

A BRONZE *FASCINUM* DISCOVERED AT POLUS CENTER (FLOREȘTI, CLUJ COUNTY)*

RADA VARGA, FELIX MARCU

Abstract: The current paper presents a *fascinum* from Roman Dacia. The artefact is a bronze mount, discovered in Florești (Cluj county), during the rescue excavations undertaken before building a commercial centre. The phallic amulets are part of the apotropaic magic, meant to advert misfortunes and the evil eye.

Keywords: mount; apotropaic symbol; Roman cellar.

Rezumat: Lucrarea de față prezintă un *fascinum* din Dacia romană. Artefactul este o aplică descoperită în Florești (jud. Cluj) în timpul săpăturilor arheologice de salvare efectuate cu ocazia construirii unui centru comercial. Amuletele falice aparțin magiei apotropaice, fiind destinate prevenirii nenorocului și deochiului.

Cuvinte cheie: aplică; simbol apotropaic; *cella*.

The Latin word *fascinum* translates as either an evil spell, a bewitchment, or a phallic emblem worn as a charm¹. The verb *fascinare* basically meant to use the power of a *fascinum* – to practice magic – and from here its meaning in many modern languages: to figuratively enchant, bewitch. In Roman society, phallic amulets were used for protection against malevolent spirits, evil eye or simply as good-luck charms².

Phallic representations abound in Roman minor arts, on amulets, statuettes, vessels and drinking cups, lamps, furniture decorations etc. Equally vast is the modern literature on the matter. In the following paragraphs we will concentrate on presenting the meanings and typologies of phallic bronze amulets, especially focusing on their place in provincial society.

Amulets in phallic forms could be worn by persons or were even placed on buildings, as terracotta or bronze plaques³. Regarding the personal charms, they are mentioned by Varro and Pliny the Younger. The former says⁴ that boys wore such amulets, in order to be kept from harm (as part of or associated with the *bullā*, which incorporated more magical elements), while the latter records⁵ that babies of both genders were protected by phallic charms. The religious role of the phallic symbols is reflected in the funerary sphere as well, representations of *phalli* being registered on

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¹ After OLD 1968, s.v. *fascinum*.

² Younger 2005, 146.

³ Moser 2006, 63.

⁴ VAR. *L.* 7. 97.

⁵ PLIN. *Nat.* 28. 39.

gravestones⁶. But Pliny also mentions a very important fact⁷, namely that the *phallus* was used as an apotropaic and good-luck symbol by the militaries as well. This detail is fully confirmed by the archaeological discoveries from military sites situated in the *limes* provinces of the Empire.

The *fascina*, present in military and civilian sites, usually are pendants, mounts or belt fittings. The pendants are more commonly three-dimensional, while the mounts are two-dimensional or – less frequently – a disk decorated with the phallic motif in relief. The most common category is the pendants, made usually of bronze or, more rarely, bone. The phallic amulets were worn by adults as stand-alone pendants, rather than as part of a more complex necklace⁸. Although in Britain and the Rhine region they appear preponderantly in military contexts, they were more probably not exclusively military adornments, but masculine ones. As symbolic role, we can assume that especially in the military milieu, the phallic representation stands for virility, force and victory, besides its apotropaic function. Up to the present day, apparently Colchester has produced the most phallic pendants from the Roman provincial environment – apparently, because many sites don't have exhaustive monographs, including all small finds and because many of the artefacts we found were listed on the pages of auction houses⁹. In this context, the phallic mounts are rarer – without constituting an actual rarity.

The published phallic amulets from Roman Dacia are not very numerous and some of the most beautiful pieces, as the three bronze pendants from the Museum of Oltenia (Craiova)¹⁰ or one of the pendants from Apulum¹¹ are donations from private collections – thus without a known archaeological context. The artefacts with known provenience are divided between civilian settlements, military environments¹² and funerary contexts¹³. Frequently, the civilian settlements where *fascina* were discovered are adjoined to military camps, as is the case with Apulum¹⁴ or of the *vicus* from Cășeu¹⁵. The artefacts registered so far in Dacia are mainly three-dimensional pendants (two examples from Porolissum are double *phalli* and one from Craiova represents a winged *phallus*, cast in bronze).

