

Risus, Cucullatus, Venus. Divine Protectors and Protective Divinities of Childhood in Dacia and Pannonia¹

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Abstract. The study investigates a less known aspect of Roman life – the childhood, by means of bringing to light its few manifestations that left visible traces in the material culture: the fear of death and the divine protectors against it. For defending their children from natural and supernatural dangers, the Romans invoked more frequently divine forces (some even magical) than the official gods of different cults. This results, for instance, in the deposition of apotropaic statuettes such as *Risi*, which mark the passing from infant to child, or the *Genii Cucullati* in the next stage, from child to adolescent. Most likely, some Venus statuettes can be ascribed to the same category, representing girls' votive dedications or dowries and marking the end of childhood. To better understand this phenomenon, it will be traced from inception until the moment when it begins to fade away. Some elements of this phenomenon probably originate in Gallia, and then its spreads in the provinces, notably in those with a Celtic ethnic background, such as Pannonia. There is no direct influence from Gallia in Dacia, where we can detect only a provincial component which was probably heavily influenced by the Pannonian practices.

Keywords: Roman religion, childhood, protective divinities, Dacia, Pannonia

Rezumat. *Risus, Cucullatus, Venus. Protectori divini și divinități protectoare ale copilăriei în Dacia și Pannonia.* Studiul urmărește un aspect mai puțin studiat al vieții romane din Imperiu, copilăria, reliefând unul dintre puținele aspecte ale acesteia care au lăsat urme în cultura materială: spaima de moarte și protectorii divini împotriva acesteia. Pentru protecția copilului în fața diferitelor pericole naturale sau spirituale, precum și cu ocazia diferitelor sărbători care marchează în general trecerea diferitelor etape, romanii apelează mai degrabă la forțe divine (unele cu caracter magic) și mai puțin la divinitățile

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oficiale ale cultului. Astfel, apar spre exemplu depuneri de statuete apotropaice, cum ar fi cele cu *Risi*, care marchează trecerea de la etapa de sugar la cel de copil, sau de *Genii Cucullati* pentru stadiul următor, marcând trecerea de la etapa de copil la cel de adolescent. În această categorie de piese par să intre și unele statuete cu Venus, care probabil sunt dedicații votive sau reprezintă zestrea tinerelor fete, marcând astfel sfârșitul copilăriei. Pentru înțelegerea cât mai completă a fenomenului s-a urmărit traseul acestuia de la formare la dispariție. Gallia pare să fie probabil locul de origine al fenomenului, urmând apoi propagarea lui în alte provincii, mai ales cu substrat celtic, așa cum este și Pannonia. Nu există o influență directă din Gallia în Dacia, putându-se observa doar o componentă provincială puternic influențată de practicile din Pannonia.

Cuvinte cheie: religie romană, copilărie, divinități protectoare, Dacia, Pannonia

For the Roman society, as for any other Ancient one, the children represented a precious resource. But it's a resource less protected than one might presume. For the Ancient world, it was assumed that approximately 30-40 % of the newborns died until the age of one, the life expectancy growing after the age of seven, but only a third of the children being able to reach full maturity². In these harsh conditions, it was expected that the Roman society had to take certain measures for protecting its children, even from the magical-religious perspective, assuring the divine protection. In this respect, the children were surrounded by apotropaic objects, in the shape of amulets, toys or statuettes of the protective divinities. The fear of premature death was present in each step of childhood. In time, as the child becomes more important to his family and to society, the protection measures increase, as well as the passage from one stage to the other.

The newborn's entrance in the first step of childhood, *infans*, and in the following one, *pueritia*, was not easy. His or her life was in constant danger: birth complications, abandonment or diseases. In addition to these natural causes, other spiritual factors, malefic and thwart forces, were present in the Roman mentality, powers which could be softened, but never controlled. In order to be protected, children were surrounded by apotropaic artifacts, toys or amulets. In

² Montanini 1997, 92.

this category are comprised the so called *bullae* and *lunula* pendants³. These items were also found in children tombs, pointing to the fact that their protection continued in the afterlife as well. In the first months of life, children are attracted by sounds, light or colors and toys like *sistrum* or *crepitaculum* were designed taking into account this observation. They were made from metals or clay, in the shape of birds or children. Besides their role of toys, they banished through sounds the evil spirits.

