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## A NEW SERAPIS RING FROM PANNONIA<sup>1</sup>

*The Hungarian National Museum came into possession of a Roman copper alloy ring, found in northeastern Pannonia, bearing the image of Serapis among various animals, forming a unique iconographical scene. Some elements of the scene can be possibly interpreted in an astrological context. The ring can be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD, and it is most certainly belonging to a distinct group of archaeological monuments, well-known from northeastern Pannonia, attesting the Severan cult of Deus Invictus Serapis in this area.*

*A Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum 2015-ben egy új, északkelet-pannoniai római bronzgyűrűre tett szert, amely Serapist különféle állatalakok körében ábrázolja. A ritka ábrázolástípus egyes elemei valószínűleg asztrológiai kontextusban értelmezhetők. A gyűrű a Kr. u. 2–3. századra keltezhető, s minden bizonnyal egy horizontba tartozik azokkal az ugyancsak északkelet-pannoniai leletekkel, amelyek Deus Invictus Serapis erőteljes Severus-kori kultuszát tanúsítják a térségben.*

Keywords: *Serapis, Egyptian cults, Pannonia, Graeco-Roman astrology, magical gems*

Kulcsszavak: *Serapis, egyiptomi kultuszok, Pannonia, görög-római asztrológia, mágikus gemmák*

In 2015, a new ring, depicting the bust of Serapis came into the Roman Collection of the Hungarian National Museum<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1). Contrary to the common practice of the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD, the scene is not engraved into a gem made of precious stone, but into the surface of the bezel of the ring itself. Besides the bust of Serapis, the ring features additional incised figures, showing two snakes, a lion and a scorpion. This iconographic type is without exact parallel, rendering the artefact a unique source of the Egyptian cults of Roman Pannonia.

*Findspot:* Unknown (in the territory of Komárom-Esztergom county, Hungary)

*Inventory:* Hungarian National Museum (Budapest), not inventorized (accession no. 40)

*Dimensions:* 2,4×1,9 cm; the oval bezel is 1,9×1,4 cm  
*Dating:* 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (based on the form of the ring) (HENKEL 1913, 268–271; FACSAĐY 2009, 30–31, Type II–III)

*Description:* Copper alloy finger ring with dark, greyish-green patina, spotted with some red corrosion on the bezel. The hoop is simple, with oval cross-section, the slightly splaying shoulders are articulated just below the bezel. The bezel is

decorated with incised figures in three horizontal sequences. In the top row, the bearded head of Serapis is depicted wearing a *calathos*, looking left, flanked by two cobras. In the central row, a recumbent lion is shown, looking left, while in the bottom row, a scorpion is visible, looking to the left (Fig. 1).

### *Iconographical analysis*

Plinius the Elder has noted in his *Naturalis Historia* (*Nat. Hist.*, 33, 41) that finger rings depicting Egyptian deities were particularly popular already in his time, therefore it is no surprise that the image of the Hellenistic (Graeco-Egyptian) god Serapis (*Tac. Hist.*, 4, 83–84; *De Is. et Os.*, 28–29; CLERC–LECLANT 1994a, 666–667; TAKÁCS 1995, 5–7; VEYMIERS 2009, 13–18) was also featured prominently on gems and rings in the Roman period.<sup>3</sup> The sole bust or head of Serapis is the most common type of these depictions (MRÁV 2002, 148; VEYMIERS 2009, 23–33) as his characteristic attributes (long hair, bearded face and wearing a *calathos*) readily identified him to the viewer (VEYMIERS 2009, 28), rendering his full-body depiction unnecessary. The Serapis representations



Fig. 1 1: Drawing of the Serapis ring (András Szabó); 2: Photograph of the ring (András Dabasi, Hungarian National Museum)

