

## *Priapea Daciae.*

### **A new statuette depicting Priapus from Porolissum**

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**Abstract.** This paper presents a previously unpublished bronze statuette representation of Priapus. The artifact was discovered in the South-Western part of the settlement of Porolissum, in Dacia Porolissensis. Unfortunately, the precise archaeological context is unknown. In addition to presenting succinct description of the bronze statuette, this paper discusses the known finds of Priapus from the province of Dacia and suggests how they may have been used in public or private religious manifestations.

**Keywords:** Priapus, Roman Dacia, Porolissum, bronze statuette, Roman religion.

**Rezumat. Priapea Daciae. O nouă statueta cu reprezentarea lui Priapus de la Porolissum.** Acest studiu prezintă o statueta de bronz inedită cu reprezentarea lui Priapus. Artefactul a fost descoperit în zona sud-vestică a aşezării de la Porolissum, în Dacia Porolissensis. Din nefericire, contextul arheologic precis nu este cunoscut. Pe lângă prezentarea succintă a descrierii statuetei, în studiul de faţă se discută şi celelalte descoperiri cu reprezentarea lui Priapus din provincia Dacia sugerând în acelaşi timp cum ar fi putut fi folosite acestea în manifestările publice sau private.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Priapus, Dacia romană, Porolissum, statueta bronz, religie romană.

In the spring of 1980 a stray find from Porolissum (Pl. I) was reported to the local museum of Zalău, namely a bronze statuette depicting the god Priapus<sup>1</sup>. The small, solid cast statuette has a height of 7.1 cm, a width at

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the shoulders of 2.1 cm and a base of 0.98 cm<sup>2</sup>. The statuette depicts a schematic, grotesque and provincial representation of an ithyphallic Priapus. Represented as a dwarf and possibly naked, he wears a Phrygian cap on his head. The facial characteristics are easily distinguishable: exophthalmic eyes, small nose, and a proportionate mouth. The body is proportionally shaped. With both of the palms of his outstretched hands, the deity holds his erected *phallus*, while his other genital organs are outlined. The feet are represented down to just a little lower than the knees; the statuette has a support at its lower extremity for being attached on a small base (Pl. II, photos and Pl. III, drawing). The state of conservation of the bronze statuette is satisfactory, with only a small corroded area on the right shoulder. The precise archaeological context of the statuette is unknown; however, it was found in the South-Western area of the *municipium Septimium Porolissense*.

Priapus was a native deity from the Mysian city of Lampsakos on the Hellespont. In Greco-Roman times, Priapus was perceived as a fertility god, symbolized by the exaggeratedly large dimensions of his *phallus*. He was also considered to be the protector of gardens, goat and sheep herds, bees, vineyards, and of agricultural products<sup>3</sup>.

In Roman Dacia, there is only one inscription mentioning of Priapus, accompanied by the epithet *pantheos*, suggesting his universality as a Roman god<sup>4</sup>. The altar/statue base was erected by Publius Aelius Ursio and Publius Aelius Antonianus, *aediles* of the *colonia Aurelia Apulensis*, and dates to AD 235<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, there are only five other representations of Priapus, in the form of bronze statuettes found in Dacia, known to the scientific community: 1) a small statuette, with a height of 5.3 cm. and discovered in the civil settlement of Sucidava, portrays Priapus holding his cloak with his *phallus*<sup>6</sup>; 2) construction workers in Deveselu unearthed Roman bricks and a 5.8 cm. high representation of Priapus *pantheos* with a large

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<sup>2</sup> History and Art County Museum Zalău, inv. no. 744/1980.

<sup>3</sup> For the ancient literary sources and a general and fairly recent bibliography on Priapus see W. Rüdiger Megow s.v. *Priapos*, in LIMC, VIII/2 (1997), p.1028-1044.

<sup>4</sup> Herter sv. *Priapus* in RE XXII 2 (1954) col. 1929-1930, for commentary on Priapus see col. 1914-1941.

<sup>5</sup> IDR III/5 308, now lost: Text: *Priepo/ pantheo/ P. P(ublil) Aelii/ Ursio et An/tonianus ae/diles col(oniae) Apul(esnsis)/ dicaverunt/ Severo et Quintiano co(n)s(ulibus)*.