The artefact we are presenting is a bronze phallic mount (inv. no. V.58934), discovered during the rescue excavations undertaken before the building of Polus Center (Florești, Cluj County) in the so-called area “Șapca Verde” (“Green Hat”) (Pl. I). Here, a civilian settlement was discovered, situated close to the road connecting Napoca and the fortress of Gilău, at about 5 kilometres West of Napoca¹⁶.

⁶ Moser 2006, 68 – for some examples.

⁷ PLIN. *Nat.* 28. 39.

⁸ Crummy 1983, 139.

⁹ Timeline auctions, Live auctioneers and of course E-bay.

¹⁰ Bondoc 2000, 55–58.

¹¹ Bounegru et alii 2011, 69, no. 80.

¹² Porolissum (Gudea 1989, 670), Apulum (Bounegru et alii 2011, 69, no. 81).

¹³ Bounegru et alii 2011, 69, no. 82.

¹⁴ Timofan 2005, 205–206; Bounegru et alii 2011, 69, no. 79.

¹⁵ Isac, Isac 2006, 121–123.

¹⁶ Unfortunately, almost all of the Roman structures have been destroyed before the proper archaeological excavation was started, because of the investor's haste to finish the construction. Therefore, only the lower parts of about five deepened huts, a well, the earth cellar and half of a kiln for tiles/bricks have

The mount was discovered in an earth cellar¹⁷, identified in the so-called trench S47 (Pl. II). The structure presents a heavily burnt upper level, it initially appeared quadrilateral and became round and shallower in depth, with an intermediate step (Pl. II/4; Pl. III/1)¹⁸. The dimensions were of 2.40 × 2.40 m with a lower diameter of 1.20 m, and a maximum depth of almost 3.00 m. In the same archaeological context more artefacts were discovered: pottery fragments – including several *terra sigillata* and luxury vessels, a bowl representing a human face, the upper part of a bronze scale, a fitting, arrowheads and a spearhead. Among these artefacts, was the *fascinum*, cast in bronze (Pl. III/2–3), with a diameter of 5.30 cm and a thickness of 0.40 cm. The phallic representation is in relief, 2.20 cm long, placed in the center of a circular ring of 2.80 cm in width. The outer part of the mount is partially deteriorated. On the upper part of the ridge, close to the tip of the *phallus*, might be represented a stylized vulva¹⁹.

The *fascina* are material expressions of an archaic form of personal religious devotion – the apotropaic magic. While during the period we are dealing with this practices might have been connected to vague superstitions or only traditionally perpetuated, they still are part of the private religious universe. The artefact presented here is a rather rare form of phallic mount, without exact analogies in Roman Dacia. Its discovery inside a cellar, while it could be the result of chance, could also indicate a ritual/magical gesture for protection of the stock in the vault.

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survived. In the Northern-Eastern part of the complex the lower part of a Roman road and some traces of wooden structures were preserved for research.

¹⁷ The artifact was first presented in the catalogue of the exhibition dedicated to the finds from the excavation at Polus Center (Alicu et alii 2008, 32, no. 96).

¹⁸ For similar features see Czysz 2003, 103, Abb. 68.

¹⁹ The analogies we have found in the Empire are typologically solely approximative, because the mounts tend to be three-dimensional (Crummy 1983, Fig. 163–165 – three Late Roman phallic mounts; <http://www.finds.calverley.info/0325.htm> – it lacks discovery place and conditions; <https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/491921> – a phallic mount from Widfort). More resembling to our artifact are two pieces from auction websites: *Roman Bronze Phallic Mount – Lot No. 0567*, from www.timelineauctions.com (page visited in May 2015, now the artifact doesn't exist on sale anymore) and *Female Phallic Mount 003795*, from <http://www.ancient-erotica.co.uk/>.

