Pannonian origin. Éva Garam catalogued the disc brooches of the Avar-period and concluded that the shape and decoration were inspired by Byzantine designs, but that most of them could have been made in Pannonia.²⁹ According to Endre Tóth, these objects are of Pannonian origin, following late Roman Christian iconography, and the disc brooches found in Albania are also derived from the Pannonian. Vida and Falko Daim have identified a specific group of disc brooches as Byzantine objects imported by the pilgrims, partly on the basis of Birgit Bühler's technological findings and partly on the basis of the relic cult and pilgrimage practices of the period. From an iconographic perspective, Bollók distinguished between groups of disc brooches that were clearly Christian and those that followed pagan models, attributing a Christian interpretation where appropriate. Among the latter, he included the brooch of grave no. 5 in Horreum of Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, which he identified, like others, as a scene of „Omphale and Heracles,” adding that its meaning is elusive.³⁰ This group also includes round brooches decorated with scenes of the apotheosis of the emperor, which can be interpreted as the Ascension, and the scene of Bellerophon killing the Chimera. What is peculiar about these latter objects, however, is that while the Christian reinterpretation of pagan scenes and symbols is typical of Christian iconography in the 3rd and 4th centuries, it is completely unusual in the 6th and 7th centuries, especially if we consider them to be of Mediterranean origin, since purely Christian iconography prevailed in the Byzantine Empire at that time. According to Bollók, this

²⁷VIDA (2011) 413–414, and 402, fig. 4.3 and 4.4. On the Sadovec chevron collar, see HORVÁTH-RÁCZ (2016) 314, fig. 11. Bóna dates the Horreum graves to the same period as the Basilica graves, after the Avar conquest, between 568 and 630. BÓNA (1971, 297) supposes that the scene on the brooch represents “Unbelieving Thomas”. MÜLLER (2020) 75–76 agrees with this dating.

²⁸BOLLÓK (2014) 260–264.

²⁹VIDA (2018) 56–61 reviewed Garam's findings, taking into account the brooches that were later discovered.

³⁰BOLLÓK (2014) 275.

can be explained by the fact that these brooches embody the imagery of a community that had partially broken away from the mainstream of the Christian Mediterranean of the sixth and seventh centuries CE while preserving the traditions of early Christian iconography. This community included the Romanized indigenous population of Pannonia, the northwestern Balkan population more broadly left without Roman administration, and the settling of Germanic people who were culturally influenced by the former.³¹

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SCENE DEPICTED ON THE BROOCH (FIG. 1)

In her study of Avar period disc brooches, Garam identified the image of Bonosa's brooch as a biblical scene, but did not attempt to define it more precisely. She identifies "a figure standing in the center, wearing a long robe and cloak, with a palm branch (?) in his raised left arm, and a seated or kneeling figure in front of him on the left, extending his arm towards the standing figure's right hand; on the right, a standing figure with a raised hand, and on the left, a figure leaving the scene with a large object in his hand."³²

According to Garam, the image is difficult to interpret because the goldsmith probably cut details from a larger scene, which in itself is meaningless. She suggested that this is indicated by the position of the figure carrying a large object on the right side of the field.³³ Garam distinguished between two major groups based on formal criteria and grave goods. Unlike the brooches of the so-called Baranya group of the seventh and eighth centuries CE, the brooch from grave no. 5 belongs to an earlier group with a deepened center and rich grave goods dating from the second half of the sixth century to the beginning of the seventh century, which can be traced back to the early Byzantine culture.³⁴ According to Garam, these brooches were probably popularized by traders and pilgrims from the Holy Land. The disc brooches were of Byzantine origin but were not made there; the earliest pieces were probably made in Sirmium and the others in Pannonia and Dalmatia.

