

<i>ACTA CLASSICA</i> <i>UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>XLIII.</i>	<i>2007.</i>	<i>p. 79–99.</i>
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MAGICAL HAND DEPICTIONS IN THE ROMAN PROVINCES

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From the Palaeolithic period to present days, from the caves in the Pyrenees to Japan, the hand is the mostly used sign, symbol from the human members on the various sacred-magical depictions.

The hands known from the provinces of the Roman Empire – apart from the hand-shaped-objects offered for successful recoveries – can be ordered into two major groups independently of their size and material. We must count the sacrificial gifts offered for gods among the first group, and the objects that were made probably with apotropaic function among the other group. The inscriptions on the life-sized-bronze hands of the first group reveal that these objects were consecrated to gods. One of such inscribed hand was offered for Sabaios¹ by a Zougras, another by an Aristocles, whereas on the third bronze hand the letters IDOM are legible. This hand was associated with the cult of Baal in the town of Doliche. An unadorned, open-palmed hand is visible on an altar dedicated to Dolichenus at Leptis Magna.² At the end of the last century, Usener had firmly regarded the votive hands – before some inscribed representatives were unearthed – as apotropaic amulets, he even linked their use to delivery-childbirth on the basis of folk analogy. It was Blinkenberg who firstly stated that the bronze hands were part of the cult of Sabazios, the Thracian-Phrygian god. By the evidence of inscriptions, we can firmly establish that the „holy hand” did have function in the cult of Dolichenus as well beside in the cult of Sabazios.

The purpose of this present study is to investigate the damage averting, hand-shaped amulets associated not with the cult of gods, but with folk religiosity, folk beliefs not excluding the possibility that the two belief world could be in contact with each other at a certain point.

¹ A Guide to the Exhibition Illustrating Greek and Roman Life. British Museum Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities. London 1906, 47.

² I. Tóth, Juppiter Dolichenus tanulmányok [Studies on Juppiter Dolichenus]. Budapest 1976, 126.

The bronze and bone sticks and hairpins ending in hands on which ornaments are discernible carrying some mysterious, symbolical meaning belong to those finds which are frequently found in the imperial provinces. On contrary to the *vota*, there are no inscriptions on these small objects, but even more abrasion-marks are observable that refer to the frequent use of them. We may wonder whether the sticks, the clothes- and hairpins did have magical functions, what they were used for or why their wear was favourably useful. What is this folk religiosity about if their use can be attributed to religious beliefs? Was it just superstition, magic, or could it be a traditional, Greco-Roman rite that authors somehow ignored being not mentioned in the sources, or perhaps the vestige of one of the syncretic religious trends which were so fashionable in the imperial period?

Parallels to the finds from Pannonia and other western provinces (e.g. Noricum, Germania, Gallia and Britannia) that appeared in the first century A.D. and were found in large numbers from the second-third century are known in Egypt since the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Claude Sourdive wrote his monograph (entitled *La Main*) on the Egyptian hand depictions from the predynastic period to the third century A.D. on the basis of more than half-a-thousand objects. In many respects, his statements can also be used in the possible interpretations of the Roman provincial finds. In Egypt, the first find depicting a hand was found in a girl's sepulchre from the first Nagada period.³ The hands depicted with extending or bending fingers were quite rare at that time, but turned up during both the Old- and Middle Empire. In large numbers, they were left behind after the beginning of the reign of the 22nd dynasty, whereas the finds from the Hellenistic period are completely identical with the shapes from the Roman imperial period. Two types of the hand-shaped bone and bronze pins depicting hand-gestures from Ancient Egypt (first type: open-palmed hands with fingers pressed against one another, the thumb sticking closely to the palm; second type: closed-palmed hands with a pointing index finger) have not been found (so far!) among the Roman imperial finds. There are early examples for the first type e.g. in the bone collection from the Bronze Age from Caesarea in Palestine,⁴ or the Etruscan ebony carvings⁵. The type with pointing figure is characteristic of Egypt, the hands represent a typical gesture to ward off evil, to avert damage.

