
HERMS FROM APULUM, ROMAN DACIA (NOWADAYS, ALBA IULIA, ROMANIA)

Abstract: This study proposes to analyse a monument type sporadically approached in the Romanian specialty literature, namely the three herms in the collections of the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia, whose place of origin is unclear. Amongst, two were designed to protect travellers, private properties and their owners. That discovered on Furcilor Hill, in 1898, is funerary. They are generally dated to the 3rd century AD, the last, to the period of the military anarchy, after AD 235, further evidence of the sculptural activity at Apulum, in the decline period of the province of Dacia. The herms with male portraits lacking any artistic propensity, while the herm with the portrait of Medusa preserves a few rather good quality features, without yet being comparable to import statues.

Keywords: *Apulum, herms, Gorgon Medusa, military anarchy.*

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To our knowledge, the topic herein has not yet been discussed in the Romanian specialty literature. Three sculptural monuments in the collections of the National Museum of the Union in Alba Iulia drew our attention, of which two were published a long time ago¹. I believed opportune to reanalyse the already published herms as well, since completions related to their iconographic description, chronological framing and significance may be added. From our point of view, all three sculptural pieces are herms, because of the manner they were sculpted.

In the Graeco-Roman world, herms are composed of a parallelepiped post, which at the top have a god's head or bust carved. Originally, these depicted the messenger god, Hermes, hence the name of this monument type. Over the course of time, other gods started to be sculpted as well, while, occasionally, in case of two portraits looking to opposite directions, we are dealing with the adjoined gods Hermes and Apollo (Hermapollo), Hermes and Mithras (Hermithra), Hermes and Harpocrates (Hermharpocrate) etc. In Roman times, such herms were also used in cemeteries and rendered the deceased. They were also placed by crossroads, with the purpose of protecting travellers, by house gates to ward off evil spirits², in amphitheatres, in hippodrome stables³ etc., fulfilling both decorative and apotropaic⁴ functions.

The first sculptural piece to be discussed here is a herm preserved intact, now in the permanent exhibition of the museum in Alba Iulia. It is a pillar (inv. no. R665), with the top carved in the form of a deity's bust (**Fig. 1a-b**). It is made of calcareous sandstone and has the following sizes: pillar:

¹ CSERNI 1901, 332-333, il. no. 41-42 (a herm with male portraits); FERRI 1933, 288, fig. 370.

² NARDO 2002, 98.

³ PARIS 1896, 134.

⁴ FERRARI 2003, 421-422.

height – 81 cm; width – 0.41/42 cm; thickness – 0.30/31cm; bust: height – 34 cm; width – 22 cm; thickness – 25 cm; Total Height – 115 cm. Its place of origin is unknown, so it is difficult to say where precisely it was firstly located. Nonetheless, a visible deep groove sculpted on one of the side faces of the monument may be indicative of the spot where the herm was set up, namely by the entrance into a courtyard. Nevertheless, such mark might date to the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, when the piece might have been used for decorative purposes. The deity's hair is rich, slightly raised above the forehead, by small waves, with thick beard and moustache. The drill bit was used to render the outline of some of the hair locks. Eyelids are thick, the iris and pupil being marked by coarse incisions, the forehead is cut by a few lines, while brow ridges are projecting. The god is dressed in a *chlamys* fastened on the right shoulder with a round brooch. Mantle folds are also rendered by deep drill bit carved grooves. Overall, workmanship is rudimentary, below the average level of the provincial art. Although the portrait preserves certain Antonine remnants in the hairstyle reproduction, the deity looks up, in a pathetic pose⁵, which points to a dating under the Severans.

The second sculptural monument is a two-portrait herm, discovered in 1898 by A. Cserni, the founder of the museum in Alba Iulia (**Fig. 2a-b**), in the southern cemetery of the urban centre at Apulum, located on Furcilor Hill – Podei. A. Cserni interpreted the monument as a possible portrait of Janus, believing that the depiction on the other, opposite side, almost entirely destroyed, represented a woman⁶. Based on the appearance, the piece is worked of organogenic limestone (inv. no. R797), mined in the quarries of Ighiu. The sizes are as follows: height – 19.30 cm; width – 13.30 cm. In the case of the missing portrait, it is difficult to say whether it was a female figure, owing to the poor preservation state, however, functionally and symbolically we are dealing with a funerary herm which renders the portraits of two deceased figures. The surviving portrait illustrates a male figure. It is worked coarsely, with asymmetrically rendered traits. The right side, with part of the skull, is broken. Damage traces are also noticeable on the right brow ridge and the nose. The mouth is rendered schematically, lacking naturalness. A line cuts the forehead, which shows we are dealing with an elderly figure. The hairstyle and beards are illustrated by curls reminiscent of the Antonine period, nonetheless, the upward look, in a pathetic pose, makes us date this sculpture rather to the 3rd century AD⁷, in the Severan period. The entire workmanship of the piece is indicative of an artisanal, inartistic work.

