

ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.	LIX.	2023.	pp. 5–16.
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## A JET MEDUSA PENDANT FROM AQUINCUM/BUDAPEST

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*Abstract:* A rare jet cameo-pendant with the representation of a Medusa-head came to light south of the *canabae* of Aquincum during the excavation of a section of the Roman cemetery. Among the jewellery carved from jet, pendants depicting the head of Medusa form a separate group. We know only 21 pieces without this jewel; all of them are distinctive, unique carvings. The pendant from Aquincum belongs to the group of ‘beautiful-pathetic’ Medusa-heads. It could have been made in the 3rd century, based on analogy and on the other grave-goods. There is a possibility that this type of jewellery was made for burials as an apotropaic object.

*Keywords:* Aquincum, cameo, jet, Medusa, pendant, grave-jewellery, apotropaic object.

### The description of the pendant

The pendant, found in a grave at the cemetery of the Aquincum *canabae* is of interest with good reason.<sup>1</sup> Although the clearly-identifiable depiction – of Gorgon/Medusa – is not uncommon in Pannonia either, the material of the carving and the uniqueness of the cameo catch the attention. (**Fig. 1–2**)

The pendant was made of jet, which was subsequently framed with an unevenly-cut gold band with a smooth surface. On a short stretch, the gold band does not fit tightly to the side of the cameo. A suspension hoop was also made using gold wire, by passing the wire through the original hoop carved together with the cameo. This solution had no practical purpose, since this piece of jewellery was a pendant originally as well, although the size of the original hole precluded the use of a string with larger beads. Gold was used in this case presumably to increase the value of the cameo and to produce the popular combination of black and gold. The Aquincum pendant also stands out among the known *gorgoneion* pendants with the delicateness of the depiction and the beauty of the face. Medusa’s face is depicted in three-quarter profile facing left. The face is framed by an elaborate coiffure, organic parts of which are the snakes twisting in an S shape. Three pairs of snakes twist above the forehead and by the cheeks, and a fourth

<sup>1</sup> Gesztelyi 2008, 321. Cat. 42; Facsády 2009, 117. Cat. 243.

pair can be seen at the chin. The snakes' bodies are indicated by deep cuts; in some sections, the incisions form rhombuses, imitating snake skin. The forehead is smooth, the arc of the brows is pronounced. The nose is straight and pointed, the eyes are well-defined, the lower eyelids are slightly swollen. The pupils of the slightly deep-set eyes are accentuated by silver inlays. (In the right eye, only a remnant of this can be seen.) The gaze is gentle, preoccupied. The mouth is unsmiling, the lips are curved, the chin is rounded. Above the head, wings are indicated on both sides by incised rhombuses. The jet on the right cheek and on the back is heavily cracked; originally its surface was polished bright. The pendant measures 32 x 30 mm.

### **The circumstances of the cameo's discovery**

This piece of jewellery came to light south of the *canabae* of Aquincum during the excavation of a section of the cemetery running north-south along modern-day Bécsi Road.<sup>2</sup> The covered grave, built using stone slabs contained the heavily-disturbed remains of a woman aged around 22–25. Based on the greatest length of the femur, the estimated height of the deceased was 163.5 cm. The calcanei, at the Achilles tendon's insertion point, showed enthesopathy, suggesting significant physical exertion.<sup>3</sup> This finding suggests physical labour, yet the deceased was buried with rich grave goods,<sup>4</sup> some of which survived even after the noticeable grave robbing and considerable disturbance. Around the middle of the grave and at the foot – in addition to the jet medallion described above – there were beads of a string of jet beads and of a jet bead bracelet, fragments of a ring made of bronze wire, a small silver ring, as well as fragments of a glass vessel, an amphora plug and a heavily-worn sestertius of Hadrian. The skull was not disturbed; the hairpin with a golden head and the pair of gold earrings on either side of the skull remained in their original position.<sup>5</sup> The position of the bone remains and the traces of the torn jet necklace also made it possible to reconstruct the mode of the disturbance. The grave pit dug into the ground was considerably larger than the stone casket; surprisingly, in some places the space between the casket and the grave dug was buttressed with horizontally-set, carved hypocaust pillars. The grave robbery – judging by the left foot, pushed aside whole and intact – likely took place not long after the burial. The robbers reached into the grave on the western, longitudinal side of the grave presumably with some kind

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<sup>2</sup> Budapest, District 2, 4 Sajka Street, grave 93/9.

