

The Toad and the Uterus: the symbolics of inscribed frogs

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Abstract: *Three frog pendants with ZOHN inscription were found in Pannonian cemeteries. Two out of three were made of glass and the third was made of lead (this last one has not been published yet). These pendants were found only in the graves of little girls. There were some coins in two graves which we can exactly date back. These coins can be dated back to the times of Constantine I. and Constantine II. This date is decades earlier than what we have believed about glass pendants from Syria. On the one hand, the amulet function of these objects alludes to the frog and the toad which were the symbol of the fertility in the Ancient Time and on the other hand, the ZOHN inscriptions on these pendants are in the accusative. These pendants were not only protecting their wearer from the misfortunes but also made favourable impressions on fertility.*

Résumé: *On a trouvé trois pendentifs de grenouille avec l'inscription ZOHN dans des cimetières en Pannonie. Deux des trois étaient de verre, le troisième, qui n'était jamais publié, de plomb. Ces pendentifs ont tous été trouvés dans des tombeaux de petite filles. On a aussi trouvé dans ces tombeaux des monnaies datant de l'époque de Constantine I et II. Ces dates sont plus anciennes que la datation qu'on pensait des pendentifs de pâte de verre de Syrie. Ces objets sont des phylactères, car la grenouille et le crapaud sont les symboles de fécondité dans l'antiquité. Les mots ZOHN de l'inscriptions sont en accusatif (cf. donne moi la vie). Les pendentifs n'étaient pas seulement des phylactères protégeant leur utilisateurs des mauvais sorts, mais en même temps des objets magiques pour assurer la fécondité.*

Keywords: *frog, toad, glass pendant, lead pendant, fertility, amulet*

Mots clé: *grenouille, crapaud, pendentif de pâte de verre, pendentif de plomb, fécondité, amulette*

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Mátra Sickness¹

Gyula Magyary-Kossa, one of the preeminent researchers of Hungarian medical history, writes the following in his study entitled «Mátra Sickness»: «Not only in Somogy county, but elsewhere, as well, our people — and perhaps every people in Europe since the Roman period — regard the uterus as a creeping, crawling, toad-like animal that changes its place»².

The word «mátra» in the study's title is connected to the German word *Mutter* and the Greek word *méter*. The nature of the disease is that the womb breaks free in the body of the woman and attacks other organs. Since one of the names of the uterus in Greek is *hysterá*, hysteria was attributed to symptoms caused by a wandering womb even by authors in Antiquity³.

But Magyary-Kossa's claim is more than this: in his opinion the idea that has become widespread in the modern age, namely that the uterus is shaped like a toad, existed in Ancient Rome already⁴. But no author in Antiquity makes such a claim⁵. Some assume that the uterus is like a stubborn animal broken free, but they do not name the animal more precisely. In addition, there is a surprisingly large number of frog representations, and it is especially interesting that we can also find a number of amulets depicting a frog or a toad (the two cannot always be distinguished).

By presenting, interpreting and putting into the appropriate context a type of amulet, this study aims to clarify the meanings attributed to frogs by the Greeks and the Romans, and whether the uterus is among them.

Amulets with frogs

The frog as a symbol appears in Pannonia, and we know so far of a total of 3 amulets that display a Greek inscription next to the frog.

1. I want to thank Gabriella Nádorfi, archeologists at Szent István Király Museum, for her help with this study; László Schilling, who made the photo of the lead pendant in Gorsium and who shared his research results with me; and Bálint Havasi, director of the Balatoni Museum in Keszthely, who provided me with the photo of the pendant with inventory no. 62.43.9.

2. GY. MAGYARY-KOSSA, «Mátra-betegség», in GY. MAGYARY-KOSSA, *Magyar orvosi emlékek*. I, Budapest 1929, p. 354.

3. E. GRADVOHL, *Sóranos. Új Mandátum Kiadó*, Budapest 2006, pp. 113-129.

4. This is why infertile women or women with uterine pain in southern Germany made votive offerings of toads made of wax or iron in church, cf. H. BÄCHTOLD-STÄUBLI, «Kröte», in *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 5, Berlin, New York 1987, pp. 634-635. The origin of the idea in Antiquity is presented — without any reference — by A.A. BARB, «Diva Matrix», in *JWCI* 16, 1953, p. 214.