Some divinities, like Venus, but also a series of characters with divine attributes, such as Cucullatus and Risus, can also be included in the category of childhood protectors, with objects discovered in archaeological contexts related to children and childhood.

In her vast authority, the goddess Venus (Pl. I.)⁴ appears also as protector of childhood, especially of girls, whom she protects even after marriage. In fact, Venus is one of the few divinities associated with the protection of children from the *dii consentes*. Terracotta statuettes representing Venus are frequently discovered in children tombs, Venus being one of the few divinities that are present in funerary inventories, of adults as well⁵. She is known in the children graves from Gallia, alongside toys⁶. She is also associated with toys in the necropolis from Londinium, Britannia⁷. Such statuettes were also unearthed in the tombs close to the Pannonian limes, at Intercisa⁸. Venus is the only divinity present in the graves from Dacia, as best proved by the Apulum necropolis, with five statuettes⁹. Another funerary context is the complex from Potaissa, on the right bank of the Arieş River, where a statuette of the goddess was found in the same pit with toys, pottery shards and bones, in the proximity of several tombs¹⁰. Probably, the presence of Venus in graves is linked with the idea of rebirth, an attribute highlighted by the *lunula* pendant, symbol of the moon phases, and the idea that life triumphs over death.

³ Dasen 2003, 283- 286; Laes 2006, 64-69.

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⁵ Antal 2012, 93-104.

⁶ Coulon 1996, 152-153; Faudet 1997, 82-84; Talvas 2007, 192, tab. 192.

⁷ Barber/Bowsher/Whittaker 1990, 10, pl. II.

⁸ Barkóczi et al. 1954, 24; Póczy 1963, 241.

⁹ Cserni 1899, 55, pl. X; Ciugudean et al. 2003, no. 75; Gligor et al. 2009, 247; Anghel et al. 2011, 32, 46, 52, no. 2, 32, 50.

¹⁰ Pâslaru 2007, 339-364, pl. 15/A.

For that matter, the goddess may be linked to the end of the adolescence of the young *nubendae* girls, which often coincided with marriage. These events are somehow blended and the situation is different compared to the boys. Before the wedding, the girls dedicate a small toga (*togula*) to the gods and offer dolls or terracotta statuettes to the goddess Venus, marking the passage to the next stage of life¹¹. Probably this is the aspect to which relate those statuettes with the representation of the goddess from the Liber Pater sanctuary from Apulum or the ones from the round sanctuary of Celtic influence from Aquincum, in both cases toys being found as well.

Moreover, Venus may be associated with those distaffs with the representation of the goddess which were probably given to girls after the first step of childhood at the age of seven, when they began household duties. These have a more symbolic function rather than a functional one, the images of the goddess making the distaff practically unusable. The objects aren't offered to the goddess at the time of marriage as in the case of the rest of the toys, but they are taken as dowry in the new home, sometimes being present in tombs¹². Such artefacts are frequent in Pannonia (Brigetio, Mursa), in funerary contexts (Intercisa, Tordas)¹³. In Dacia, one piece was discovered at Porolissum¹⁴.

Less information is available for Risi and Cucullati. The Risus type statuettes (Pl. II) are those boy busts without hair, with a chubby happy face and bare chest and back. Some examples from Gallia wear a hooded cloak, like the Cucullati statuettes¹⁵. The Risus type objects are similar to the ones of Republican age from Italy or Gallia, dedicated as *ex-voto* in the sanctuaries. Most of them depict infants wrapped in swaddling bands. They wear on their heads *cucullus* type caps, and the *lunula* pendant on their neck, as well as Risi. They are often deposited with anatomical uterus type *ex-votos*, as in the urban sanctuary from Paestum or the Apollo sanctuary from Alessia¹⁶.