³ Cl. Sourdive, *La main dans l'Égypte Pharaonique*. Paris, without the year of the publication, 4.

⁴ Ch. Ayalon-Sorek, *Ancient Artifacts from Animal Bones*. Tel Aviv 1999, 64.

⁵ P. Jakobsthal, *Pins and their Connections with Europe and Asia*. Oxford 1956, 85, fig. 238 (Orvieto).

In the art of the provinces, the bone carvings and the small bronze finds depicting hands can be ordered into eight groups. My typology is based on the different, well-separable hand-gestures and the details of adorned hands. The bracelets, spheres of various size, pinecones and miniature shovels were additional symbols associated with the gestures of the hand. From all these, the snake of the snake-bracelet, the cone of the pine tree, the fruit, or other crops (apple, pomegranate, fig, and poppy-head) and the incense are those symbols that could be interpreted precisely from a sacral point of view.

First group: Palm with extended fingers kept loosely together (Fig. 1). Three representatives of this group are known from Pannonia, the finds are from Aquincum,⁶ Intercisa⁷ and Gorsium.⁸ The one from Aquincum is intact, the other two are broken. All three pins represent palms with stretched fingers. On the wrists, circles are carved in to signify bracelets. Sourdive considers this hand-gesture unfamiliar in Egypt, a pattern that cannot be traced back to earlier Egyptian hand-depictions.⁹ This type of pin-head is the most similar to the „Fatimah’s hand” amulet best known from the Arabic culture.¹⁰

Second group: Hand with small spheres between the thumb and the index-finger, the other fingers are extended similarly to the first type. The majority of the hairpins from this group is made of bronze. The fingers bending to the shape of a circle are holding a small sphere. Quite frequently, the hand and the pin-body are separated by circles signifying a bracelet. The archaeologists working in the provinces trace this type back to the Trojan cycle; they regard this hand as that of Aphrodite’s holding the golden apple given by Paris. We should, however, exclude the possibility that the craftsmen fabricated their goods with such a severe distortion of proportion (between the apple and the hand!) mainly in the case of the bone pins, but also of the small bronze finds of good quality (Fig. 2). Sourdive’s explanation that the fabricators modelled these pins on the hands holding incense-spheres used for sacrifices seems a lot more acceptable.¹¹ This type appeared in Egypt during the reign of the 22nd

⁶ BTM (Budapest History Museum) 52.658 . Intact bone pin, l: 10,5 cm , the inner palm is heavily abraded.

⁷ M. Bíró, Pannoniai csontművészet [The Art of Pannonian Bone Making]. Budapest 2000, fig. 10b.

⁸ M. Bíró, Gorsium Bone Carvings. Alba Regia 23 (1987) 25-63. fig. 339. The palm is heavily abraded.

⁹ Sourdive, 576.

¹⁰ Fatima was Mohamed’s daughter whose figure is associated with the hand-shaped hangers that are known, made and sold in the Arabic culture.

¹¹ Sourdive, 177, figg. E 07, E 08 (Cairo).

dynasty and were continually produced during the Greco-Roman period until the third century A.D. The ceremony of burning incense is frequently represented on the feast-scenes from the New Empire, on the sacrificial scenes of ceremonies in temples. Life-sized, hand-shaped incense spheres were unearthed as well, i.e. in this case the incense spheres were held on a stick similar to a hand. The majority of the pins holding incense spheres is from the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty from the Delta region. The European finds from the Roman age can be dated to the third century and to the beginning of the fourth century A.D.¹² These finds were found both in military and civilian settlements. Even if they differ from the first and third groups formally from typological point of view, it is quite probable that they belonged to the same cult-circle regarding their essence.