1. kép 1: A Serapis-gyűrű rajza (Szabó András); 2: A gyűrű fotója (Dabasi András, Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum)

dated to the Roman Imperial period usually show the god from side view (VEYMIERS 2009, 26). A distinct group of Serapis rings are formed by those showing the plastic representation of Serapis' bust – these artefacts can be dated to the Severan period (MRÁV 2002, 157–160; VEYMIERS 2009, 26–27). Serapis as a deity of Graeco-Egyptian origins, possessed many different aspects as the god of the Underworld, fertility and healing (VEYMIERS 2009, 13–18), and during the Roman period, his connection with the Imperial cult was also prominent (TAKÁCS 1995, 19–20; MRÁV 2000, 83; MRÁV 2002, 157–158). This latter aspect was especially conspicuous in the Severan period, as it is attested by many epigraphic sources (MRÁV 2000, 80).

The two cobras flanking the bust of Serapis can be most probably interpreted as *uraei*<sup>4</sup> – symbols of divine power and eternity, as cobras were considered immortal among the serpents in Antiquity (*De Is. et Os.*, 74; *Hierog.*, 1, 1). The *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo also mentions that golden *uraei* are placed around the image of gods (*Hierog.*, 1, 1). Similar representations of Serapis enclosed by two serpents

are not unique in the Roman Imperial period: a 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD clay bulla from Karanis (VEYMIERS 2009, 280. Pl. 32. I.H 16) (Fig. 2, 1) shows the bust of Serapis surrounded by two *uraei*. Below them, two facing lions and a scarabaeus (cf. SZABÓ 2014a, 228–229) with extended wings are visible. R. Veymiers considered this scene as a distorted form of the Egyptian zoolatry, and interpreted the animals on the Karanis bulla merely as solar or apotropaic symbols (VEYMIERS 2009, 56). Another clay bulla from Palmyra (VEYMIERS 2009, 240, Pl. 11. I. AB 77) (Fig. 2, 2) dated to the Roman Imperial period shows the bust of Serapis encircled within a wreath, and surrounded by two serpents<sup>5</sup> (although these do not show the characteristic hood of the cobras – cf. HARDWICK 2009, 255–256). Serpents associated with Serapis in Graeco-Roman art also include the so-called Agathodaemon.<sup>6</sup> Their connection is attested by several iconographical examples,<sup>7</sup> and it is sometimes manifested as an assimilation of Serapis and the Agathodaemon (Serapis-Agathodaemon) in iconography, usually portrayed as a serpent with the head of Serapis.<sup>8</sup> A granite relief from

Alexandria (DUNAND 1969, 13, No. 7; DUNAND 1981, 279, No. 19) (Fig. 3) shows the facing bust of Serapis flanked by two serpents – they can be identified with certainty as the Agathodaemon (even though the details are damaged and missing from the relief) and Isis-Thermouthis.<sup>9</sup> Although the iconographical treatment of the Agathodaemon and Isis-Thermouthis does not adhere to strict conventions, there are no known examples where both of them are depicted as cobras or without their attributes (e. g. the *pschent* and *basileion* crowns, *sistrum*, false beard), therefore it is highly unlikely, that the depiction of the two serpents on the Pannonian ring should be interpreted as the Agathodaemon and/or Isis-Thermouthis. They should be rather seen as simple enclosing symbols, denoting the divine authority and principal aspect of Serapis, who is apparently in the main focus of the scene. Such iconographical usage of *uraei* are obviously following Egyptian traditions, but during the Roman period it is rarely attested in works of art outside Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