Thus, it seems that these statuettes had a role in the fertility cult or in maintaining the children's health. The Risus statuettes are made from clay, are hollow inside, and may contain clay beads or granules, being used as a rattle. These statuettes were in this way denominated by

¹¹ Martin-Kilcher 2000, 64; Hersch 2010, 66.

¹² Bíró 2000, 102.

¹³ Bíró 1994, 195-229; Bíró 2000, 38-40.

¹⁴ Vass 2012, 59-70.

¹⁵ Henrion/Bütner 2010, 2, no. 4; Bémont/Jeanlin/Lebanier 1993, 65, fig. 24/b.

¹⁶ Ammerman 2007, 142-145; Cazanove 2013, 148.

archaeologist Edmund Tudot due to their happy expression. He mentions the character as a divinity, making a reference to Risus, a personification of laughter at Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 2. 31, 3. 2, 3. 11)¹⁷. In addition, Emory B. Lease considers Risus as a divinity, referring to its equivalent in the Greek mythology, Gelos (Γέλως). Philostratus presents Gelos as part of Dionysus' suite, along with Comus (*Images*, 1. 25)¹⁸. Recent hypotheses saw in Risus a representation of Sabazius or Bacchus as children, but without providing any solid arguments to this¹⁹.

Therefore, it remains to be proved if we are dealing with a divine character, as it was presumed from the beginning, a protective genius of childhood, or just with a toy with protective functions. This type of statuettes was largely spread in the Empire, in domestic contexts, where they were used as toys, but also in graves, where they had an apotropaic or psychopompos role.

In archaeologically well documented provinces, like Gallia²⁰ or Britannia²¹, Risi appear almost exclusively in children tombs. In Pannonia, such statuettes were discovered in graves close to the limes at Intercisa or Brigetio, in the workshops from Savaria, or in the round sanctuary of Celtic influence from Aquincum²². In Dacia, they appear in funerary contexts (Apulum, Celei)²³, cultic contexts (Apulum)²⁴, workshops (Slăveni)²⁵, and domestic contexts (Apulum, Napoca, Potaissa, Porolissum)²⁶.

Another type of statuette which could be comprised in the category of the childhood protectors is the one which represents a Cucullatus (Pl. III). The name does not designate a special character, but a feature of the garment, *cucullus*, the hood, which is always depicted. Usually, the statuettes of this type wearing the *cucullus* have an

¹⁷ Tudot 1860, 27.

¹⁸ Lease 1916, 30.

¹⁹ Vertet/Zeyer 1982, 85.

²⁰ Talvas 2007, 191, 258, 259.

²¹ Taylor et al. 1993, 196, fig. 3/ii, iii; Eckardt 1999, 65, pl. XII/B.

²² Hekler 1910, 38; Kuzsinszky 1932, 306; Nagy 1942, 582; Barkóczi et al. 1954, 24; Alföldi et al. 1957, 67, pl. 24/13; Póczy 1963, 241-242.

²³ Tudor 1974, 46, fig. 54-55; Bondoc 2005, 56, no. 45; Ota 2009, 25-26, pl. V/1; Anghel et al. 2011, 69, 70, 76, 78, no. 83, 84, 97, 98, 102.

²⁴ Diaconescu/Haynes/Schäfer 2005, 38-45; Schäfer 2014, 42-43.

²⁵ Ungurean 2008, 223-224, no. 378; Bondoc 2005, 37, no. 26.

²⁶ Beu-Dachin 2010, 237-238, 240, no. 4, 5, pl. II, IV/f, V, VI; Anghel et al. 2011, 72-74, 77-80, no. 89, 90, 92, 100, 103, 104, 105, 107; Gudea 1989, 514-515, no. 16, 25, pl. CIX/16, CX/25.