The third sculptural monument is a double portrait herm (R 32), of which only one has survived (**Fig. 3a-c**). It was purchased by A. Cserni in 1913, yet, unfortunately, its find context is unknown. It has the following sizes: height – 42 cm; width – 27 cm; thickness – 23 cm. The piece drew the attention of the specialists over the course of time, who provided different interpretations. S. Ferri maintained it might have been a demonic representation, possibly even of

goddess Hecate⁸. M. Gramatopol interpreted it as the portrait of Julia Domna, bringing forth parallels like the sculptural portraits preserved in the collections of the museums in the Vatican, Louvre and Athens⁹. In the catalogues of the exhibitions opened in Köln and Rome it is considered a simple 3rd century AD¹⁰ female portrait. The only specialists to interpret the bust as the image of Medusa were I. Miclea and R. Florescu. They dated the piece between the end of the 2nd c. – early 3rd c. AD¹¹.

The piece is a bust of a female figure, with round face, expressive eyes, the iris and pupil marked by deep incisions, rather clumsily. The hair is combed, parted in the middle, in parallel strands set horizontally. The mouth is open, while the lips are full. The hairdo is rather well delimited by the face plan. From rear, right-side part of the crown, is broken. The figure wears a *chiton* whose folds are quite well rendered.

It is a two-portrait herm, as the surviving figure displays a forward tilting, specific to this monument type. I don't believe it is a funerary figure, but rather one divine, since the hair covers the ear entirely (the right ear no longer preserves). Although I could not find a parallel, I believe it is Gorgon Medusa, rendered in a humanized style, under the appearance of a beautiful woman, with delicate features. Many portraits of Medusa depict her with half-open mouth, while those from the Hellenist and Roman periods show her with this physiognomy type, humanized, in which, occasionally, the serpents are missing¹². The piece exhibits an "U"-shaped perforation (in cross-section) for attachment to a pedestal or even a pillar. It is by no means a funerary representation. Portraits of the deceased do not have open mouths. Features of the late Roman period, present in the sculptural art, may be distinguishable, namely punches made with the point on the crown and left occipital area of the head, a technique that announce in my opinion the pass from the Severan dynasty to military anarchy¹³. I shall not further lay emphasis here, but in Apulum, the portrait of Medusa appears on funerary monuments (on the *lorica* of officer statues¹⁴, on sarcophagi arches¹⁵, *stelae*¹⁶ etc.), in glyptography¹⁷ and coroplastic art¹⁸. The open mouth is noticeable in the portrait of Medusa on a bronze *situla* handle discovered in the Dacian environment, specifically in the Dacian settlement of Piatra Craivii¹⁹. A white marble female portrait discovered in 1959 at Tomis, Moesia Inferior (nowadays, Constanța, Romania), in one of the cemeteries, is a rather good stylistic resemblance of the sculpture herein. The hair is rendered parted in the middle, while the iris and eye pupil are marked by deep incisions. The sculpture was dated by mid 3rd century AD²⁰. From my point of view, it belongs still to a herm.

⁸ FERRI 1933, 288, fig. 370.

⁹ GRAMATOPOL 1985, 114-116, il. 19; GRAMATOPOL 2000, 250, il. 119.

¹⁰ RÖMRUM 1969, 246, G93; CIVILTÀ 1970, 239, G56.

¹¹ MICLEA/FLORESCU 1980, 77, no. 100.

¹² FERRARI 2003, 391.

¹³ In the Military Anarchy it was developed a new sculptural technique called the "*a penna*". See: DIACONESCU 2005, 53, 96; DIACONESCU 2010-2011 (2012), 130.

¹⁴ DIACONESCU 2010-2011 (2012), 147-148, Fig. 24.

¹⁵ FLOCA 1941, 8, fig. 2.

¹⁶ TIMOFAN 2018, 63.

¹⁷ OTA 2019 (forthcoming).

¹⁸ MICLEA/FLORESCU 1980, 77, no. 111.

¹⁹ PLANTOS 2007, 23, no. 23.

²⁰ COVACEF 2002, 81-82, No. 23, Pl. VII, Fig. 3.

As mentioned in the first lines, for the province of Dacia there is no study published on the topic. I am dealing with a funerary herm and other two, most likely located by crossroads or in private yards. Except the herm with the image of Medusa, which still preserves rather good portraiture traits, the other two are of poor workmanship, below the provincial average level. They generally date to the first decades of the 3rd c. AD, or more precisely, in the case of the last sculpture, to the period of late Severan or the beginning of the Military Anarchy, as evidenced by the technique almost similar to that of successive punches²¹ in the rendering of part of the hairdo.

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²¹ DIACONESCU 2005, 53; DIACONESCU 2010-2011 (2012), 130.



Fig. 1. a-b. Herm with the portrait of a male deity. (photo, R. Ota)



0 cm  10 cm



Fig. 2. a-b. Double funerary herm, with one of the deceased's portrait. (photo, R. Ota)



Fig. 3. a-c. Double herm, with one of the surviving portraits, that of Gorgon Medusa. (photo, R. Ota)