<sup>3</sup> Analysis report by anthropologist Tamás Hajdú, whom I would like to thank for his work.

<sup>4</sup> Inventory numbers: Aquincum Museum 94.6.3734–3743.

<sup>5</sup> Facsády 2002, 221; Facsády 2009, Cat. 281.

of hooked instrument, through a hole drilled in the stone slab, but they could not access the head or the jewellery on it. A jet necklace made of tiny beads snapped as it was being pulled out; the beads that fell within the grave, however, indicate the method and bad luck of the robbers.

The jet jewellery aside, the pair of gold earrings provides the main clue concerning the dating of the grave. (**Fig. 3**) The circular earring with an S-shaped hook was in fashion during the middle third of the 3rd century AD.<sup>6</sup> We can date therefore the burial to the second half – end of the 3rd century AD.

### The material of the cameo: the jet

Black substances of organic origin generally defined as jet (jayet, jais, gagat, gagate, gaietto, azabache), were called *gagates* by the ancient authors. According to Pliny,<sup>7</sup> it was named after Gages in Lycia, but modern analyses indicate that the black substance found in present-day southern Turkey is not the same as the raw material mined in western Europe.<sup>8</sup> Dioscorides,<sup>9</sup> Pliny,<sup>10</sup> and Galen,<sup>11</sup> who lived a century later, too, mention only the ‘medical’ and ‘magical’ usability of *gagates*. It was used as incense when burnt and as medicine when ingested with other substances. There is no mention of its being shaped and worn as amulet or jewellery. Solinus,<sup>12</sup> however, already reports that this ‘*nigro gemmeus*’ stone can be found in large quantities in Britain. This suggests that by the time of Solinus, by around the 3rd century AD, the use of jet and jet-like materials for jewellery was not unknown to the Romans either. The definitions given by contemporary authors – primarily Pliny –, however, make it doubtful that modern jet is the same as the stone called *gagates*. In any case, the name survived, probably because of the superficial similarities (e.g. shiny black colour, porosity, ease of carving, combustibility) characteristic of coal derivatives.

It is not easy nowadays either to tell apart just by visual inspection real jet and other materials with similar physical properties (coal, cannel coal, shale, lignite, asphalt, etc.).<sup>13</sup> For the majority of artefacts, after non-destructive sampling, organic-petrological, geochemical and vitrinite reflectance analyses are required to determine their material and provenance. The analysis of jet-like materials became

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<sup>6</sup> Facsády 2009, 82.

<sup>7</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* XXXVI. 141.

<sup>8</sup> Dean 2007, 263–264.

<sup>9</sup> Dioscorides, *De materia medica* 5–146.

<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* XXXV. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Galen, *De Simp. Med. Facul.* 9.203.

<sup>12</sup> Solinus, *Coll. Mem.* 22. 11 (19).

<sup>13</sup> Allason-Jones 2001, 234–237.

possible from the 1990s. Fortunately, nowadays Hungarian researchers are also involved in the analyses,<sup>14</sup> thanks to which we know that the Aquincum pendant – based on Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) – was most likely made of Whitby jet from Britain, considered to be a ‘true jet’.<sup>15</sup>

### **The depiction on the cameo: the head of Medusa**

The myth, known from several ancient authors,<sup>16</sup> tells the story of how Perseus killed one of the monsters who lived in the far west. Medusa – the only mortal one of the Gorgon sisters, whose gaze was literally petrifying – remained dangerous even after her death, turning those who looked at her to stone. Adding to her ominous appearance was the hair of the once beautiful girl, which had been turned into frightening snakes as punishment.<sup>17</sup> Medusa’s punishment was the result of the wrath of Pallas Athena, who also helped Perseus kill her by giving him advice. The goddess then displayed the terrifying head as a deterrent on her *aegis*. From the Archaic period onwards, the depiction of Medusa became a common motif.<sup>18</sup> Its way of depiction and the intellectual content, however, varied from period to period.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the fearsome frontal depictions, by the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Medusa came to be ‘humanised’; and around the 5th–4th century BC, with the Medusa Rondanini, began the series of ‘beautiful’ Medusa depictions as well.<sup>20</sup> The full-figure representations were reduced to the depiction of the head and face. The ‘beautiful-pathetic’ Medusa-head in three-quarter profile became popular in the Hellenistic period,<sup>21</sup> and retained its popularity in the Roman period as well.