5. W. HIRSCHBERG, *Frosch und Kröte in Mythos und Brauch*, Wien, Köln, Graz 1988, p. 91: «bei den antiken Autoren, wie etwa Hippokrates, Platon, Aristophanes und ihren Nachfolgern niemals von einer Gleichsetzung "Kröte = Uterus" die Rede war...». For medieval frog and toad symbolism, see A. LUYSTER, «Femme-aux-Serpents at Moissac: Luxuria (Lust) or a Bad Mother?», in S.R. ASIRVATHAM *et al.*, *Between Magic and Religion*, Lanham 2001, pp. 180-186.



1. Pendant from Keszthely-Dobogó (grave 56)



2. Glass spacer from Keszthely-Dobogó (grave 110)

3. Pendant from Tác-Margittelep (grave 78)



One artifact is a matte, yellowish brown, flat pendant made of *pâte de verre*, found in a late Roman era grave at the Keszthely-Dobogó excavation between 1956 and 1961. Grave 56 was that of a little girl. At her right foot they found a cup and a short iron knife with the tip broken off, and left of her chest, a dark blue glass bead decorated with light blue, yellow and green dots. From beside the neck, a yellow, flat *pâte de verre* pendant was unearthed, the surface of which is decorated with a lion⁶. By the top of the right shoulder, a teardrop shaped yellow glass bead was found, together with a light blue glass bead of a very similar shape and a yellowish brown, flat *pâte de verre* pendant. On the surface of the latter, a frog can be seen lying with arms and legs spread, and on each side, two letters of a Greek word: ZO-HN (Life [in the accusative])⁷. The glass bead is 2.6 cm tall, inventory number: 65.43.9⁸.

The second artifact was also found at the Keszthely-Dobogó excavation in grave no. 110. This was also the grave of a little girl. Above the skull, archeologists found a small bronze coin depicting Emperor Licinius (308-324). At the right shoulder of the skeleton, an iron knife and an open silver bracelet were found, the latter encircling the right arm. Between the lower legs, nine more coins were found in a heap. All of these were cast during the rein of Licinius and Constantine I. The last datable coin among these was made between 326 and 328. Under the lower left arm, six bracelets were found, one of which is open and five are closed. On the middle finger of the left hand there was a ring. The neck of the skeleton was encircled by a necklace consisting of 242 light blue, lentil-shaped beads. Beyond the 242 beads, as decorating elements, we can also see larger, barrel-shaped light blue and red beads. And in the middle of the necklace, there was a flat, yellow, spacer glass cameo pendant with a diameter of 1.6 cm. The surface of the glass spacer shows a spread out frog lying with open arms and legs, depicted from above. On each side of the frog, two Greek letters are visible, the reading of which again yields the word ZO-HN (Life)⁹. The current location of the artifact is unknown.

The two artifacts from Keszthely-Dobogó were published by Károly Sági in 1981¹⁰. But the third artifact has not yet been published. This pendant was found at the late antique cemetery in TÁC Margittelep. So far 442 graves were opened up at the site between 1934 and 1983¹¹. One of the undisturbed graves contained 2 girls

6. We know several pendants with lions from Hungary, and parallels may be shown from Syria to South Tyrol, cf. R. NOLL, *Das Römerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Salurn*, Innsbruck 1963, p. 69.

7. Of course the correct spelling of the word would be with an omega, but this form appears regularly in texts from late Antiquity, showing that short and long «o» was no longer differentiated in pronunciation.

8. I. BILKEI, «Die Griechischen Inschriften des Römischen Ungarns», in *Alba Regia* 17, 1979, p. 32 (Nr. 27) and the literature following him mixes up the two glass beads with frogs, because he publishes the pendant found in grave no. 56 as if it had been found in grave no. 110. He indicates the correct measurements for the pendant, but the wrong inventory number.

9. Inventory number: 65.100.2.

10. K. SÁGI, *Das Römische Gräberfeld von Keszthely-Dobogó*, Budapest 1981, 30, pp. 74-75.

11. L. SCHILLING, «Bestattungen und Gräberfelder von der Spätantike bis zum Frühmittelalter in und um die spätrömische Befestigung von TÁC/Gorsium (4.–8. Jh.)», in *Keszthely-Fenékpuszta im Kontext*