The lion was a very common, yet complex symbol, possessing many aspects and meanings throughout Antiquity. Alone in ancient Egyptian art, it could have a great number of meanings, depending on the context (DE WIT 1951a). Generally, it is considered as denoting bravery, strength, power, ever-watchful vigilance, victory over one's enemies (*De Is. et Os.*, 38; *Hierog.*, 1, 17–20; DE WIT 1951a, 158–172; BONNER 1950, 35–36) and as a solar symbol (DE WIT 1951a, 138–147; BONNER 1950, 35–36, 246–247). The scorpion could also symbolize a great number of things in Egyptian contexts (*Hierog.*, 2, 35; STOOFF 2002; EVANS 2015, 148–152.). It is often regarded as a malicious animal and is often depicted with such connotation on mummy shrouds (RIGGS 2009, 252) and so-called Horus stelae (KÁKOSY 1980; STERNBERG-EL HOTABI 1999) in the Late and Graeco-Roman periods, although it also possessed an apotropaic and healing aspect<sup>11</sup> as the symbol of the Egyptian scorpion-goddess Serquet (RIGGS 2009, 254; EVANS 2015, 151–152; cf. BONNER 1950, 77–78). The scorpion as a symbol can be also strongly associated with Isis.<sup>12</sup>

As the lion is paired with a scorpion on the Pannonian ring, it would be plausible to interpret the animals as zodiac signs, the Leo and Scorpius, respectively. The two signs appear flanking the bust of Ammon-Helioserapis on a jasper gem (VEYMIERS 2009, 367, Pl. 70, VLEB 6) (Fig. 4, 1). R. Veymiers described the gem as a magical amulet, and interpreted the symbols as zodiac signs (VEYMIERS 2009, 209–210). Another gem, a



Fig. 2 1: Clay bulla, Karanis, 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD (VEYMIERS 2009, 280, Pl. 32, I.H 16); 2: Clay bulla, Palmyra, Roman Imperial period (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. 11, I. AB 77)  
2. kép 1: Agyagpecsét, Karanis, Kr. u. 2. sz. (VEYMIERS 2009, 280, Pl. 32, I.H 16); 2: Agyagpecsét, Palmyra, római császárszék (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. 11, I. AB 77)



Fig. 3 Serapis flanked by Agathodaemon and Isis-Thermouthis, granite relief, Alexandria, Roman Imperial period (DUNAND 1981, No. 19)  
3. kép Serapis, Agathodaemon és Isis-Thermouthis, gránit relief, Alexandria, római császárszék (DUNAND 1981, No. 19)

3<sup>rd</sup> century AD sardonyx cameo (VEYMIERS 2009, 312. Pl. XVIII, V.AAB 30.) (Fig. 4, 2), features the busts of Serapis and Iuppiter besides an eagle and a scorpion, the latter again interpreted by R. Veymiers as an astrological symbol – accordingly the whole scene is supposed to represent the cosmic powers protecting the Roman Empire and the emperor (VEYMIERS 2009, 109). Zodiac signs could also represent months and corresponding deities in ancient Roman art (LONG 1989, 590–591).



Fig. 4 1: Black jasper amulet, Sofia, 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> c. AD (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. 70, VI.EB 6); 2: Sardonyx cameo, unknown findspot, 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> c. AD (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. XVIII, V.AAB 30)

4. kép 1: Fekete jáspis amulett, Szófia, Kr. u. 3–4. sz. (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. 70, VI.EB 6); 2: Szárdónix káma, ismeretlen lelőhely, Kr. u. 3–4. sz. (VEYMIERS 2009, Pl. XVIII, V.AAB 30)



Fig. 5 Heliotrope magical gem, British Museum, 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD (CBd-663)

5. kép Heliotróp varázsgemma, British Museum, Kr. u. 3. sz. (CBd-663)



Fig. 6 Dangerous animals to be vanquished by Horus on the Metternich Stela, between 360–342 BC (SCOTT 1951, 201)

6. kép Legyőzendő veszélyes állatok Horus előtt a Metternich-sztélén, Kr. e. 360–342 k. (SCOTT 1951, 201)