Birgit Bühler analyzed the technology behind making the Pannonian round box brooches.³⁵ She concluded that Bonosa's brooch is of outstanding quality, and consists of more pieces than the others. The borders of regular pearls may have been made in a double mold, and the contours of the figural depictions in the central image field on the gilded silver plate are much sharper than the others, surpassing them in plasticity. There were tool marks on the surface, suggesting that the decoration, previously pressed into a negative model, was later chiseled or reworked. The complexity, plasticity, and technique of the brooch distinguish it from jewelry made in the Early and Middle Avar periods and testify to the influence of Byzantine craftsmanship. In this respect, it belongs to a group with the brooch of a horseman found in grave no. 12

³¹BOLLÓK (2014) 274.

³²GARAM (1993) 101.

³³GARAM (1993) 130.

³⁴GARAM (1993) 118–119.

³⁵BÜHLER (2002) 133–144.

of the Horreum cemetery and a similar brooch from Keszthely-Fenékpuszta or Keszthely-Dobogó deposited in the Hungarian National Museum.³⁶

According to Daim, the brooches from graves no. 5 and no. 12 at Horreum and perhaps a similar brooch from grave no. 60 at Nagyharsány (Hungary) are a unique group of Carpathian Basin round brooches from a formal and iconographic point of view.³⁷ They may have been imported, however, it is not certain that they were brought here by trade alone. Their wearers may have acquired them on pilgrimages, and the boxes may have contained secondary relics, such as dust from the tombs of saints and pieces of plaster or candle wax.³⁸ In fact, wax remains are found in the above-mentioned disc brooch in the Hungarian National Museum, in a round brooch of unknown origin depicting angels currently in Munich, and in two brooches from Calabria, which show a cantharus flanked by two peacocks. Similar round peacock brooches have also been found in Kruja (Albania) and Vilpazar (Montenegro).³⁹ Daim suggests that the later Avar brooches may have been modelled on these Christian religious objects, but simplified, with geometric decoration and without religious meaning.

Franz Glaser identified an Omphale-Heracles scene in Bonosa's brooch. He supposes that the male figure wearing a petasos and boots carries a wool basket with bobbins protruding from it on the right edge of the image. On the left is a house with a female figure in front of it and barely recognizable Eros hovering above it. In the center, a female figure holds a sunshade, and in front of her kneels, a bearded man wearing a helmet-like headdress, his left hand pointing towards her, and his right hand touching the hem of her robe. Glaser believes that the image shows Heracles as both a kneeling figure and a figure in a woman's dress in front of the house, and Omphale in the center in a woman's dress and on the left in a man's clothing with a woolen basket. The sunshade-like object is identified with the help of a scene on a terra sigillata plate showing Omphale and Heracles travelling in a chariot, with a servant holding a sunshade over Heracles. According to Glaser, Omphale herself holds the sunshade on the brooch in Keszthely, a reference to her social status and Oriental origin.⁴⁰ Glaser's interpretation seems surprising, but it is widely accepted, even though the identification of the figures is questionable, and the story itself is difficult to reconcile with the artistic and cultural tradition represented by the group of round brooches to which Garam, Bühler, Vida, Bollók also include this artifact. This would be a completely isolated iconographic solution without precedent, with no antecedents in funerary art or early Christian visual culture that reinterpreted mythological scenes and figures.

Federica Pannuti did not find Glaser's interpretation convincing, preferring instead to interpret the Akedah scene, very common in the early Christian period, as a prefiguration of the Passion of Christ, showing two elements of the sequence of events at the same time. On the right, Isaac has a bundle of wood in his hand; on the left, the sacrificial scene itself.⁴¹ She does not go into the explanation of the figure standing in front of the house, the objects in his hands, or the particular garments.

³⁶Hungarian National Museum: 30/1885.74.

³⁷DAIM (2002) 113–124.

³⁸This explanation is highly controversial. See LUKÁCS (2022) 131.

³⁹DAIM (2002) figs. 8–11.

⁴⁰GLASER (2002) 145–146.

⁴¹PANNUTI (2012) 163–164.

