

## MYTHOLOGICAL SCENES FROM DACIA PROVINCE: PERSEUS KILLING GORGON MEDUSA AND ZEUS SEDUCING LEDA

Radu OTA

**Keywords:** *Romanization, Mythology, Perseus killing Gorgon Medusa, sculpture, Apulum, narrative relief, official cults, Zeus seducing Leda*

Apulum, the most important centre of Romanization irradiation, underwent a large economic and cultural development also reflected by the multitude of iconographic and epigraphic attestations of the official Greek-Roman cults but not only. Heroes of Greek mythology, except for Heracles/Hercules generally are poorly represented within Dacia province iconography, compared to the official deities, attested by a great number of images and inscriptions. A fragment of monument and a lamp with the representation of some mythological Greek-Roman scenes drew my attention; they are part of the collections of the museum from Alba Iulia, completing information about this subject. We are dealing with an interesting relief with votive character, which depicts the myth of Perseus killing Gorgon Medusa and the image of Zeus transformed into swan, who is trying to seduce Leda, one of the numerous mortals with whom the king of the gods had love affairs.

A Bucova marble block (after its texture), in a fragmentary state (R916, length-60cm, width-31cm, thickness-15cm), was found in one of the deposits of the National Museum of Union from Alba Iulia; most probably it belonged to the frieze of a temple (Pl. I. 1-3). The piece got into the possession of the museum on 14 March 1908. The conditions in which it had been bought are not known neither is the exact place of provenience, the Inventory Register of Roman Period of the museum noting simply only „Apulum”.

Before making a detailed presentation of the relief, we will review the myth, which was at the basis of this type of representation. Polydectes sends son of Zeus and Danae, Perseus, king of Serifos Island, to cut off the head of Gorgon Medusa. Athena, the most beloved daughter of Zeus, and Hermes, the messenger of the gods, guides him in his attempt. The nymphs, who give him Hades' helmet (which made invisible the person who wore it), a charmed bag and winged sandals, also help him. Reached above the island where the Gorgons lived, the

hero attacks Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon and cuts her head off while she was sleeping. After he put it in the bag, he succeeded to escape from the other two Gorgons who started to search for him<sup>1</sup> due to Hades' helmet.

Three characters depicting the scene of one of the most important legends of Greek mythology, that in which the hero Perseus kills Gorgon Medusa<sup>2</sup>, decorate the sculptural field in relief.

Athena appears on the right side of the relief, standing, wearing a *peplos* and an Attic helmet. She holds a round shield, functioning as a mirror, in her hand. Only a part of the head and the raised left arm preserved of Medusa, decorates the centre of the image. The master also rendered the wings, dinosaur scales from the body and snakes instead of hair. Perseus appears to the left of the image, the moment when he prepares to cut off the head of Medusa. The terminal part or the top of the Phrygian cap worn by the hero, as well as a piece from the *chlamys* that Perseus wore can be still distinguished on the left margin of the relief. According to a type of iconographic scene encountered in the neighbouring provinces, West of Dacia, the hero is depicted wearing a cloak and a Phrygian cap. The representation from Apulum does not „copy” in detail the iconographic schemes encountered in the neighbouring provinces, the stonecutter tried to render certain originality to his creation.

It is probably a so-called „narrative relief” in which Perseus' deeds was “told”, among which that of killing Gorgon Medusa. *It is the only image of this myth from Dacia province.* The urban centre Apulum underwent numerous iconographic representations of the Greek myths taken over by Roman religion. The most spread mythological scene from Dacia, Hercules defeating the lion of Nemea is depicted on a funerary altar from Germisara<sup>3</sup>, on an *aedicula* from Porolissum<sup>4</sup> and on a funerary *stella* from Apulum<sup>5</sup>. Scylla, the marine monster killed by the hero is also illustrated on a funerary relief from Apulum<sup>6</sup>. The scenes of Greek mythology<sup>7</sup> predominate in Dacia province, according to Professor M. Bărbulescu. In addition, Roman mythology, less receptive to mythology, created less myths.