adolescentine face and sometimes hold in their hand a round object as an offering, which could be a fruit or a *patera*. The hood and the sleeveless cloak, with which the characters are represented, are garments generally worn by newborns or small children. This type of clothing is sometimes present on the Risus type statuettes as well. Generally, the covering of the head is associated with death, as suggested by numerous antique examples when the ones close to death cover their heads. The sleeveless cloak is also linked with the funerary medium. As a consequence, these characters may be related to funeral rituals, especially regarding children, probably playing an apotropaic role too²⁷. In addition to this function, the Cucullati might have had healing attributes as well, being associated with Telesphorus and Aesculapius. This type of statuettes is largely spread in the entire Empire, in Asia Minor, Egypt, Dacia, Thrace, Greece, Italy, Pannonia, Germania, Gallia, or Britannia, being made of terracotta, bronze or amber²⁸. The name *Cucullatus* is mentioned in two inscriptions from Noricum discovered in a sanctuary of Celtic influence²⁹. According to Rudolf Egger, we are dealing with a divinity of Celtic influence, which receives the name Cucullatus through the *interpretatio Romana* phenomenon. This type is taken by the Etrusci from the Celts of Northern Italy. Moreover, due to the Galati Celts, Cucullatus becomes popular in Asia Minor, while the Greek priests and, later on, the Roman ones mention him as Telesphorus, in association with Asklepios and Hygia³⁰.

Such statuettes rarely appear in Dacia or Pannonia, being often mistaken for Attis in the bibliography, or mentioned just as the character wearing the *phrygian* hood³¹. In Pannonia, they are found in cultic contexts, such as the sanctuary and its supply store from Aquicum³². In Dacia, in this stage of research, Cucullati are not present in funerary contexts, being discovered mainly in domestic (Apulum, Ampelum, Napoca, Potaissa, Cicău)³³ or cultic features (Apulum)³⁴.

²⁷ Vertet/Zeyer 1982, 63-65.

²⁸ Deona 1955, 43- 74; Toynbee 1957, 456- 469; D'Ambrozio 1993, 179- 237.

²⁹ Kenner 1976, 147.

³⁰ Egger 1932, 31.

³¹ Tóth 1985, 127-161; Póczy 1963, 241-257.

³² Póczy 1956, 73-136.

³³ Anghel et al. 2011, 60, no. 60; Ungurean 2008, 151, 230, 239, no. 30, 410, 468; Alicu et al. 1995, 623, no. 62, fig.5/5; Winkler/Takács/Păiuș 1979, 160; Gudea 1989, 514, no. 15, pl. CIX/15.

³⁴ Diaconescu/Haynes/Schäfer 2005, 38-45; Schäfer 2014, 43.

Hence, the terracotta statuettes which belong to these protectors are often associated with children and childhood. The phenomenon seems to have originated in Gallia, where elaborated terracotta statuettes with Cucullatus or Risus appear for the first time. Just like the figurative statuettes and the *terra sigillata* from Gallia, the Cucullatus or Risus statuettes had spread through the Empire, even towards East, especially with the help of soldiers, but of merchants too. In Pannonia, these terracotta objects arrive rarely from Gallia and more frequently from other provinces, like Germania, alongside *terra sigillata*, ornamental lamps and figurative terracotta³⁵. Later, in the 2nd century AD, workshops appear even in Pannonia, like the one from Aquincum. The pieces produced in these workshops, such as Risi or Venus statuettes, bear the Gallic influence arrived through Germania³⁶. It must be noted that the statuettes representing these childhood protectors are concentrated in the provinces with a Celtic substratum, like Gallia, Germania, Britannia, Noricum and Pannonia. Dacia is an exception because there is no local Celtic background, although this type of discoveries is present.

The Gallic influences are not visible in the case of the Dacian objects, but some of them are met in contexts similar to the ones from Gallia, Germania or Pannonia. Most probably, these artefacts arrive in Dacia from Pannonia, following the Danube line, just like other goods. But because when Dacia became a Roman province, the local production began in Pannonia, the Gallic primary characteristics are dimmed, being hard to identify.

The most solid argument for studying these characters together is the archaeological research, statuettes of Venus, Risus and Cucullatus being found in the same context. This is the case of the round sanctuary of Celtic influence from Aquincum, where many Venus, Risus and Cucullatus statuettes were discovered, the edifice being attributed in the archaeological literature to the goddess Venus because of the high frequency of her representations³⁷.

For Dacia, one must mention the Liber Pater sanctuary from Alba-Iulia, where all the above mentioned items of childhood protectors

³⁵ Fremersdorf 1938, 168.