Endre Tóth observed an unusual depiction of Lazarus' resurrection on the brooch that diverges from traditional iconography.⁴² Parts of the building represent the cave tomb. In front of the tomb, the resurrected Lazarus is freed from his shroud by the angel floating above. Christ stands in the center with a parasol-like figure above his head, perhaps a tree canopy. Lazarus's sister kneels before him. On the right side of the image is a figure rushing out; it is either a soldier or servant. According to Tóth, the artist deviated from canonical representations, because he offered his own interpretation of the relevant passage from the Gospel of John. Inclusion of the angel was necessary because the biblical description did not reveal how Lazarus was freed from the shroud covering his body. The figure rushing out the picture is probably a servant carrying a basket of perfumes. This servant is also not mentioned in the text, but his gesture suggests that Lazarus is a four-day-old corpse who smells bad. However, Tóth does not resolve these inherent contradictions: Why would a four-day-old corpse need perfume? If Lazarus has been resurrected, why does he smell? And if he smells, why is someone fleeing with perfume?

Dalma Lukács published a more detailed interpretation, presenting iconographic parallels.⁴³ According to Lukács, this scene depicts Daphne's transformation into a laurel tree.⁴⁴ The laurel tree symbolizes moral chastity in the Christian context of Coptic art. She believes that a water nymph stands in front of the columned house, holding a torch in her right hand. The standing figure in the middle is Daphne, with Apollo kneeling in front of her. Hermes stands on her right, holding cornucopia from which laurel leaves may emerge. Above the house, Lukács sees a winged figure of Eros, which may refer to a love scene. In addition to Daphne's feet, she assumes the neck and head of Apollo's animal, a swan. Lukács claims that this scene is unique in the region. Similar depictions have been found in Egypt; the closest parallel is a sixth-century ivory carving preserved in Ravenna.⁴⁵ If the deceased girl wore the brooch during her lifetime, the mythological scene would have a decorative function rather than a symbolic one. However, if her mourning family placed it in her grave, the choice of the scene may suggest that she died before fulfilling her role in marriage. This interpretation is noteworthy, but questionable in several respects. The figure identified as Eros is identical to the upper part of the object held in the left hand of the female figure standing in front of the house. This figure is analogous to the upper part of the object held in the left hand of the central figure. If we agree with Lukács that the latter is the canopy of a tree into which Daphne is transformed, then the former must also be a tree canopy and not Eros. Similarly, the standing figure's strapped clothing cannot be a tree trunk because her two legs are visible at the bottom, and the figure identified as a water nymph has the same draped clothing, but does not turn into a tree. The author of the present paper could not discern the swan neck and head in the image. The kneeling figure looks more like a woman wearing a tiara than an Apollo wearing a laurel wreath. In my opinion, the Coptic parallels are tenuous. Daphne is always naked, Apollo has a kithara, and there is no scene in which Hermes, the nymph, Apollo, and Daphne appear together, as Lukács claims on our brooch.

The explanations are so different from each other that this alone makes the brooch unique. How can the same image be viewed and interpreted differently? The difference in perceptions is

⁴²TÓTH (2022) 253–255.

⁴³LUKÁCS (2022).

⁴⁴LUKÁCS (2022) 126–130.

⁴⁵LUKÁCS (2022) 128. fig. 4:4 = LIMC III, 259, 35.

due not only to the object's small size, but also to the interpreters' prior knowledge and preconceptions, which influence what they recognize and identify in the image. This is a natural human trait from which none of us are exempt since, as Hans-Georg Gadamer said, all understanding is essentially prejudicial and determined by prior understanding. Understanding occurs by merging the horizons of the interpreter and the subject in a circular movement where the interpreter plays and risks their preconceptions.⁴⁶

In the case of a special object such as Bonosa's brooch, whose interpretation requires a wide range of background knowledge and is very complex, we can only choose between more or less probable interpretations. The degree of probability depends on the accuracy of the observation and the extent to which all the details of the scene can be identified. It also depends on the extent to which the scene can be placed within an iconographic tradition and on the extent to which a coherent explanation can be given for the depiction's appearance in Horreum grave No. 5 in Pannonia in the second half of the sixth century.