The Medusa-head depiction is also often found on jewellery. A special group of gold necklaces – clearly recognisable in Egyptian mummy portraits as well – , which featured a gold medallion with an embossed Medusa-head in the middle, was in fashion for only a few decades, between AD 140 and 190.<sup>22</sup> The depiction also became common in the form of gems, with pieces of a very similar design

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<sup>14</sup> Bondár et al. 2021, 146.

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Dr Attila Demény, full member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (Institute for Geological and Geochemical Research, Research Centre for Astronomy and Earth Sciences), for providing me this partial result from the ongoing investigation.

<sup>16</sup> See Gantz 1993, 304.

<sup>17</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV. 777–785, 793–800.

<sup>18</sup> LIMC IV 1988, 319–330.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of earlier literature see Lazarou – Liritzis 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Furtwängler 1909, 1721–1727; Belson 1980, 373, 376; from gold: Lazarou 2019, 7. Fig. 9–11.

<sup>21</sup> Lazarou 2019, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Michaelis 2015, 89.

being produced mainly during the 3rd century AD. It decorated – primarily in the form of cameos – pendants,<sup>23</sup> earrings,<sup>24</sup> and rings,<sup>25</sup> but museum collections and gem catalogues often also contain gems on their own depicting Medusa-heads.<sup>26</sup> This depiction was common in particular among the products of the workshop suspected at Viminacium.<sup>27</sup> Medusa-head pendants made of glass were also made in the 4th century.<sup>28</sup> Without analogy is a fibula found in Wancennes, Belgium, which has in the middle a glass cameo with a mask-like Medusa depiction. What makes it special, however, is its unique punched inscription, which can be resolved and interpreted as “*Capud Gorgonis Perseus conciderat*”.<sup>29</sup>

The popularity of the depiction is usually ascribed to its apotropaic nature.<sup>30</sup> This reduction to protective nature is, however, challenged by the basic function of jewellery, which is precisely to attract attention. This seems to be contradicted by the deliberate display of a representation which, if glimpsed, posed a serious threat to the observer. It is questionable therefore whether the same reason led to the choice of gem in all cases. The amulet nature of Medusa likely varied in degree not only from one type of jewellery to another, but also from one area to another, just as its depiction on coins, too, can be ascribed to different reasons.<sup>31</sup>

### Medusa cameos from jet

Jet of different qualities and origins<sup>32</sup> was also used to produce small items of everyday use, but in its utilisation, jewellery stood in first place. Most often, it was used to make a variety of small beads and bracelets consisting of beads, but it was also often used to carve – retaining the forms of gold jewellery – rings, bracelets and pendants.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ruseva-Slokoska 1991, 149. Cat. 127–128; Milovanović – Anđelković-Grašar 2017, 174. Fig. 13–15.

<sup>24</sup> Milovanović – Anđelković-Grašar 2017, 175. Fig. 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Grueber 1900, 63. (onyx cameo); Betti 2005, 363, 370. Fig. 3. amethyst intaglio; Johns 1996, 84. Fig. 4.5; Ruseva-Slokoska 1991, 175. Cat. 206, 180. Cat. 219; Gesztelyi 2000, 82. Cat. 269–270.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Babelon 1897, 84. Nr. 158–89. Nr. 177; Vermeule 1970, 214. 25.; Henig 1976; Henig 1978, Cat. 725–728; Guiraud 1988, Cat. 479, 480, 989–991; Riha 1990, 24; Gesztelyi 2013, 108. Cat. 31–33; Hamat – Kovacs 2020, 402.

<sup>27</sup> Popovic 1989, 49–56.

<sup>28</sup> Giovannini 2010, note 129; Entwistle – Finney 2013, 155. Cat. 41–42., 156. 43.

<sup>29</sup> Fontaine 2012, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Milovanović – Anđelković-Grašar 2017, 168.