Third group: The thumb and the index finger form a circle, the other fingers are kept close together (Fig. 3). The lack of the incense spheres and the closely kept fingers differentiate this type of pins from the second group, whereas the characteristic gesture of the thumb and the index finger link these two types. These pins were all made of bone with no exception, they are smaller and of much poorer quality than the bronze pins in the second group. Thus the lack of the incense spheres could evidently be explained by the clumsiness of the craftsmen, since the circle formed by the thumb and the index finger is a determining factor of both types. The datable finds of this type are from the end of the second century and the third century A.D.¹³

Fourth group: Hand lifting up a large fruit on its fingertips. Similarly to the hands with incense spheres, more and more pins were fabricated in the so-called Late Age (22nd dynasty) in Egypt. Their popularity had vestige until the third century A.D. The fruit in question is much larger than the incense spheres.

¹² E. M. Ruprechtsberger, Die römischen Bein- und Bronzenadeln aus den Museen Enns und Linz. (Linzer Archäologische Forschungen VIII). Linz 1978, figg. 344, 345, 346; M. Kohlert-Németh, Archäologische Reihe. Römische Bronzen II aus Niha-Hedderheim Fundsachen aus dem Hausrat. Frankfurt am Main 1990, 86: fig. 49; A. Kaufmann-Heinimann, Der römische Schatzfund von Straubing. München 1951, 141, Kat. 243, T. 149; V. Gonzenbach, Zwei Typen figürlich verzierter Haarpfeile. Jahresbericht der Gesellschaft Pro Vindonissa 1950/51, 14–19; G. Feyder-Feytmans, Recueil des bronzes de Bavai. Suppl. Gallia. Paris 1957, Kat. 278, t. 43.

¹³ Places of occurrence: Savaria (unpublished), Viminacium (S. Petković, Rimski predmeti od Kosti i Roga sa teritorije Gornje Mezije. Arheološki Institut XXVIII. Beograd 1995, XVI.1, kat. 341), Mainz (H. Mikler, Die römischen Funde aus Bein im Landesmuseum Mainz. Monographies instrumentum. Montagnac 1997, 35 t. 2, 5), Emona (A. Dular, Rimske koščene igle iz Slovenije. Arheološki Vestnik 30 (1979) 278–293, Intercisa (I. Bóna–E. Vágó, Der spätrömische Südostfriedhof [Die Gräberfelder von Intercisa I.]. Budapest 1976).

We could identify this oval fruit as an egg, apple, pomegranate, fig or poppy-head with the same chance. The bone carving from Intercisa is the only one which is thoroughly elaborated, it is of good quality and the detailed design of the cone of a pine tree is well discernible on it.¹⁴ We can find such scratchings also on the tree carvings from Egypt that could exclude the egg from the possible interpretations.¹⁵ The finds from the European provinces can be dated to the third-fourth century A.D.,¹⁶ whereas one of the two pins from Caesarea in Palestine is bound to have been unearthed from a Byzantine layer.¹⁷ The most surprising representative of this type is the hand-figured-pin from Egypt on which a small child is sitting on its fingertips instead of the fruit; the hand itself is adorned by bracelets.¹⁸ This relic helps us learn about the sacral background of the magical hands (Fig. 4).

Fifth group: Hand demonstrating the fig sign (Fig. 5). This new variant, a hand-ended pin with the fig sign appeared in Egypt during the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty. On this clenched fist, the thumb is thrust either between the index- and middle finger or between the middle- and the ring finger. This type of find is especially characteristic of the Cleopatra period. The fig – *fica* – is an ancient sexual symbol in the Mediterranean world. MacGregor writes publications on such depictions from the collection of the excavations in England, on which the fig-hands were combined with phallus, thus duplicating the sexual reference of the amulet. In his opinion, the material of these miniature talismans was not indifferent, either, since all the gagat, the coral, the bone and the horn were considered sacred base materials.¹⁹ The find from Verulamium (a combination of a phallus and a fig-hand) published by Wheeler was suitable to be hung on a chain or a leather strap in the neck due to a hole drilled into the middle part. Similar amulets were left behind in Britannia until the ninth century A.D. Fig-hands –independently of its phallic symbol – have been unearthed in each European province: Viminacium, Lugdunum, Emona, Poetovio, Aquileia, and

¹⁴ Intercisa (Dunaújváros), unpublished.