This mythological scene (Perseus killing Gorgon Medusa) firstly appears on vessels painted on Aegina Island, belonging to archaic Greek art<sup>8</sup>. Those painted in the classical period follow, discovered in Attica and preserved in museums in London, Cambridge and New York<sup>9</sup>. This myth is also depicted on the reliefs of

<sup>1</sup> FERRARI 2003, p. 657

<sup>2</sup> I want to thank my colleagues Ph.D. Agnieszka Tomas (Warsaw University) and Ph.D. Gabrielle Kremer (Vienna Institute of Archaeology) for the amability of making available bibliographical references and images on this theme, without which I couldn't have made this article, taking into consideration that we are dealing with the only iconographic representation of Perseus in Dacia province.

<sup>3</sup> BĂRBULESCU 1977, p. 187, no. 77, fig. V/1-2; ȚEPOSU-MARINESCU 1982, p. 45, 168, A 32; BĂRBULESCU 2003, p. 285, no. 3, fig. 2.

<sup>4</sup> BĂRBULESCU 2003, p. 285, no. 5.

<sup>5</sup> FLORESCU 1930, p. 104, no. 47, fig. 40; ȚEPOSU-MARINESCU 1982, p. 119, S 67, pl. VIII; CIONGRADI 2007, p. 180, Taf. 54, S/A 70.

<sup>6</sup> GRAMATOPOL 1967, p. 163-167.

<sup>7</sup> BĂRBULESCU 1996, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 339, no. 112.

<sup>9</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 339, no. 113-115.

Grecian art from the archaic and classical period. On an archaic Grecian vessel, decorated with motifs in relief preserved in Louvre museum, Perseus is dressed with a short *chiton* and cap; he also wears winged sandals, while Medusa has a horse body<sup>10</sup>. Another famous representation of the myth appears on a lime metope of the temple from Selinunt, built in 530-510 B.C. Athena<sup>11</sup> appears to the left of the image, next to Perseus, who is cutting off the head of Medusa. As well, the myth shows on the reliefs of two bronze sculptures from the half of the 6th century B.C., discovered in Delphi and Olympia<sup>12</sup>.

Within Roman painting, the scene shows up in Herculaneum, in the so-called „House of Perseus and Medusa“<sup>13</sup>. In Gaul, Perseus turns up as watching backwards, next to Medusa<sup>14</sup> on a vessel relief of *oinochoe* type discovered in Chalon-sur-Saône. Also in Italy, more precisely in Campina, the scene is present on four votive plates from Campina, which are held in Rome, Naples, London and Würzburg<sup>15</sup> museums.

Close analogies which present this legend are encountered on funerary reliefs from Pannonia, found in Intercisa (2), Savaria<sup>16</sup>, Aquincum<sup>17</sup> and Sopianae<sup>18</sup>. In Noricum, the same iconographic scene is attested on a sarcophagus relief from Graz<sup>19</sup>. Medusa usually appears kneeling, the moment when the hero is cutting her head off.

The striking iconographic resemblance of the relief from Apulum with those from Pannonia and Noricum certifies once more that Dacia's Romanity has a pronounced Occidental character<sup>20</sup>. This is evidenced by the adoption and pronounced spreading of official cults, reflected in their turn through art, but also by the organization way of the cities, architecture of public or private buildings and last but not least, the typically Roman way of life. Also, as far as the origin of funerary construction typology and the funerary art from Dacia Superior are concerned, the closest analogies start from the monumental necropolis in Aquileia (North Italy) and Sempeter (Noricum)<sup>21</sup>.

Mythological scenes with Perseus holding the Medusa head and with Hercules killing the Nemean lion are also found in Baroque art, through the reliefs made on the first gate of the Vauban type bastionary fortress in Alba Iulia, built in the first half of the 18th century<sup>22</sup>.

The lamp we are going to deal with was already published almost three decades ago<sup>23</sup>. We considered necessary to bring some completions as far as the

---

<sup>10</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 339, no. 117.

<sup>11</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 339, no. 119.

<sup>12</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 339, no. 120-121.

<sup>13</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 340, no. 130.

<sup>14</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 340, no. 134.

<sup>15</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 340, no. 133 a-d.

<sup>16</sup> TOYNEBEE 1977, p. 402; LIMC 1994, p. 340, no. 131, 132 b.

<sup>17</sup> LIMC 1994, p. 340, no. 132 a.

<sup>18</sup> GRAMATOPOL 2000, p. 212.