<sup>6</sup> Tudor 1948, 193, no. 38, fig. 38; Tudor 1978, 390, 394; Țeposu-Marinescu/Pop 2000, 57, no. 47, pl. 27.

*phallus* and wearing a cloak<sup>7</sup>; 3) a statuette was found in the *thermae* of the Roman town of Romula by G. Tocilescu, which later disappeared<sup>8</sup>; 4) in Micia a Priapus statuette with a height of 4.2 cm. holds with both of his hands his *phallus* and also has a *kalathos* – this was discovered in 1979 in a distinct archaeological layer, the *principia* of the fort at a depth of 0.95 m, dating to AD 106-170<sup>9</sup>; and, 5) the most recent discovery was made in Apulum in 2007 (66A Moșilor street in what was the *municipium Septimium Apulense*) – a statuette depicting Priapus with a height of 4.7 cm plus a base of 1 cm, was found in a pit dated to the middle of the IIIrd century AD<sup>10</sup>. This was probably votive offering, judging by the fact that it was found in a pit.

There are two fragmentary *terracotta* figurines from Ampelum that were recovered in the context of a kiln, respectively 7.5 and 9 cm in height and both hollow<sup>11</sup>. One of the artefacts bears incisions with the letters GIP on the pedestal, interpreted as the name of the manufacturer *G(aius) I(ulius) P(roculus)*<sup>12</sup>. Also, made out of *terracotta*, is a *phallus* from Romula, which has been interpreted as an object used in association with the cult of Priapus<sup>13</sup>.

Priapus is also represented on an oval gem crafted from orange carnelian. The figure, housed in the collections of the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu, wears a *chlamys* and walks to the right<sup>14</sup>. Unfortunately the find spot of the artifact is unknown.

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<sup>7</sup> Pârvan 1913, 66, Pl. VIII/4; Tudor 1978, 229, 390, 394, fig. 100, 3; Țeposu-Marinescu/Pop 2000, 57, no. 49, pl. 27; Petculescu 2003, 104, no. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Tudor 1978, 390.

<sup>9</sup> Țeposu-Marinescu/Pop 2000, 57, no. 48, pl. 27; Petculescu et al. 2003, 104, no. 51, dating in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. For a recent analysis of the statuette, see Cristea 2015, 993-1000.

<sup>10</sup> Ota 2008, 99, no. 120 (with the bibliography of other catalogues or conservation reports dealing with this artifact); Ota 2012, 104, pl. XXIX, 4; dating according to the archaeological context in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

<sup>11</sup> Lipovan 1992, 63, no. 1, fig. 1 a-b; 63-66, no.2, fig.1, 2 a-b; Ungurean 2008, 239, nos. 466-467.

<sup>12</sup> Lipovan 1992, 63-66, no. 2, fig. 1, 2 a-b; Ungurean 2008, 41. However we consider the reading of the letters as speculative.

<sup>13</sup> Tudor 1978, 390; Ungurean 2008, 41 and no. 275. This *phallus* however could have been used as an amulet; thus, we doubt the direct link between the artifact and the cultic manifestations towards Priapus.

<sup>14</sup> Țeposu-David 1965, 96, no. 19.

The most impressive representation of Priapus is the one found in *Napoca*. The colossal limestone statue of Priapus *pantheos* (with an estimated total height of 2.2 m according to A. Diaconescu) was found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the South-Eastern part of the Roman city. Its state of preservation is poor, especially in the extremities of the body; the erect phallus was probably destroyed in antiquity. The ithyphallic god holds an axe in his left hand and an eagle in his right one; his cloak is tied with a disk-shape *fibula* on his right shoulder<sup>15</sup>. A. Diaconescu has dated the statue to the Severan age, based upon artistic and sculptural analogies<sup>16</sup>. This colossal statue must have been a cult statue of a temple dedicate to Priapus *pantheos* in *Napoca*, which functioned at least during the Severan dynasty. It is impossible, for now, to establish when the temple was built or when it was eventually abandoned. We can be certain that this is the most unequivocal evidence of a public cult of Priapus *pantheos* in Roman Dacia.