¹⁵ *Sourdive*, 177. E 09, 10, 11, 12, 14.

¹⁶ *J. Cl. Béal*, Catalogue des objets de tabletterie du Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-Romaine de Lyon. Lyon 1983, 226, XXXIX t. fig. 735; Hungarian National Museum; *Mikler* 1997. t.35 fig. 1,3.

¹⁷ *E. Ayalon*, The Assemblage of Bone and Ivory Artifacts from Maritima. Israel 1st-13th Centuries CE. (BAR International Series 1457). Oxford 2005, fig. 246, 247.

¹⁸ *Sourdive*, 567.

¹⁹ *A. MacGregor*, Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn. The Technology of Skeletal Materials since the Roman Period. Sydney 1985, fig. 106 a-d, 106 e (Verulamium).

Vindobona.²⁰ Dular's data from Szerémség are the earliest references to these pins, the one from Poetovio can be dated to the second half of the first century A.D., whereas the finds from Viminacium from the same region were fabricated in the first half of the third century A.D.²¹ Moreover, a bone pin ending in hand with snapping fingers was also unearthed in the Christian cemetery in Nida-Hedderheim excavated in 1891/1892.²²

Sixth group: Hand-shaped pins adorned with bracelets imitating snakes (Fig. 6). The representatives of this group are significantly larger and thicker than those in the previous groups. The length of the intact pins varies between 14 and 15 cm. The bracelets depicted on the tree carvings are precise copies of the jewels known from the archaeological collections. The bracelets appear in two types on the bone carvings. Firstly, the bracelet imitating a snake is winding upwards in a spiral line; the head of the snake is resting on the top of the hand similarly to the Sabaios-hands. This type is known – among others – from Aquincum, Apulum, and Lugdunum.²³ The other type shows that the snake-bracelet is winding horizontally around the wrist; the head and tail of the snake are growing up- and downwards from this line. Such representatives were found and published from Pompei, and the Gallian excavations: Vienne, Lyon, Arles, and Narbonne. This bracelet-type can often be discovered on terracottas depicting Aphrodite-Venus.²⁴ In Egypt, as always in the case of the pins discussed above, this type can be dated to earlier period than its European parallels. The ebony pin from Fayum (Gourob), on which an ureus snake is winding around the hand with snapping fingers, is datable to the time of the Ptolemaic dynasty.²⁵ The datable representatives of this pin-type were made in the third century A.D.

²⁰ S. Petković, Rimski predmeti od Kosti i Roga sa teritorije Gornje Mezije. (Arheološki Institut XXVIII.) Beograd 1995, t. XVI, fig. 2; Béal 1983, 225, t. XXXIX. 732 és 733; Dular 1979. t. 2/10.

²¹ Dular 1979. t. 2/10.

²² J. Obmann, Die römischen Funde aus Bein von Niha-Hedderheim. In: Schriften des Frankfurter Museums für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Archäologisches Museum XIII. Bonn 1997, 232-256. 256.

²³ Hungarian National Museum (M. Bíró, The Bone Objects of the Roman Collection. Catalogi Musei Nationalis Hungarici. Ser. Archaeologica II. Budapest 1994.), Aquincum Museum (unpublished), D. Ciugudean, Obiectele din os, corn și fildes de la Apulum. Bibliotheca Musei Apulensis V. Alba Iulia, 1997. 161, t. XI. 1; Petković 1995. t. XVI, fig. 3. Béal 1983. t. XXXIX. 731, 732, 734, 737.

²⁴ Akurgal, Venus statue (Canakkale, 1st cent. B.C.).

²⁵ Sourdivé 177, E 13.