³⁶ Kuzsinszky 1932, 306-307.

³⁷ Kuzsinszky 1934, 17; Kuzsinszky 1924, 33; Nagy 1942, 580-583; Szilágyi 1956, 74; Póczy 1963, 241-242.

have appeared, in contexts including toys as well³⁸. Judging by the initiation character of the sanctuary, the deposits could be related to the Liberalia feast, on the 17th of March, coinciding with the festivities during which the adolescents wear the *toga virilis* or *toga libera* for the first time, marking their entrance in the public life³⁹. Thus, along with toys (carts and small wheels), the children dedicate also Risi statuettes, which seem to mark the passage from the infant stage to the child stage, or Cucullati statuettes, which seem to mark the passage from the child stage to the adolescent stage.

The moments for the dedication or the use of such items are numerous: the *lustratio* feast, at eight-nine days after birth, when the child receives his/her name and the purification takes place, respectively the child's entrance in society. Other occasions could have been the passage through the different steps of childhood, after each seven years - *infantia*, *pueritia* or *adolescentia*, or other quotidian events, different feasts or recovering after a disease. So, the Romans mainly called on the divine forces, some with magical attributes, even of Greek tradition, to protect their children, are more rarely the official cult divinities. In fact, until the boys wear the *toga virilis* or until the girls get married, they are not actually part of the Roman civil society. In a way or the other, they remain at the *infans* level, the ones who cannot speak, who have no rights⁴⁰. As a consequence, the children evolve at the edge of the public cult, outside the protection area of the major divinities. They belong more to the private area, a clue in this regard being the absence of feasts in the Roman calendar focused on children.

Despite the importance of the childhood stages, many of the aspects of the short life of a Roman child are nowadays unknown. The written information is scarce, depicting fragmentary aspects of life, without almost any reference to the ones related to death. Instead, the materials conserved from Antiquity are mainly of funerary character, stereotypes, which may offer information on a child's death, but not on his life. Infantile archaeology, if we may call it this way, has focused especially on the monuments and tombs from necropolises, with little accent on the day by day life. Thus, we know more on how the Roman children died and less on how they lived.

³⁸ Diaconescu/Haynes/Schäfer 2005, 38- 45; Schäfer 2014, 39-50.

³⁹ Cicero, *Ad Atticum*, VI, I, 12; Ovidius, *Fastes*, III, 771.

⁴⁰ Montanini 1997, 90.

Some details concerning childhood, the fears and dangers to which children were exposed, are found in the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors, such as Plutarch, Tertullian, Virgil and Ovid. These sources treat especially stereotype aspects of Roman life, traditions and common laws of the higher classes, which bring few information on the ordinary citizens or provincial life. Thorough studies focusing on the material culture regarding the protectors of childhood are missing. The majority of the data concerning the Roman childhood are revealed by the material culture, having in mind various objects found in funerary contexts, sacred areas or the domestic milieu.

Although infantile death was high in the Roman world, the affection and care of the parents may be observed in the reliefs and funerary medallions where children are accompanied by the mothers or the entire family, but also in the diversity of the divine protectors of childhood, represented in the shape of clay statuettes.

Illustrations

Pl. I: Venus terracotta statuettes: 1. Apulum – Liber Pater sanctuary (after Diaconescu/Haynes/Schäfer 2005); 2. Intercisa – grave good; 3. Apulum – grave good (after Anghel et al. 2011); 4. Aquincum – Round Sanctuary.

Pl. II: Risus terracotta statuettes: 1. Apulum - grave good (after Anghel et al. 2011); 2. Potaissa (MNIT photo archive); 3. Brigetio – grave good; 4. Intercisa – grave good (after Szabó Á.).

Pl. III: Cucullatus terracotta statuettes: 1. Potaissa (MNIT photo archive); 2. Ampelum (after Anghel et al. 2011); 3. Apulum (after Anghel et al. 2011); 4. Napoca – Valea Chintăului, *villa rustica* (MNIT photo archive).

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Pl. I



Pl. II



Pl. III