In the sources regarding ancient Graeco-Roman systematic astrology, however, the respective constellations, Leo and Scorpius are rarely associated with each other (GURY 1997, 490–491; cf. BECK 2007, 50–69). The pairing of apparently unrelated (i. e. in Graeco-Roman systematic astrology) zodiac signs sometimes appear on engraved gems (e. g. CBd-1560; SGG II, Fi90; SGG II, Ro27; SGG II, Ts22) – these perhaps represented horoscological or astrological relations significant only to the individual wearing the gemstone. On the other hand, both the Scorpius and the Leo play a prominent role in the myth of Osiris, as it is attested by Plutarchos. Apparently, the death of Osiris took place when the sun passed through Scorpius (*De Is. et Os.*, 13), while the inundation of the Nile and the symbolic “effusion” of Osiris (*De Is. et Os.*, 36; cf. KÁKOSY 1978, 66–67.) occurs when the sun first comes into conjunction with the Leo (*De Is. et Os.*, 38; cf. *Aratos, Phaen.*, 150–151).

The lion and scorpion are notably depicted together with Serapis on a series of magical amulets (CBd-663; CBd-664; CBd-1079; CBd-1130; SGG I, Cat. 49).<sup>13</sup> Though none of these gems are exactly the same, the main elements of their iconographic scene usually feature an enthroned Serapis upon a crocodile, crowned with a scarabaeus and looking to the left, holding a sceptre (sometimes adorned with an ibis) in his left hand and extending his right hand over a scorpion. Below him the mummified Osiris is lying on a lion and the whole scene is encircled by an ouroboros (Fig. 5). The reverse side of the gems usually depict Harpocrates, sitting upon a lotus (Fig. 5). According to C. Bonner, the scenes denote the connection between Horus (Harpocrates), Osiris and Serapis (BONNER 1950, 237), while S. Michel argued that on this series, Serapis is shown in a heavily syncretistic manner, emphasizing the solar aspects of the god (MICHEL 2001, 171). The lion upon which the mummified Osiris is laid is the simplified depiction of the lion-shaped table utilized during embalming – a feature well-known from Egyptian art as early as the dynastic period (BONNER 1950, 26; DE WIT 1951b, 318–319; SFAMENI 2004, 381–382), therefore it bears no special meaning regarding Serapis or the rest of the scene. The scorpion (and the crocodile) is interpreted by S. Michel merely as dangerous animals (cf. *Hierog.*, 2, 35) pacified by Serapis (MICHEL 2001, 171) – perhaps not unlike the depictions of the apotropaic Horus stelae (KÁKOSY 1980; STERNBERG-EL HOTABI 1999). The exact function of these magical gems are uncertain, although some scholars link the Harpocrates scheme to love charms (BONNER 1950,

144; MICHEL 2001, 173–174; cf. PGM LXI, 1–38), and one specimen (CBd-1079; BONNER 1950, No. 355) bears the inscription [δὸς χάρι]ν τῷ φοροῦν[τι] - i. e. “bestow favor upon the wearer”.

It is impossible to establish a decisive religious and semantic interpretation of the Pannonian ring, as there is a large room for various interpretations, but several remarks can be concluded. It is unlikely, that the scene of the ring promotes the solar aspect of Serapis, as the depiction of the scorpion does not conform to this. The animals could also merely signify dangerous animals, emphasizing the apotropaic (cf. BONNER 1950, 98) and healing attributes of Serapis, not unlike the beasts represented on the Horus stelae (Fig. 6) and several magical amulets of the Roman Imperial period (cf. PGM CXIII, 1–4). This assumption, however, is less plausible considering that only two specific animals are shown in a somewhat neutral fashion, which is uncharacteristic of similar apotropaic artefacts.

The iconographical composition of the ring is most closely paralleled by the gems showing more animals interpreted as zodiac signs (e. g. CBd-1560; SGG II, Fi90; SGG II, Ro27; SGG II, Ts22). On these artefacts the individual iconographic elements (including the zodiac signs) are put next to each other without establishing any readily apparent connection, contrary to the design of magical amulets (cf. NAGY 2015, 208, 211–215) or apotropaic stelae. On these latter artefacts, the relative position of each individual iconographical element was obviously of crucial importance. In contrast, on the Pannonian ring and on similar gems, individual elements possess a meaning regardless their position, therefore they could be portrayed in a neutral fashion.