<sup>19</sup> I want to thank Gabrielle Kremer for the amiable information that I received from her.

<sup>20</sup> PROTASE 1990-1993, p. 262-263.

<sup>21</sup> GRAMATOPOL 2000, p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> ANGHEL 1987, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> MICLEA, FLORESCU 1980, p. 78, no. 115.

study of this piece is concerned (Pl. I, 4). It is a clay lamp, of high quality, red brick colored (length – 10,5 cm, height – 3,6 cm, diameter – 7 cm)<sup>24</sup>. It comes from Oltenia, the discovery place not being known exactly. The discus is round, flat bottom, oblong nozzle, decorated with volutes. The infilling orifice (*infundibilum*) is perforated on the discus decorated with the mythological scene representing Zeus, transformed into a swan, seducing Leda. The image is skilfully made by the master. Leda is rendered with grace, naked, with her hair in a bun. The bird, with carefully marked feathers, kisses the mortal very tenderly. It is a love scene by which the master wished to arouse certain emotions exactly through the care with which he rendered the characters.

Another issue is that of dating the piece. It is somehow difficult to make a tight dating, but we will try on the basis of analogies to formulate an answer. The lamp is included within the IVth type established by S. Loeschcke, which was dated by the same author from the period of Octavianus Augustus until the 2nd century A.D.<sup>25</sup>.

In Dacia, this type is attested in Porolissum, Gilău and Buciumi, thus in the military environment, by lamps dated on the basis of the archaeological context along the whole 2nd century A.D.<sup>26</sup>. Therefore almost all discoveries for this type of lamp are dating from the 1st-2nd centuries A.D. The first editors of the piece framed the lamp at the beginning of the 3rd century A.D., in the so-called „Roman Baroque”, because of discus and decorative elements<sup>27</sup>.

If the piece was made after the Roman conquest we think to date it in the 2nd century A.D., but it is not excluded to have been used for a longer period (although marks of intense secondary burning are not present), starting with the last decades of the 1st century A.D. As far as the decoration on the discus is concerned, this mythological scene is rendered generally extremely rarely in Roman art.

According to the most spread legend related to this myth, Leda, daughter of Thestius and wife of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, united with Zeus, transformed into a swan. From their union, two eggs resulted out of which Dioscuri and Helen<sup>28</sup> were born. We also found six analogies on lamps discovered in Carthage<sup>29</sup>. Of course that the respective image should have existed also in other parts of Roman world, but for now these are the only analogies we had access to. *It is the only representation of this mythological scene on a lamp from Dacia province.* Images of Leda are also encountered in Roman art from this province on three gems<sup>30</sup>, but neither of these in the hypostasis of affection with Zeus. Thus, the nymph appears on gems on Romula (2)<sup>31</sup> and Sucidava (1)<sup>32</sup> and on a limestone wall of an *aedicula* from Apulum<sup>33</sup>. Representations of Leda next to Zeus

<sup>24</sup> There are quite big differences as far as the dimensions of the piece depicted by the first editors is concerned. See MICLEA, FLORESCU 1980, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> LOESCHCKE 1919, p. 37-38.

<sup>26</sup> ROMAN 2006, p. 93, no. 38, pl. 13, 17; 96, no. 44, pl. 12, 17; 97, no. 47, pl. 8, 12.

<sup>27</sup> MICLEA, FLORESCU 1980, p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> FERRARI 2003, p. 491.

<sup>29</sup> DENEAUVE 1969, p. 166, no. 698-703.

<sup>30</sup> BĂRBULESCU 1984, p. 113, 115, 133; 1996, p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> TUDOR 1937-1940, p. 355, note 2; 1967, p. 224, no. 68, fig. 6/16.

<sup>32</sup> TUDOR 1937-1940, p. 355, no. 4.

<sup>33</sup> MOGA 1998, p. 136, fig. 4.

transformed into a swan<sup>34</sup> are attested on seven gems belonging to the collection of the Numismatic Cabinet of the Romanian Academy. The issue is that the provenience place of them is not known, so that they might have been made in Dacia or in neighbouring provinces.