<sup>31</sup> See Haymann 2022.

<sup>32</sup> See Menéndez 2019, 126–129.

<sup>33</sup> Facsády 2009, 25; Menéndez 2019, 137. with earlier literature.

Among the jewellery carved from jet, pendants depicting the head of Medusa form a separate group.<sup>34</sup> In addition to the piece from Aquincum, to our present knowledge only 21 pieces have come to light: 10 from Britain (London, York, Strood, Chelmsford, Colchester),<sup>35</sup> nine from Germany (Cologne, Bonn, Neuss, Krefeld, Trier) and two from Belgic Gaul (Amiens, Tournai).<sup>36</sup> All of them are distinctive, unique carvings, nevertheless we can distinguish smaller groups among them based on their stylistic features, above all the design of the face. The pendants usually present the snake-haired head from the front, less often in three-quarter profile. The number of snakes varies, with two, three or even four pairs of snakes surrounding the face. Above the head, some variation in the design of the wings can be detected, although all pieces are characterised by a rhombus-shaped notching on the wings' surface. A unique design is the head depicted in profile on the pendant found at Strood, which, according to its first publisher, resembles Celtic coins.<sup>37</sup>

Group I/A: The influence of Celtic art is easily recognisable in some of the carvings. The provincial origin is clear particularly in the case of one of the pieces from York.<sup>38</sup> The elongated face is irregularly shaped, masculine, with a wrinkled forehead, half-closed eyes and a large mouth. The carving is of a higher relief than the others pieces and the suspension, too, is different. Usually a perforated suspension loop, which was created together with the depiction and rose above the head, was used to hang the medallion, in this case, however, the material was perforated at the top of the head, behind the hair. The face on one of the medallions found in Cologne looks like a mask, given its open mouth and bulging eyes.<sup>39</sup> One of the London pieces is more finely executed than those above, but it, too, has Celtic characteristics.<sup>40</sup> The piece found in Bonn but held in Oxford is unique with its teardrop shape.<sup>41</sup> On this pendant, the face is elongated and slightly masculine, the chin is rounded and the deep-set eyes – in spite of the marked pupil – make the gaze look fixed. The hair is designed differently, using holes.

Group I/B: The other group of pieces which can be classified as provincial art is characterised by a highly chubby face and a fixed gaze, and the snakes are separated from the hair. The piece found in Colchester<sup>42</sup> differs from the

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<sup>34</sup> Hagen 1937, 127. 11–18.

<sup>35</sup> Parker 2016, Appendix.

<sup>36</sup> Tournai: Amand 1952, 479, Todd 1992. 247; Amiens: Evans 1886, 444.

<sup>37</sup> Strood, Ashmolean Museum, 1927, 563; Evans 1915, 572; Kirk 1955, 217.

<sup>38</sup> Parker 2016, 102. Fig. 9.7.

<sup>39</sup> Hagen 1937, 127. E 11.

<sup>40</sup> Parker 2016, 100. Fig. 9.3.

<sup>41</sup> Evans 1886, Fig. 5; Hagen 1937, 127. E 12.

<sup>42</sup> Pooley 2017, 76, 190; Parker 2016, 99. Fig. 9.2.

Aquincum pendant not only in terms of its round, chubby face, fleshy lips and pupil-less, large eyes. The snakes connect to the S-shaped curls of the hair almost by chance, as it were, and one pair touches the chin directly. The wing design is also significantly different, shaped like a stylised bird feather. The frontally-depicted chubby face, swollen lips and fixed eyes are also characteristic of a piece found in a lead coffin in York dated to the 4th century. The pupil, too, was carved on this piece, but this did not change the fixed nature of the gaze. The three pairs of snakes coil alongside the hair, and the wings' ends are marked with vertical parallel lines. These same traits can also be found on several pieces from Cologne,<sup>43</sup> but differences can be detected in their carving. The Medusa-head of the piece found in Tournai has a similarly chubby face and fixed gaze. What makes it special is that the pendant was carved on both sides, with a damaged head of disputed sex on the other side.<sup>44</sup> When the pendant from Amiens was found,<sup>45</sup> it had a loop of gold thread in its suspension loop. The face on this piece, too, is rounded, chubby, the mouth is slightly open, and the eyes show pupil markings. Above the head, the wing is finely executed, the hair is well arranged, and the two pairs of snakes are next to the coiffure and under the chin, separated from the hair, as it were.