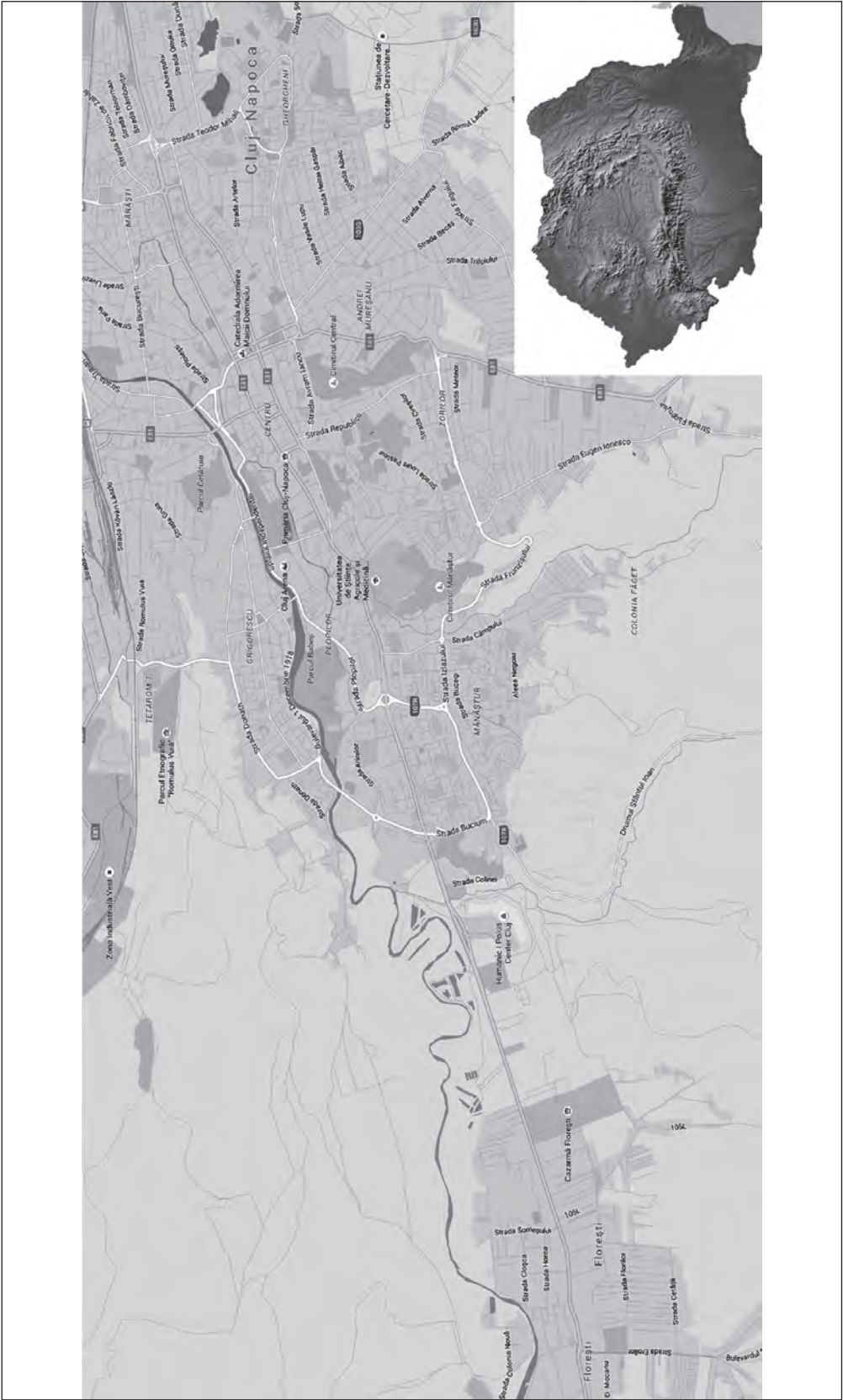
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