Accurate observation requires autopsies and high-resolution photographs. Although modern technology can be helpful in this regard, it can also mislead observers. The creator of the artwork did not have technical tools available to modern observers. With magnification, modern observers can see details of the original that are not visible to the naked eye, such as a randomly drawn line, surface damage, bulges, or dents. These details can be attributed to independent meanings, even though they are meaningless.

I find Erwin Panofsky's terminology and method of interpreting Renaissance art relevant to our topic.⁴⁷ Therefore, my explanation begins with a meticulous examination of the image, which Panofsky calls a pre-iconographical description. Next, an iconographic interpretation will be performed, and finally, I draw iconological conclusions.

PRE-ICONOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS: WHAT DO WE SEE?

The image shows the details of a building and four figures (Fig. 1). The group on the left is made up of three figures dressed in women's clothing, and a figure on the right is dressed in men's clothing, who hurries out of the picture and looks back at the person standing in the center of the scene. The man wears a short tunic (*exomis*), a cloak (*chlamys*) fastened at the chin by a buckle and thrown back, and a broad-brimmed hat (*petasos*) on his head. It is questionable whether the distinctly branched lines on his legs above the ankles indicate boots or something else. The man holds two objects in each hand: a stick-like object and a horn-shaped wicker basket, from which three pointed objects protrude. The main figure, standing in the center and depicted frontally, wears an ankle-length, straight, sleeveless shirt (*chiton*) and sandals, and holds a weird object in her left hand. The hand is almost flush with the long handle of the object, which has a slightly curved crescent-shaped object at each end. The upper part of this object has at least eight triangularly pointed tongues. The head of the figure is adorned with a diadem-like jewel from which a veil hangs down at the sides. With her right hand, she touches the upper left arm of a kneeling or seated female figure on her left, while the latter holds the

⁴⁶GADAMER (1990) 191–217.

⁴⁷Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art. In: PANOFSKY (1955) 26–54.

lower edge of her chiton with her right hand. The short female figure, whose head appears to be encircled by a wreath, also wears a long-sleeveless chiton that is spread out in front of and behind her. The exact position of her body is difficult to determine, partly because of the spread of chiton and partly because of workmanship, which shows strong traces of reworking, engraving, and chiseling on the brooch. Standing behind her is the third female figure, also in a long chiton, but distinguished from the other two by a diagonal band above the waist, which is probably a folding of the dress over the belt (*kolpos*). The head is blurred, but the large size suggests that she may also be wearing a diadem. She is holding an elongated object in her right hand, pointing downwards, and an object in her left hand, pointing upward. The object held upward is similar in shape and short tongues to the object held in the hand of the central female figure. The female figure on the left stands in front of a gabled building supported by a column with capital, and may look at the other two female figures.

In this context, we must look for a scene in the ancient and late-antique iconographic tradition in which there are four dominant figures – three women and one man – and in which a colonnaded building with a pediment also plays an important role. Two of the women hold an object up in their hands, but one of them holds something down with her other hand. Two of the three women are in a closer relationship: one is standing, and the other is sitting on the floor, kneeling or stepping out of the ground towards the standing figure. A male figure in a distinctive attire is closely associated with the scene.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROTOTYPE: THE RETURN OF PERSEPHONE

As will be demonstrated, the image of the round box brooch is most likely Persephone's *anodos*. The columned building can represent the underworld, where Persephone and Hades rule. Hecate is standing in front of the building. In the center of the picture, we see Persephone returning from the underworld to Demeter and to the right of her the *psychopompos*, Hermes, dressed in his characteristic attire, with winged boots or sandals on his feet.