Group II: Some of the Medusa-head pendants feature a more finely-executed face and a softer gaze than the previous ones. One example, also from London,<sup>46</sup> was found with characteristic female grave goods. The horizontal-oval-shaped pendant depicts a face with delicate features, facing front. The neatly-combed coiffure, parted in the middle, frames the round face. The nose is straight and the eyebrows are arched. The eyes are large and the pupil is not defined. Snakes are only found by the hair at the sides and by the chin, suggesting, as in Group I/B, that the reptiles are only present at the ends of the hair. On the two sides above the head, the wings are clearly defined, with long parallel lines marking the end of the wings next to the section with rhombus-shaped notching. Based on the grave goods, it can be dated to the end of the 3rd century AD.

We can find the analogy of the Aquincum jet pendant in the Medusa-head piece uncovered at Chelmsford in 1972.<sup>47</sup> The back of the circular medallion is plain and smooth. The face with a gentle, preoccupied gaze is depicted in three-quarter profile. The axis of the face is at the edge of the suspension loop, which makes it look like the head bows slightly forward. The illusory gesture makes the

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<sup>43</sup> Hagen 1937, 128. E 15–18.

<sup>44</sup> Amand 1952, 479 considers it to be a woman wearing a stola, Todd 1992, 247 considers it to be a male head.

<sup>45</sup> Evans 1886, 444. and Fig. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Johns 1996, 107. Fig. 5.19; Barber et al. 1990, 9. Pl. IV.B.

<sup>47</sup> Henig 1978, 292. Pl. LXV.53; Parker 2016, 99. Fig. 9.1.

whole face even more melancholic. The cheeks are plain, smooth and rounded, the chin is also round. The nose is straight, and the mouth is shaped like that of the piece from Aquincum. The pupils of the eyes are marked by recesses. The coiling snakes form part of the hair; four pairs of snakes can be distinguished from the forehead to the chin. The wings are also clearly visible, but their surface has barely any incisions.

## Conclusion

Certain types of jewellery made of jet and jet-like materials – bracelets, beads, hairpins – also reached the towns of Pannonia in relatively large numbers. Considered rare are the rings, decorated bracelets, pendants and other items of everyday use such as knife handles, which required more elaborate carving. The Medusa pendant from Aquincum belongs to this group of artefacts, which are also rare west of the Rhine. Although the majority of jet Medusa depictions have a fixed gaze and are symmetrically-arranged and frontal, there are parallels for the more softly-executed, three-quarter profile depictions as well. Accordingly, we can consider the Aquincum piece, too, the product of a British workshop, all the more so given that the archaeometric analysis appears to confirm the British origin of its raw material. The quantity and uniqueness of the pieces do not allow us to distinguish workshops. The pieces with a known find-spot are grave finds, discovered in the graves of young women;<sup>48</sup> and in one uncertain case it is likely that the piece was worn by a child.<sup>49</sup> The majority of pendants do not show signs of everyday wear. (The carving of the pendant found at York–Railway Station is incomplete probably not because of wear; it is likely an unfinished piece. The nose and mouth are completely smooth, the hair is also broad-brush.<sup>50</sup>) Medusa's multilevel protective function gained a new meaning with the black material. We cannot rule out that these pendants were unique pieces made for the grave.

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<sup>48</sup> Parker 2016, 110.

<sup>49</sup> Pooley 2017, 75, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Parker 2016, 102. Fig. 9.6.

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**DOI 10.22315/ACD/2023/1**  
**ISSN 0418-453X (print)**  
**ISSN 2732-3390 (online)**  
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**Figures:**



**Fig 1.** Jet pendant from Aquincum.  
(BTM Aquincumi Múzeum, photo: Péter Komjáthy)



**Fig. 2.** Back side of the jet cameo from Aquincum.  
(BTM Aquincumi Múzeum, photo: Péter Komjáthy)



**Fig. 3.** The jet pendant and the pair of gold earrings from the Aquincum sarcophagus.  
(BTM Aquincumi Múzeum, photo: Péter Komjáthy)