(graves 78 and 79). The bigger one may have been 5-7 years old¹². The grave goods consist of two items. One of them is a bronze coin from the age of Constantius II (337-361), so the grave can be dated to the middle of the fourth century. The front contains the inscription DN CONSTANTIVS PF AVG = *dominus noster Constantius pius felix Augustus*. The back depicts the emperor in the act of stabbing a hostile horseman. The legend on the back reads: FEL TEMP REPARATIO (*felicium temporum reparatio* = Restoration of happy times). And at the feet of the emperor we see an abbreviation indicating the mint in Siscia. The neck of the older child was adorned by a pendant made of lead or pewter, both sides of which are decorated. On one side we can see a frog from above, next to which we can decipher traces of the inscription ZO-HN. The «O» is clearly legible, the upper and lower strokes of the «Z» are visible, the «HN» is indistinct. The pendant has a diameter of 19 mm¹³. The interpretation of the other side awaits clarification. What is sure is that this lead pendant is the recasting of a pâte de verre amulet like the one found in Keszthely-Dobogó. The family in Gorsium may not have been able to afford an original glass amulet, but didn't want to leave the child unprotected, so they cast or had cast a lead copy for the little girl. The copy is assumed to have been cast locally, which an analysis of the material could confirm.

An amulet very similar to the artifacts from Keszthely arrived in 1902 at the museum in Split. On it, researchers were able to decipher the letters «Z» and «O» on one side of the frog, but the vestiges of letters on the other side were interpreted wrong¹⁴. There would not be enough room next to the frog to accommodate the name ZONIR(OC) assumed by the publisher, so they assumed that the ending «OC» was left off. In essence, this is what is visible on the pendant: ZO - IIII, where the four vertical strokes could actually have been part of «HN», so the 4th century artifact from Solin can be grouped with the frogs with inscriptions from Pannonia.

In his study on spacer glass cameos, Tamás Gesztelyi considers these objects of Pannonian origin.¹⁵ One of the glass cameos is the currently missing one found at the Keszthely-Dobogó cemetery with a frog depicted on it and the inscription ZOHN. Gesztelyi thinks the inscription corresponds to *vivas* in Latin, and interprets these beads with inscriptions as amulets for healing or for the preservation of health.

A group of artifacts very similar to the frog pendants found in Hungary and Croatia can be found in the section of ancient glass at the Israel Museum. Every

Spätantiker Kontinuitätsforschung zwischen Noricum und Moesia, Budapest, Leipzig, Keszthely, Rahden/Westf. 2011, p. 14.

12. K. ÉRY, «Anthropological Studies on a Late Roman Period Population at TÁC-Margittelep», in *Annales Historico-Naturales Musei Nationalis Hungarici* 92, 2000, p. 378.

13. Today it is housed in the Szent István Király Museum in Székesfehérvár, inventory number: 61.1664.1.

14. N. CAMBI, «Certains objets de verre de la basse antiquité avec représentations figuratives, au Musée Archéologique de Split», in *AVes* 25, 1974, p. 145. We can see a photo of the object in figure 11.

15. T. GESZTELYI, «Spätromische Glaskameen mit zwei Kanälen», in *ActaAntHung* 38, 1998, p. 132.

frog is depicted from above, with arms and legs spread out; the sizes are largely the same (height: 22-24 mm, width: 16-20 mm), the color is translucent light blue and green or yellowish brown, and they are dated to the 4th-5th century A.D.¹⁶. One of the five glass frogs was offered by Dr. Leo Mildenberg from Zurich, and the remaining four by Eliahu Dobkin. As a result, the provenance, dating and function of the objects are uncertain, because we have no data of the circumstances in which the artifacts were found. Only one of the Dobkin pieces contains an inscription. On this pendant, the height of which measures 22 mm, the width, 18 mm, and the color is light yellowish brown (inventory number: 77.12.617), the frog is on the left, and the inscription fragment on the right¹⁷. The letters of the inscription that are faded but visible, are placed in an eclectic fashion: H+OZ. The «Z» at the beginning of the word — in mirror writing — is clearly legible, the «O» is unclear, and a cross is visible before the «H». The likely word, based on what we have learned up to now, cannot be anything other than ZOH (Life). This piece — perhaps because of the Christian symbolism of the cross — has been dated to the 5th century A.D.

Among the pendants of the museum, however, we can find another piece, although not depicting a frog, on which the inscription ZOH is perfectly legible. On both sides of the pendant we can see the bust of a man and a woman, facing each other. The man and the woman are thought to have been a married couple¹⁸. We know nothing of the circumstances of finding this artifact and its date, only that it was also bequeathed to the museum by Eliahu Dobkin.