Accordingly, the lion and scorpion most probably denote their corresponding zodiac signs. In this case, the zodiac signs on the ring could have a specific astrological-horoscopic meaning, important only to the individual wearing the ring, or it could be a reference to the myth of Osiris, as described by Plutarchos. Nevertheless, the iconographic treatment

of the scene, including the depiction of the flanking *uraei* is utterly peculiar in the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire.

### *Conclusions – The ring and the cult of Serapis in Pannonia*

Thanks to the north italic settlers, the cults of various Egyptian gods reached Pannonia as early as the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, though in this period, they were present only in the urbanized communities along the Amber Route (WESSETZKY 1961, 23–25; WESSETZKY 1989, 13; MRÁV 2000, 80; BUDISCHOVSKY 2004, 176). During the Severan period, the worship of Egyptian deities gained a new impetus and their cults appeared in the cities throughout the whole province and along the settlements of the limes (WESSETZKY 1961, 55–56; TÓTH 1974, 347–348; SELEM 1980, 39–43; MRÁV 2000, 80; BUDISCHOVSKY 2004, 178–184; PODVIN 2014, 321–322). A distinct group of monuments (including several honorary inscriptions and a monumental statue of Apis) from Northeast Pannonia, dated to the reign of Caracalla (211–217 AD) was plausibly defined by Zs. Mráv as possible evidence for a 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD Serapeum located in that territory (MRÁV 2000, 90). The findspot and dating (2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) of the new Pannonian ring corresponds with this group, therefore their relation is highly probable. The ring was not likely to be a votive object, as such practice was not very common in the Roman Imperial period, especially not with rings made of copper alloy (SZABÓ 2014b, 157). If one accepts the assumption, that the zodiac symbols on the ring refer to the myth of Osiris, then it could be interpreted as a unique personal item of individual religious significance, i. e. the worship of Deus Invictus Serapis (cf. MRÁV 2002, 148, 160). The design of the scene nonetheless suggests quite a familiarity with Graeco-Egyptian iconographic conventions and perhaps with the various astrological aspects of the cult of Serapis.

### *Notes*

- 1 I would like to extend my gratitude to Zsolt Mráv (Hungarian National Museum) for his useful remarks and discussions.
- 2 The ring was handed in to the museum by Tibor Nagy to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for doing so.
- 3 The latest synthesis about the various types of

- Serapis depictions on Roman jewellery was done by R. Veymiers (VEYMIERS 2009).
- 4 For *uraeus* representations in the Roman period, see HARDWICK 2009.
- 5 R. Veymiers described the serpents as girlands (VEYMIERS 2009, 240. Pl. 11, LAB 77).
- 6 Originating from archaic Greek religion, the