As illustrated here, the vast majority of the representations of Priapus discovered in the province of Dacia are from urban or military settlements, whereas only a few were recovered at rural settlements<sup>17</sup>. The precise archaeological contexts of most of the artifacts, with the exception of the bronze statuettes of Priapus from *Micia* or the *colonia* of *Apulum*, are unknown. It appears that the examples from *Napoca* and, possibly, the *colonia* of *Apulum* were used in the context of a public cult of Priapus, whereas all other known representations were utilized for private and quotidian religious manifestations towards the ithyphallic god.

Returning to the bronze statuette depicting Priapus from *Porolissum*, we can only state that there is no firm evidence to propose a closer dating than the wide segment of time in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. It is likely that this artifact was part of a private shrine or a *lararium* in one of the households of *Porolissum*; thus, there was no connection to

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<sup>15</sup> Diaconescu 2005, vol. 2, 163-164, cat. no. 35, pl. LXI for a more detailed artistic analysis, further information of the discovery and older bibliography.

<sup>16</sup> Diaconescu 2005, vol. 1, 437.

<sup>17</sup> Bărbulescu 1998, 203. This situation is, however, normal, as archaeological excavations did not particularly focus on Roman rural settlements up to present day. M. Bărbulescu counts 13 representations of Priapus in Roman Dacia in the same paper without mentioning them. We chose to focus solely upon the evidence related to the cult of Priapus without mentioning *lucernae*, Samian ware, phalluses, or other artifacts which are not relevant for this study.

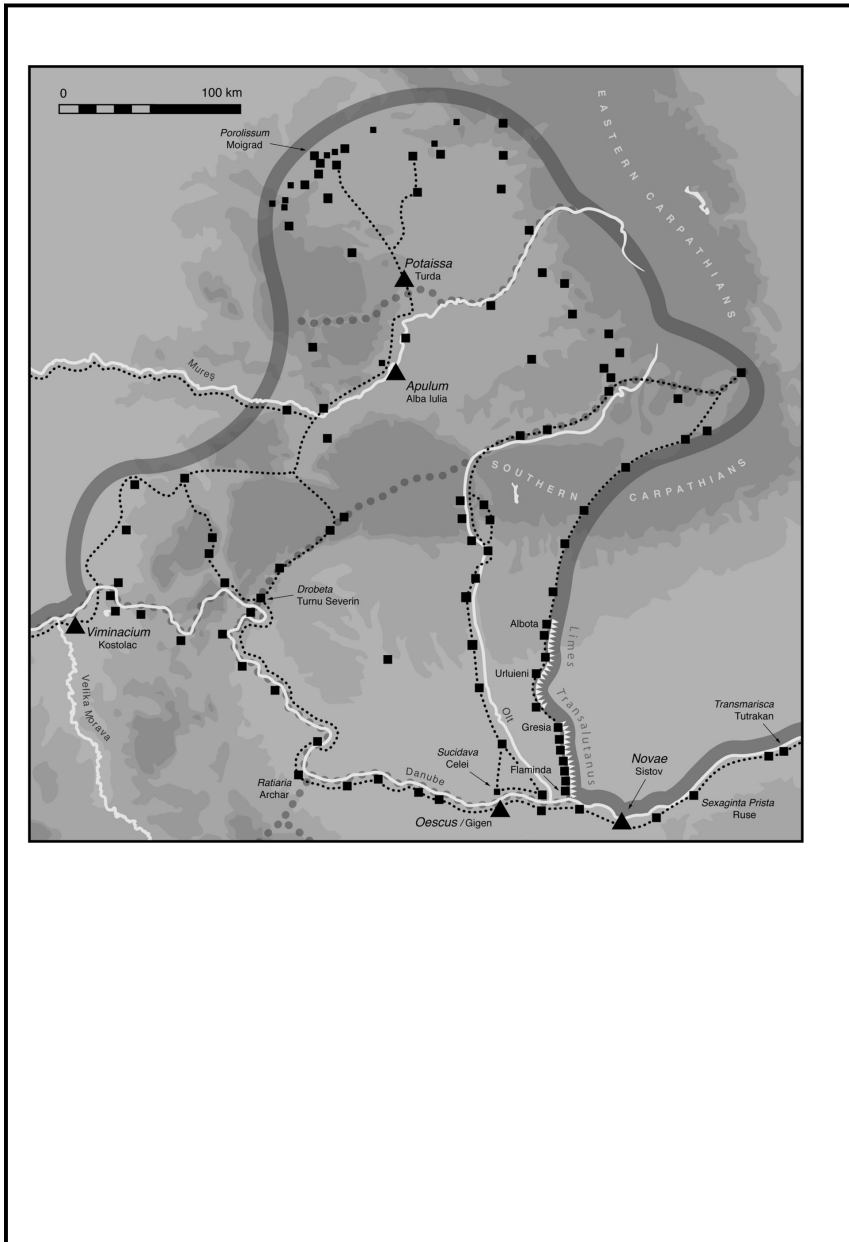
the military environment. Finally we can add that the importance of this statuette is based upon the general scarcity of representations of Priapus in Dacia.