In the antique glass section of the museum we find another spacer glass cameo (length: 14 mm, width: 17 mm (inventory number: 77.12.658)¹⁹, on the surface of which a spread out frog is visible, very similar to the ones on the glass pendant with a frog and the Keszthely-Dobogó glass cameo. On either side of the frog, two very clearly legible Greek letters are visible. On the right: ZO, on the left: HN (ZOHN = Life). But we have no information on the dating and the circumstances of finding the artifact. The object arrived at the museum also as one of the objects in Eliahu Dobkin's collection. Spaer tries to place this object in time and space and claims that this type of pâte de verre «bulla» may originate in the area of the Eastern Mediterranean, in a local workshop. But he also adds that according to Tamás Gesztelyi and Th.E. Haevernick, «spacer glass cameos were manufactured in Pannonia, considering that this is where the greatest number occur.»²⁰.

16. D. BARAG, «Stamped Pendants», in M. SPAER (ed.), *Ancient Glass in the Israel Museum. Beads and Other Small Objects*, Jerusalem 2001, p. 173.

17. SPAER, *Ancient Glass...*, *cit.*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 183-184.

18. SPAER, *Ancient Glass...*, *cit.*, p. 182.

19. According to T. GESZTELYI, these spacer glass beads were probably used as parts of bracelets or necklaces, but there are no data to prove this. See T. GESZTELYI, *Pannoniai vésett ékkövek. Enciklopédia Kiadó*, Budapest 1998, p. 74.

20. GESZTELYI, *Pannoniai...*, *cit.*, p. 75.

Dan Barag's typology distinguishes three types of glass cameos made by stamping: The loops of group A are flattened; figures are carefully placed on the vertical axis. These he dates to the second half of the 4th century and the first half of the 5th.

The loops of group B are rounded and ring-like. The workmanship is sloppier, the figures don't always follow the vertical axis. They are dated to the late 4th and the 5th centuries.

The loops of group C are large, ring-like, their shape and size are frequently irregular, and the workmanship is very shoddy. They are dated to the 2nd half of the 5th century and the 6th century.

Regarding representations, he distinguishes 6 groups. The objects in group 5 are decorated with animal motifs. These include lions and frogs. Barag's remark on the inscription is misleading, however. He thinks the inscription means Life (not Life in the accusative), and he connects it with fertility.²¹

Based on his typology, the frog pendants from Pannonia clearly belong to group B 5.

Barag's chronology cannot be maintained based on the artifacts from Pannonia. Since the coins were found in the Keszthely-Dobogó and the Máriatelep graves can both be accurately dated to the ages of Licinius, Constantinus, and Constantius II, we cannot place the pendants at the end of the 4th or in the 5th century. And the fact that they are found exclusively in the graves of children (as do pendants with lions) considerably lessens the likelihood that they represent a symbol of fertility. But it would be difficult to contradict what Barag unequivocally concludes based on the frequency of artifacts found: the amulets were made in Syria, and within it, Antioch on the banks of the Orontes²². Based on the witness of artifacts found in Pannonia, they were likely manufactured and exported at least 50 years earlier.

The frog as symbol

Figurines of frogs and toads appeared in Europe and Anatolia as early as the 6th millennium B.C., and they can be frequently connected to fertility, as, for example, the figurine of the «toad-shaped great goddess» from Hacilar²³. But Marija Gimbutas somewhat boldly connects this ancient idea with the 20th century folk custom of mater frog votives and the antique idea of the wandering *uterus*, concluding that this womb that moved like a stubborn animal was regarded as a toad (although,

21. BARAG, «Stamped Pendants», *cit.* p. 174: «Frogs, for example, which were associated with fertility, appear together with the Greek blessing 'Life'».

22. D. BARAG, «Stamped Pendants», *cit.*, p. 175: «The evidence pointing to northern Syria as the location of this industry suggests that Antioch on the Orontes was the center of production for the most of these pendants».

23. M. GIMBUTAS, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 BC. Myth and Cult Images*, London 1982, p. 176.

as we have seen, written sources from Antiquity to prove this claim are lacking)²⁴. Her explanation of the belief is that prehistoric people may have regarded embryos aborted at the age of one or two months as toads. In the justification of her interpretation, Gimbutas also refers to Egyptian beliefs. The frog goddess Heket helped in childbirth, and in the frog depictions on amulets we can see apotropaic symbols²⁵. From the period of the New Kingdom, the frog was the symbol of resurrection, and the inscriptions on Coptic lamps with frogs also unequivocally referred to resurrection. At the same time, it is conceivable that these lamps were used during childbirth with an obviously apotropaic intent²⁶. But there is no indication that in Egypt the uterus itself would have been equated with a frog or a toad.