- Agathodaemon is usually represented as a serpent, and was regarded as a protective spirit of the houses, bringing fertility (cf. VEYMIERS 2009, 13–18). In Hellenistic and Roman Egyptian art, the Agathodaemon was ultimately a symbol of royal power and divine majesty, therefore it is sometimes depicted with pharaonic insignia (e. g. the *pschent* crown and false beard). See also BAILEY 2002, 266–269.
- 7 Associated iconographical examples include DUNAND 1981, Nos. 123, 138, 218.
  - 8 Some examples of Serapis-Agathodaemon portrayals include DUNAND 1981, 279–280, Nos. 24, 33–34, 39–40; CLERC–LECLANT 1994a, 687, Nos. 208–210. See also BAILEY 2002, 266–269.
  - 9 I. e. the syncretistic form of Isis and Renenūtet, usually depicted with the body of a cobra (*uraeus*) and the head of Isis, or as a cobra wearing the *basileion*, sometimes carrying a *sistrum* (TRAN TAM TINH 1990, 788–789). See also BAILEY 2002, 266–269.
  - 10 This iconographical type, i. e. two *uraei* enclosing the images of gods (or divine symbols), described also by Horapollo (*Hierog.*, 1, 1) are featured on relatively few monuments and artefacts in the Roman imperial period. In all instances, these are related to Egyptian cults, and most of them was probably manufactured or even found in Egypt. Examples include: an Osiris-Kanopos from unknown Egyptian findspot (CLERC–LECLANT 1994b, 116–117, Nr. 17), enclosing a box (*cista mystica?*) or chalice and a solar disc; an Egyptian limestone relief adorned with hieroglyphs from Mursa, surrounding a winged solar disc (SELEM 1980, 20–21, Nr. 34, Pl. VIII); a series of *antefices* from Rome, associated with the temples of Egyptian deities; (ROULLET 1972, 55–56, No. 1–5, Fig. 27–31); a Hathor capital (originally crowning a *djed* pillar) from Rome (ROULLET 1972, 56, Fig. 33). In general, see HARDWICK 2009.
  - 11 Note that Serapis also possessed a healing aspect (BONNER 1950, 42; MRÁV 2000, 86; VEYMIERS 2009, 13–18).
  - 12 This association is uniquely emphasized in the text of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC Metternich Stela (SCOTT 1951), which accounts a journey of Isis where the goddess is aided by seven scorpions (SCOTT 1951, 210; KÁKOSY 2002, 126–128).
  - 13 For Isiac themes featured on magical gems, see SFAMENI 2004.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Aratos, Phaen.</i>	Aratos, Phaenomena
CBd	<i>The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database.</i> ( <a href="http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/">http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/</a> )
<i>De Is. et Os.</i>	Plutarchos, De Iside et Osiride
<i>Hierog.</i>	Horapollo, Hieroglyphica
<i>Nat. Hist.</i>	C. Plinius Secundus, Naturalis Historia
SGG	MASTROCINQUE, A. (ed.), <i>Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum.</i> Roma 2003–2007.
<i>Tac. Hist.</i>	Tacitus, Historiae

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## ÚJ SERAPIS-GYŰRŰ PANNONIÁBÓL

*Összefoglalás*

2015-ben egy különleges, Serapist ábrázoló bronzgyűrű került a Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum gyűjteményébe. A Kr. u. 2–3. századra keltezhető lelet a római császárkori Pannonia egyiptizáló, illetve egyiptomi kultuszainak kiemelkedő jelentőségű régészeti emlékei közé sorolható. A középső császárkor általánosan elterjedt szokásaitól eltérően nem gemmába, hanem közvetlenül a gyűrű anyagába bevéssett graeco-egyiptomi hagyományokból merítő ábrázolások a Római Birodalomban egyedülálló ikonográfiai programot alkotnak, melynek sem a monumentális, sem a kisművészetek között nem ismert pontos analógiája. A gyűrűn látható, Serapis büsztjét keretező uraeus-kígyók ábrázolása a római császárkorból zömmel Egyiptomból, vagy Egyiptomban készült tárgyakról ismert, az északnyugati tartományokban egyáltalán nem nevezhetjük elter-

jedtnek. A gyűrűn látható beállításban az oroszlán, illetve skorpió (legközelebbi ikonográfiai párhuzamaik analógiájára) leginkább asztrológiai kontextusban értelmezhetők, az Oroszlán és Skorpió állatövi jegyek jelképeként. Mindkét konstelláció kiemelkedő szerepet játszik az Osiris-mítoszban, de nem zárható ki, hogy a két zodiákus ábrázolása a gyűrűn csupán annak viselője számára bírt egyéni, személyes asztrológiai (horoszkópikus) jelentéstartalommal – a lelet mindenesetre így nem csak az egyiptomi kultuszoknak, de a görög-római asztrológiának is kiemelkedő forrása lehet. A gyűrű feltalálási helye (Komárom-Esztergom megye) és keltezése alapján az Északkelet-Dunántúlról a kutatás számára már régebb óta ismert Deus Invictus Serapis kultuszemlékekkel (elsősorban feliratos köemlékek és szobortöredékek) tartozik egy horizontba.

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