In the Greek ceramics of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the depiction of Persephone's return from Hades is far more common than the abduction scene, but in Hellenistic and imperial images, especially in Roman sarcophagi, the abduction scene becomes dominant. Two basic types of *anodos* of the Kore can be distinguished: one is performed in the presence of a chthonic deity, only loosely linked to the Eleusinian tradition, while the other can be seen as a visual interpretation of the Demeter hymn, which is an aetiological exposition of the Eleusinian mysteries but where there is room for the painter's freedom.⁴⁸ In the latter group of paintings, in the presence of Hecate, Demeter, and Hermes, Persephone appears to emerge from the ground or be waist-deep in the earth, similar to the most common representations of the *anodos* of Aphrodite and Pandora. One of the best-known examples of depictions close to Hymn to Demeter is the Athenian red-figure bell krater, c. 440 BCE, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 5),⁴⁹ on which Demeter appears on the right with a *skeptron*, and

⁴⁸MEZGER (1951) 231–233; In examining the relationship between the vase paintings, the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Thesmophoria, BERARD (1974) 138 prefers to call these scenes 'finding' (*heurésis*) rather than return (*anodos*), which was the first day of the festival.

⁴⁹New York, Metropolitan Museum: 28.57.23.



Fig. 5. Athenian red-figure bell krater, c. 440 BCE, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/252973> (Accessed 5 August 2025)

on the left Hermes in petasos and *chlamys* holding a *kerykeion*. Hecate rushes towards Demeter with two torches, looking back at Persephone, who emerges from the ground with a diadem on her head. The Kore is shown in the same position on the upper frieze of an Athenian red-figure calyx krater, where Persephone dances around satyrs.⁵⁰ Aphrodite emerges from the field in a similar manner in the upper frieze of a red-figure calyx krater.⁵¹ In these depictions, the outline of the chiton falling to the ground indicates the movement of a goddess. We can assume that an engraver with superficial knowledge of iconographic tradition might have found this posture odd and tried to make Persephone a kneeling, or sitting figure on Bonosa's brooch, even at the cost of distorting the proportions of the body. It is therefore difficult to say whether Persephone is stepping forward from the ground, kneeling or sitting, but the model is clearly recognizable. On the bell-krater of the Metropolitan, Hecate leads the Kore back to earth with two torches, as on a fragmentary Berlin lekane and an Athenian lekythos.⁵² In the latter, Hecate holds the torch in her left hand downwards, while the other is raised with her right hand, as on our brooch, or more precisely on the former negative model, of which we now see a mirror image.

⁵⁰Berlin, Antikensammlung: 3275: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/record/4A375F67-79DF-44F5-A8D5-3FAA2B4EEAD2> (Accessed 5 August 2025). BERARD (1974) fig. 16.58.

⁵¹BERARD (1974) fig. 18.63.

⁵²BERARD (1974) fig. 9.31: Berlin lekane, and fig. 9.32: Athenian lekythos.

The palace of Persephone and Hades is usually depicted as a *naiskos*, where those who descend to the underworld enter,⁵³ or where, for example, Hades and Dionysus make a pact before Persephone,⁵⁴ and from which Persephone departs on her return. A similar *naiskos* appears as the sanctuary of Eleusis in the volute-krater of the Medea in Eleusis,⁵⁵ and the shape of the Ninnion tablet, which was found in Eleusis and depicts certain scenes of the Mysteries, also refers to such a sanctuary.⁵⁶

The capital column and the pediment on Bonosa's brooch may refer to this sanctuary, which in the iconographic tradition represents both the palace of Persephone and Hades and the temple of Eleusis. Once this is recognized, the strange sunshade-like objects in the hands of Hecate and Demeter can be identified. In the Eleusinian Mysteries and in the depictions of the *anodos* and *kathodos* of the Kore, a peculiar cross-shaped torch, lit at all four ends and held on a long handle like a sunshade, often occurs. This object first appears in Magna Graecia in the fourth century BCE on Apulian vases,⁵⁷ and also on coins from Metapontum, accompanied by a wheat ear next to the head of Leucippus or in the hands of Persephone.⁵⁸ On a volute-krater from southern Italy, Hades is shown in the quadrigal with Persephone, Hermes behind, and Hecate in front, holding a cross-shaped torch aloft.⁵⁹ In another scene of the underworld in a volute-krater from Apulia, Persephone holds a four-branched torch while talking to Hades in the palace,⁶⁰ as in the scene of the agreement between Dionysus and Hades in the Toledo funerary krater mentioned above. In the Apulian vase of Medea at Eleusis, Demeter is seated to the right of the *naiskos*, with Persephone standing beside her, both holding four-branched torches, but only Persephone's torches burn. To the left of the *naiskos*, a cloaked young man holding a strigil and leaning on a staff also holds a four-branched torch with long ribbons hanging from it. Below him, a naked young man is seated in front of a table with lion's feet, on which there are three such cross torches. He seems to be the one selling these cult objects.