The uterus-amulets that emerged in the Greek and Roman world around the 2nd century A.D., and were originally no doubt made in Egypt, never depicted frogs, rather the uterus itself, a scarab or various divine figures²⁷. Simone Michel even remarks that the conspicuous absence of Heket on these gems may indicate that they didn't explicitly aid in childbirth, rather their wearers wished to control the functions of the womb with their help²⁸. Frogs are rarely depicted on gems, in any case. A frog on the back of a crocodile-like blended figure, or a winged frog sitting on a lotus flower can apparently be interpreted in the area of sun symbolism²⁹. The inscriptions of the two types, the IARBATHA and CHABRACH formulas, indicate the same³⁰.

The numerous smaller or larger depictions of frogs in Antiquity didn't always carry religious ideas, such as an apotropaic function. Sometimes, as indicated by examples from Britain, they may simply have been toys³¹. But a bronze frog from the 5th century B.C. with a Corinthian inscription was apparently made as a votive offering, perhaps for the temple of Apollo³². The interpretation of the inscription is unfortunately disputed. According to the *Inscriptiones Graecae* it reads: *Amôn Sônou Boasôni*, Amôn, son of Sônoos, to the Helper.

But L.H. Jeffrey does not accept this reading (he reads the first letter of *Boasôni*

24. GIMBUTAS, *The Goddesses...*, cit. p. 179: «Equipped with documentation from present folk, medieval, Greek, Roman and Egyptian beliefs, Gulder (1962) in his treatise on the Maissau toad presented a very convincing interpretation: this mysterious animal, must, he concluded, be a toad».

25. G. PINCH, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, London 2006, pp. 127-128.

26. L. KÁKOSY, «Frosch», in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* 2, 1977, pp. 335-336. The much shorter lemma «Kröte» in the encyclopedia also mentions only resurrection and rebirth, see 3, 1980, 790. See also R. Gordon, «The Coherence of Magical-Herbal and Analogous Recipes», in *MHNH* 7, 2007, p. 133.

27. S. MICHEL, *Die Magischen Gemmen*, Berlin 2004, pp. 334-341. See E. GRADVOHL, «Matrix-on the Typology of Ancient Votive Uterus-Representation», in Gy. NÉMETH, P. FORISEK (ed.), *Epigraphica III* (Hungarian Polis Studies 13), Debrecen 2006, pp. 53-67.

28. MICHEL, *Die Magischen...*, cit., p. 189.

29. MICHEL, *Die Magischen...*, cit., p. 67; R. GORDON, «The Coherence of Magical-Herbal...», cit., p. 133.

30. MICHEL, *Die Magischen...*, cit., p. 483 (CHABRACH); p. 484 (IARBATHA).

31. P.J. DRURY, N.P. WICKENDEN, «Four Bronze Figurines from the Trinovantian Civitas», in *Britannia* 13, 1982, p. 241.

32. *IG IV* 357. Berlin, Altes Museum, No. 7917.

as «N», and reads the word as *noasôni*), and he regards it as a nonsensical incantation, an *ephesia grammata*³³. Whichever opinion we support, it is unclear why a frog bears the inscription. According to Lévêque, on the other hand, Boasôn was an Egyptian frog goddess like Heket, and he thinks Amôn who made the offering was a Greek in Egypt³⁴. In addition, Lévêque lists every frog-shaped votive offering known to him, but the rest do not bear inscriptions, so their interpretation is uncertain³⁵.

Having reviewed the types of the not too numerous frog depictions with inscriptions from Antiquity, and the circumstances of finding pendants with frogs in Pannonia, we can conclude that the glass cameos with the inscription ZOHN cannot be connected to uterine symbolism, or even with promoting fertility in general. Grave goods in the graves of children were the amulets and the toys of the deceased. Thus, the glass cameos of Syrian origin were intended by the parents to protect their children from illness and death, and the frog straddling the border of two worlds symbolized what they wanted to protect most: life³⁶.

33. L.H. JEFFREY, «Further Comments on Archaic Greek Inscriptions», in *BSA* 50, 1955, pp. 76; L.H. JEFFREY, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, Oxford 1990, p. 114.

34. P. LÉVÊQUE, *Les grenouilles dans l'antiquité*, Paris 1999, p. 32.

35. LÉVÊQUE, *Les grenouilles...*, *cit.*, pp. 31-34.

36. GORDON, «The Coherence of Magical-Herbal...», *cit.*, p. 133: «As an amphibian, able to move between two worlds, the frog is an excellent metaphor for the passage of the intention of the recipe into the transcendent world».