As you noticed, images with Perseus and Medusa, but also of Zeus and Leda are generally rare Roman art representations. Aspects related to religion and Greek-Roman mythology should be debated and reunited in a *corpus* of votive monuments from Apulum, taking into consideration that this urban centre is the most important and representative place in Dacia province, where Roman civilization manifested in all its political, economical, social and cultural aspects.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ANGHEL1987 - Gh. Anghel, *Alba Iulia*, Bucharest.
- BĂRBULESCU 1977 - M. Bărbulescu, *Cultul lui Hercules în Dacia romană (I)*, ActaMN 14, p. 173-194.
- BĂRBULESCU 1984 - M. Bărbulescu, *Interferențe spirituale în Dacia romană*, Cluj-Napoca.
- BĂRBULESCU 1996 - M. Bărbulescu, *Les scènes mythologiques en Dacie romaine – éléments de la culture classique*, in *Omaggio à Dinu Adameșteanu*, Cluj-Napoca, p. 141-147.
- BĂRBULESCU 2003 - M. Bărbulescu, *Hercules și Mercurius gubernator*, in *Funeraria Dacoromana*, Cluj-Napoca, p. 282-294.
- CIONGRADI 2007 - Carmen Ciongradi, *Grabmonument und sozialer Status in Oberdakien*, Cluj-Napoca.
- DENEAUVE 1969 - Jean Deneauve, *Lampes de Carthage*, Paris.
- FERRARI 2003 - Anna Ferrari, *Dicționar de mitologie greacă și romană*, Bucharest.
- FLORESCU 1930 - Gr. Florescu, *I monumenti funerari romani della Dacia superior*, EDR 4, p. 72-148.
- GRAMATOPOL 1967 - M. Gramatopol, *Une Scylla funéraire d'Apulum*, Apulum 6, p. 163-167.
- GRAMATOPOL 1974 - M. Gramatopol, *Les pierres gravées du Cabinet numismatique de l'Académie Roumaine*, in *Collection Latomus 138*, Bruxelles.
- GRAMATOPOL 2000 - M. Gramatopol, *Arta romană în România*, Bucharest.
- LOESCHCKE 1919 - S. Loeschcke, *Lampen aus Vindonissa. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte von Vindonissa und des antiken Beleuchtungswesens*, Zürich.
- MICLEA, FLORESCU 1980 - I. Miclea, R. Florescu, *Daco-romanii*, I, Bucharest.
- MOGA 1998 - V. Moga, *Monumente romane inedite din Apulum*, Apulum 35, p. 135-143.
- PROTASE 1990-1993 - D. Protase, *Procesul de romanizare și dăinuirea romanității în Dacia*, Apulum 27-30, p. 259-269.
- ROMAN 2006 - C. A. Roman, *Lamps from Dacia Porolissensis*, I, Zalău.
- TOYNBEE 1977 - J. M. C. Toynbee, *Greek Myth in Roman stone*, Latomus 36, p. 343-412.
- TUDOR 1937-1940 - D. Tudor, *Quelques découvertes archéologiques de la Dacie Inférieure*, Dacia 7-8, p. 353-357.
- TUDOR 1967 - D. Tudor, *Pietre gravate descoperite la Romula*, Apulum 6, p. 228-255.
- ȚEPOSU-MARINESCU 1982 - Lucia Țeposu-Marinescu, *Funerary Monuments in Dacia Superior and Dacia Porolissensis*, Oxford.

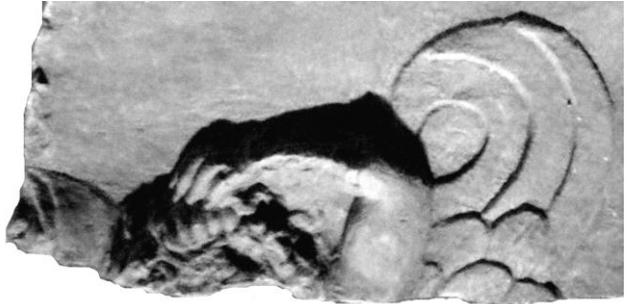
<sup>34</sup> GRAMATOPOL 1974, p. 67, no. 360-366.



1



2



3



4

Plate I: 1 - marble relief with the mythological scene of Perseus killing Gorgon Medusa; 2 - detail with Perseus; 3 - detail with Gorgon Medusa; 4 - clay lamp with the mythological scene of Zeus seducing Leda.