There is another curiosity to explain on Bonosa's brooch. In Hermes' hand, we can see the *kerykeion/caduceus*, but the god also holds, unusually, a cornucopia, in a representation that occurs very frequently on coins.⁶¹ Although cornucopia is not an attribute of Hermes, on syncretistic coins a male deity holds both a caduceus and cornucopia. On the tetrassaron of Macrinus (217–18 CE), Hermes holds a caduceus and a purse, while on a tetrachalcon

⁵³Persephone and Hermes on a warrior's volute-krater, Baltimore painter, 320–310 BCE, The Walter Art Museum: 48.86; Persephone and Hades on a red-figure volute-krater from Apulia, 340–330 BCE, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich: 3297.

⁵⁴Apulian funerary krater, c. 340–330 BCE, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo: 1994.19.

⁵⁵Apulian red-figure volute-krater, Medea at Eleusis, Darius painter c. 340–330 BCE, Princeton University Art Museum: y1983-13.

⁵⁶National Archaeological Museum of Athens: 11036, c. 370 BCE.

⁵⁷SALAPATA (2015–16) 94.

⁵⁸Lucanian bronze coin 225–200 BCE: head of Leucippus /Persephone with the cross-shaped torch.

⁵⁹Volute-krater, British Museum: 1885,0314.1.

⁶⁰Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich: 3297.

⁶¹A similar cornucopia appears on the coins, together with the personifications of Liberalitas, Genius, Fortuna, Moneta, Felicitas, Annona, Providentia, Aequitas, Pudicitia, Abundantia, Fecunditas, Homonia, etc. Male figure with cornucopia and caduceus: saeculum frugiferum; female figure e.g. Felicitas temporum with representation.

of southern Italy (c. 211–200 BCE), Hermes holds an olive branch and a caduceus, with cornucopia on the ground. In any case, the appearance of the cornucopia is consistent with the *anodos* scene, since Persephone's return from the underworld represents the spring renewal and fertility of nature. However, there may be another reason why Hermes holds a cornucopia on Bonosa's brooch. It is possible that the god on the archetype held a torch instead of the cornucopia, as on the 10 assarion coins of the Emperor Claudius II Gothicus (268–70 CE), where Hermes hurries to the right wearing a petasos, a *chlamys*, and a winged sandal, holding a *kerykeion* in his right hand and a torch in his left (Fig. 6). The maker of our brooch, or perhaps just its modifier, obviously had a problem with the depiction of cultic torches and tried to give meaning to an object that he could not precisely identify.

On the brooch, Demeter holds a torch in her left hand and touches Persephone with her right. This gesture is in keeping with iconographic tradition, since Demeter's posture always indicates whether we are looking at *anodos* or *kathodos*.⁶² When Demeter is depicted in the presence of Persephone with her arms outstretched and restless, it is a repeated *katabasis* scene; that is, a representation of the mother who repeatedly loses her daughter returning to the Underworld. However, when, in the presence of Persephone, Demeter sits calmly, as in the scene of the *Regina Vasorum*,⁶³ or stands, as in the aforementioned red figure vase of the Metropolitan, or holds Persephone in her lap, as in a fourth-century BCE lekythos found in Apollonia Pontica,⁶⁴ or touches her gently, as on our round brooch, they certainly represent *anodos*, the return from the Underworld.⁶⁵

In one of the two 'Persephone tombs' of the Kom el Shoqafa hypogeum in Alexandria, dating from the first to second centuries CE, two bands of juxtaposed, almost totally faded scenes from



Fig. 6. Pisidia, Sagalassus. Claudius II Gothicus, 268–270. 10 Assaria. Source: <https://www.coinarchives.com/>

⁶²SANCHEZ (2015) 59.