### **Illustrations**

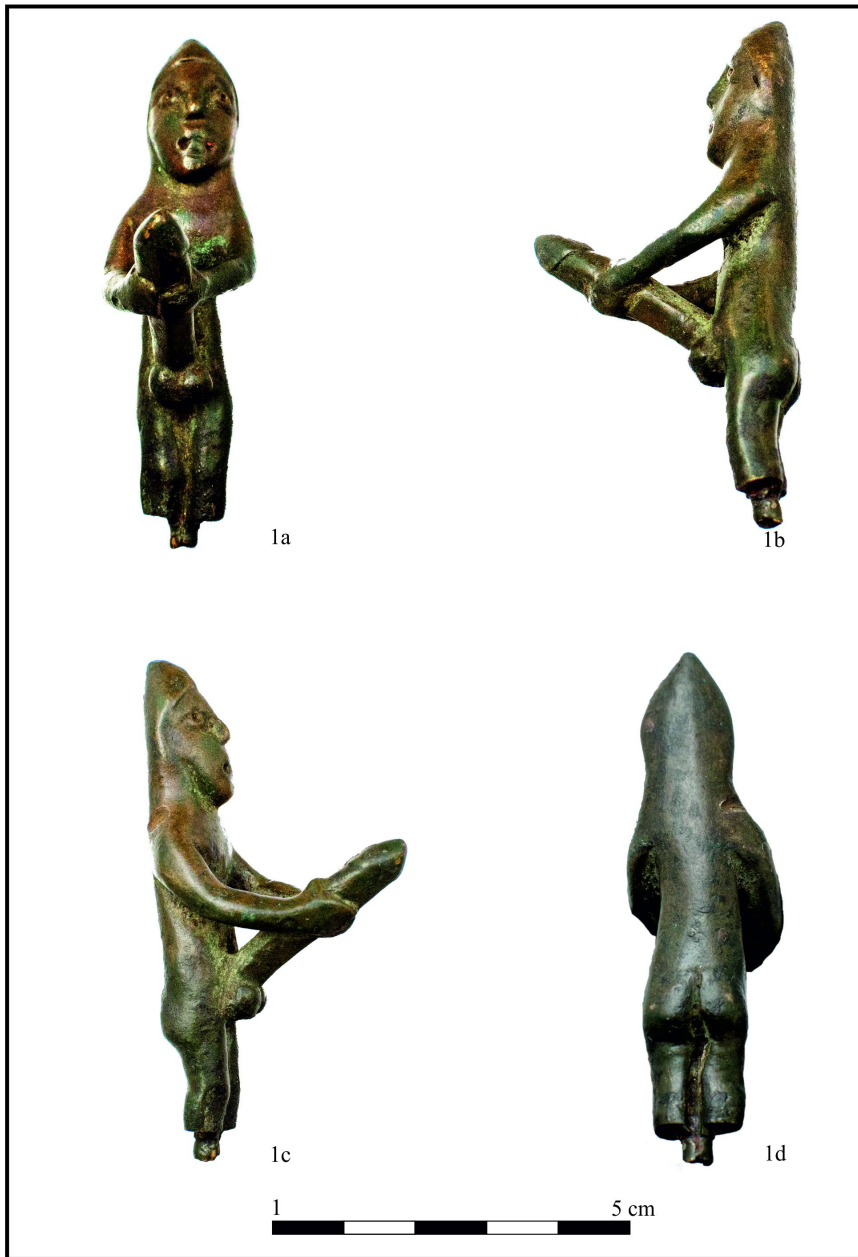
Pl. I: Map of Roman Dacia (Danube Limes – UNESCO World Heritage / Pen & Sword / CHC – University of Salzburg, authors: David Breeze and Kurt Schaller).