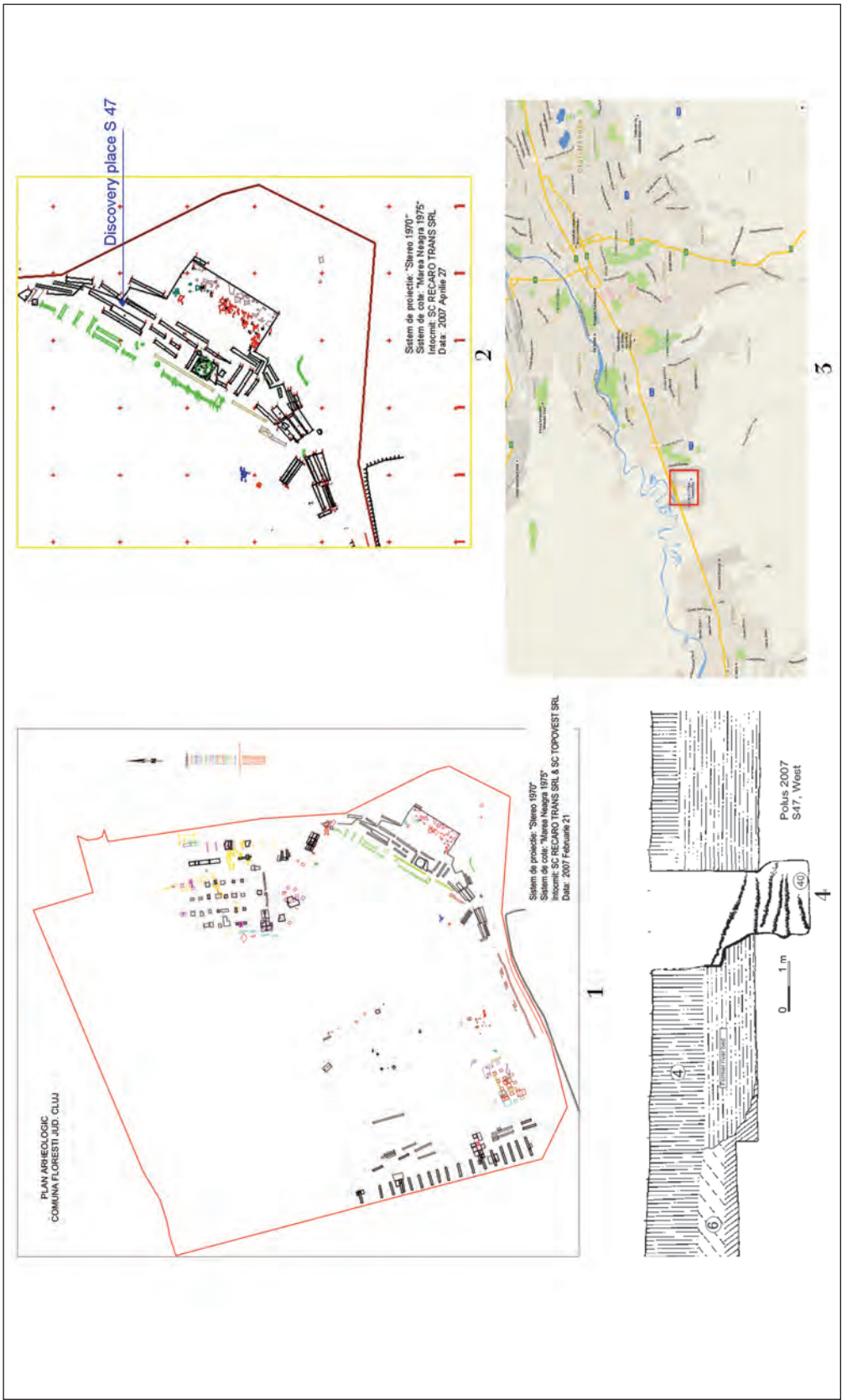
Babeș-Bolyai University
radavarga@gmail.com