⁶³Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, St 525 (B-1659), c. 4th century BCE.

⁶⁴Sofia, National Museum: 7721.

⁶⁵For the images representing the cult, see CLINTON (1992) 84. and MITSPOULOU (2011).

Egyptian and Greek mythology have been revealed by modern technology. The top row depicts Osiris' death, embalming, and resurrection. The bottom row depicts Persephone surrounded by natural elements, her abduction, and her reign in the Underworld with Hades.⁶⁶ This example shows how the myth of Kore can be interpreted in different religious systems with the same meaning.⁶⁷ This phenomenon can also be observed in cubacula N and O of the Via Latina (Via Dino Compagni) hypogeum, which was decorated in the second half of the fourth century CE.⁶⁸ From burial chamber N, decorated with scenes of Heracles and Alcestis, a very short corridor of approximately two footsteps leads to chamber O, entirely decorated with biblical scenes. As pointed out, N may have been commissioned by a wife mourning her husband, and O by a mother mourning her daughter, probably by the same person.⁶⁹ The last *arcosolium* in chamber O, and thus the very end of the entire hypogeum, has the portrait of a young girl above the grave. On either side of the corridor, Demeter (Ceres) and Persephone (Proserpina) look towards this grave. Demeter holds a torch in her left hand and a bundle of grains in her right hand. Persephone holds a bundle of grains in both hands. It would not be surprising to see the return of Alcestis on Bonosa's brooch, a scene common in Roman funerary art, but this identification is unlikely due to the absence of iconographic features, particularly the absence of Heracles.

Although, in the eyes of early Christian theologians, the story of Demeter and Persephone was considered pagan superstition,⁷⁰ like other mythological narratives and cults, it seems that their story could sometimes appear in visual representations in a Christian context, as could characters from other polytheistic myths, if their story could be given a meaning acceptable to Christians. This was the case with Orpheus and Heracles, and it seems that the story of Persephone and Demeter fits this iconographic tradition. In the Roman hypogeum, the figure, position and posture of Demeter and Persephone suggest that a mother grieving for her daughter could identify with Ceres, who had lost her daughter because, as a Christian, she hoped to regain in the resurrection the one whom death had taken from her. The elite of the Pannonian Christian community seems to have been more open than usual to the 'pagan' iconographic tradition, but it is not known exactly why. In any case, the representation of Persephone's *anodos*, as well as the inscription 'Bonosa' on the clothespin, gives special significance to grave no. 5 in the necropolis of Horreum.

ICONOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: THE SYMBOLIC AND RELIGIOUS CONTENT OF SCENE SELECTION

The image is unusual, but not unprecedented, in the Christian context. It has a rich history in ancient funerary art and may have been inspired by the tragic death of a young girl named

⁶⁶GUIMIER-SORBETS-SEIF EL-DIN (1997) 378–380 regarded the last panel as depicting Persephone's *anodos*. Later, GUIMIER-SORBETS-PELLE-SEIF EL-DIN (2015) revised this identification.

⁶⁷The story of Osiris and Persephone is also paralleled by Lactantius in *Div. inst.* 1.21.24.

⁶⁸The cemetery complex may have been built in four phases from the second decade of the fourth century CE and was in use until 410, see TRONZO (1986) chapter 2.

⁶⁹HEIDL (2020).

⁷⁰Lactant. *Div. inst.* 1.21.24; August. *De civ. Dei* 4.8, 4.10, 4.11; 6.7, 7.20, 7.23, 7.24, 7.28; Prudent. *Apotheosis* 1.488 and *Contra Symmachum* 1.367.