Pl. II: 1a. Priapus, frontal side view. 1b. Left side view. 1c. Right side view. 1d. Back side view. Porolissum (Sălaj county/RO). Photo D. Deac.

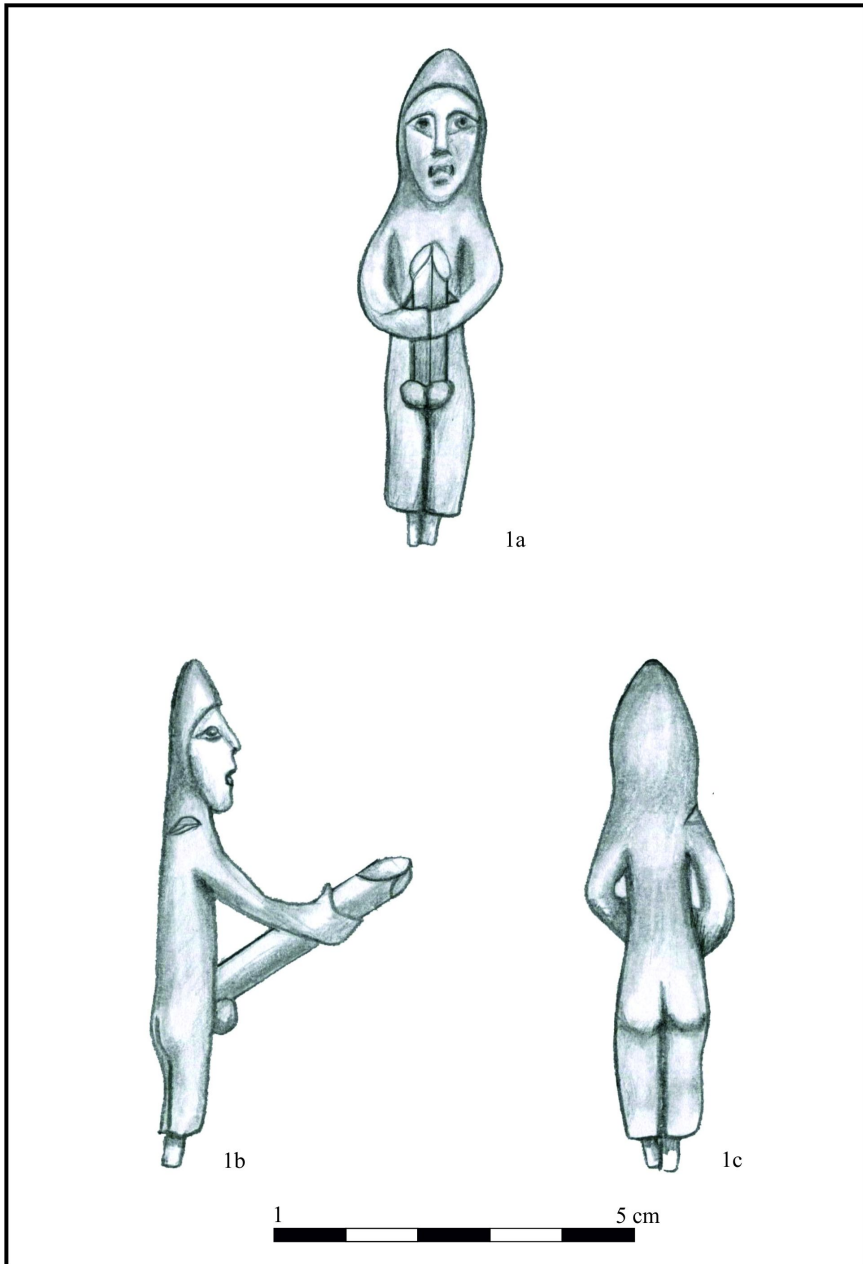
Pl. III: 1a. Priapus, frontal side view. 1b. Right side view. 1c. Back side view. Porolissum (Sălaj county/RO). Drawing O. Orțan.



Pl. I



Pl. II



**Pl. III**



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