Felix Marcu

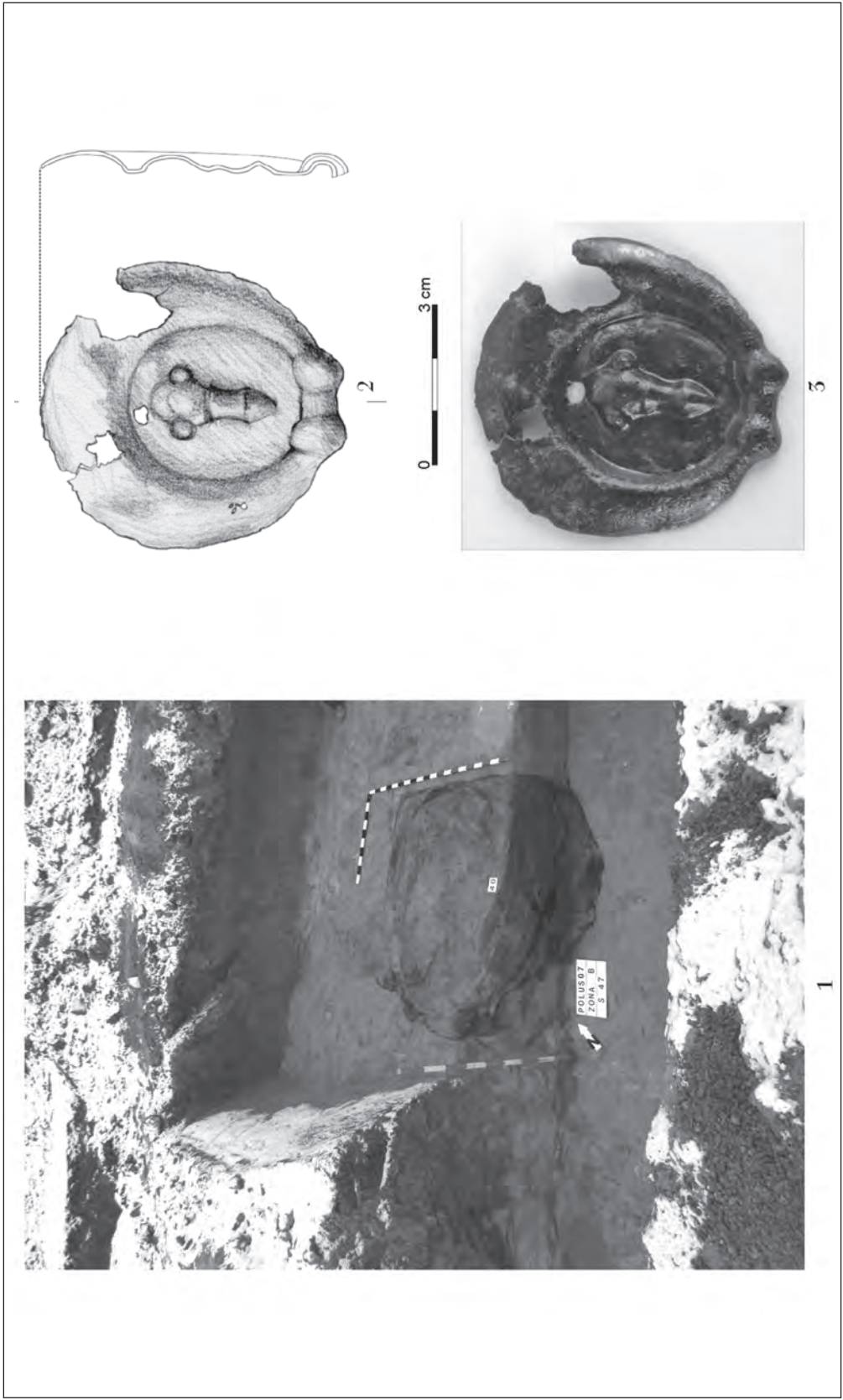
National History Museum of Transylvania, Cluj-Napoca
felixmarcu2004@yahoo.com



Pl. I. Geographical localization.



Pl. II. Topographical localization of the excavation and finding spot.



Pl. III. The artifact in situ (1), drawing (2) and picture (3).