Bonosa. The round box brooch gives us insight into the grief of a mother. A wealthy, certainly Christian, mother buried her child, whose gold earrings with peacocks indicate her Christian identity, and whose collar, modelled on the jewelry of Byzantine empresses,⁷¹ refers to her social status. The polytheistic myth was probably chosen because there is no appropriate scene in the purely Christian iconographic tradition that can so clearly express the mother-daughter relationship, the pain of a mother grieving for her daughter and the hope that one day they will be reunited.

The choice of image leads us to conclude that Bonosa's brooch certainly did not belong to one of the supposed reliquaries, nor was it part of her everyday dress; that is, it was not worn as an ornament but as a funerary gift. In the case of the Pannonian disc brooches of known origin found in graves, Garam concluded that they were worn only by women and children, but their function is uncertain. They are not suitable for holding thicker fabrics or layers of cloth together, and are too heavy to hold a thin veil or silk. As they were not suitable for practical use, they may have carried some sort of symbolic message in a prominent place in the clothing of women and children.⁷² It should be added that a group of early Byzantine round box brooches carried a symbolic message, not so much on the clothing of the living as on that of the dead, namely the belief that the ultimate victory was not in death but in life.

Unlike other interpretations, the one presented above places every element and figure depicted on the brooch within a unified interpretive framework and connects them to an iconographic tradition that developed in Classical Greek art and appeared in funerary art for centuries, including Hellenistic wall paintings, mosaics, and Roman sarcophagi, despite different religious traditions. However, as previously mentioned, the most common depictions of Persephone's return are found on fifth- and fourth-century BCE vase paintings. In Hellenistic and imperial scenes, however, abduction of Persephone becomes dominant. What could be the direct model for the sixth-century round brooch depiction of Anodos? We are unaware of any such model, and cannot present any contemporary parallels. This lack of evidence may weaken the plausibility of my interpretation but does not refute it. In fact, one must admit that our knowledge of ancient and late antique art is limited to the remaining fragments of once flourishing cultures.

Approximately two-thirds of the known round box brooches were found in Pannonia, while a smaller number were found in the Balkans and southern Italy.⁷³ Bonosa's brooch belongs to the group of round brooches that depict non-Christian images. Examples include the "Apotheosis of the Emperor"⁷⁴ and „Bellerophon and the Chimera,”⁷⁵ which were also found in graves in Keszthely-Fenékpuszta and Keszthely-Dobogó, as well as from the sixth to seventh centuries. According to the findings from graves dating to this period, the community living along Lake

⁷¹HORVÁTH–RÁCZ (2016) 314–315. The most famous example is the representation of the Empress Theodora and her entourage in the San Vitale's mosaic in Ravenna.

⁷²GARAM (1993) 116–117.

⁷³BOLLÓK (2014) 269–270; TÓTH (2022) 250.

⁷⁴Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, grave no. 83; Keszthely-Dobogó; BOLLÓK (2014) 262, fig. 2/1–2.

⁷⁵Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, grave 1885/V; Keszthely-Fenékpuszta Horreum, grave 12; BOLLÓK (2014) 260, fig. 1/1–2.

Pelso had extensive connections with people from the Mediterranean region. Along with Christian iconography,⁷⁶ this community remained receptive to certain Greco-Roman iconographic themes, especially if they were given Christian meaning. The Christian members of the community did not consider the abduction and descent into the underworld to be the main message of the Persephone story but rather her return, that is her “resurrection.” This mythological story was well known in antiquity and in late antiquity. Even if we do not know the direct visual model for Bonosa’s brooch, it is certain that the iconographic traditions of Persephone’s anodos were known in certain Mediterranean regions during the sixth century.

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⁷⁶See “The Worship of the Cross” on sixth- and seventh-century brooches from Keszthely-Dobogó and Keszthely-Fenékpuszta Horreum 14 grave: BOLLÓK (2014) 267, fig. 6A/1 and 3.

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