Seventh group: Hand holding a miniature shovel (Fig. 6). This type represents hands that are holding miniature, flat shovel or a spoon on which a grain of incense could be placed. The two quoted representatives are known from Egypt and Gallia. The distance in time between the two finds is larger than geographically since the hand from the collection of the Petrie Museum in London was fabricated during the Middle Empire,²⁶ whereas the small find from the collection in Lyon in the third century A.D.²⁷

Eighth group: Hand combining the previous symbols. From the collection of the British Museum, a hand on an ebony pin is lifting an oval fruit (see fourth group) and the snake is winding up on it (see sixth group). The bone-carver emphasized the magical characteristics of the pin by carving a real snake onto it, not just a snake-shaped bracelet (Fig. 7).²⁸ The finger-snapping-hands ending in phalluses have similar multiplied symbolic meaning.²⁹ The hand with snake-bracelet on it from Egypt is also snapping its fingers thus showing the fig sign.³⁰

To sum up what have been analysed, the hand-shaped objects – on the basis of the movements, gestures of the hands and the additional symbols– can be ordered into eight groups. The objects themselves that end in hands were made for at least two different purposes. The length of the smaller pins do not go beyond 7 cm and are quite thin, whereas the length of the longer bone sticks varies between 12 and 14 cm and are much thicker than the representatives of the former group. The connection between the size of the objects and the signs on them is demonstrable. The hands with snakes on them belong to the thicker, larger object-group. The observable abrasion-marks are quite peculiar; the fingers of almost all hands are abraded to the base. Ciugudean renders it possible that the representative found in Apulum (Gyulafehérvár) has some trace of wax on it and raises the theory that these hands were used as *styli*.³¹ I cannot agree on this theory; on the one hand, using the hand-shaped sticks for such a purpose seems quite doubtful taking the extraordinarily practical Roman design into consideration. On the other hand, the scratching, writing on a wax-board could not cause the so drastic abrasion of the „fingers” of the pin. It seems possible

²⁶ *Sourdive*, 274, fig. 1.

²⁷ *J. Cl. Béal*, *Catalogues des objets de tabletterie du Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-Romaine de Lyon*. Lyon 1983. t. XL. fig. 738.

²⁸ *A Guide* 1906, 47, fig. 105.

²⁹ *MacGregor* 1985, fig. 106e.

³⁰ *Sourdive*, 177, E 13.

³¹ *Ciugudean* 1997, 23.

that these sticks served other cultic purposes as well similarly to the hands holding incense spheres from Egypt; these objects were suitable to place the incense on the embers. The relationship between these sticks and the incense-burning could be justified by the pin-types of the second group which – though are unsuitable for the incense sacrifice due to their size – depict the practice of burning incense.

All things considered, the gesture showed by the hand-shaped hairpins and bone sticks together with the additional symbols associated with them form a homogenous system after all. The elements of this system, the fruit, the snake, the fig, and the phallus are all parts of an ancient Mediterranean fertility cult. This cult belonged to the women, or to one of the female goddesses since the hands are all female hands decorated with ornamented bracelets.

In his novel entitled *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius describes that devoutly watching the procession for Isis, Lucius, who turned into a donkey, sees that the fourth of the priests in the procession is carrying the emblem of justice, an enormous, carved, wooden open-palmed left hand.³² The symbol of justice is the left hand, since clumsiness is associated with it, it has no flexibility, and these are the reasons why it seemed more suitable symbol for justice than the right one. Unfortunately, this most widely-known *locus* that deals with the hand as a symbol cannot be correlated with our topic since all our finds represent right hands. Thus all the bronze and bone hairpins, the bone sticks decorated with snakes represent right hands without exception. Apuleius' artificial, over-sophisticated explanation is overturned by the millennial, magical tradition of distinguishing the right and left, the positive and the negative side. There existed such a folk belief, a cultic practice on the territory of the Hellenistic world and the romanized oikumene whose finds are of the same type, since the bone pins in Fayum and Lugdunum in Gallia were made with minimal difference. We should assume an approximately identical belief world behind the identical finds. If we accept Sallust's statement³³ that the images of gods have signs referring to their functions, then this statement must be true vice versa, i.e. we can deduce the god itself from the signs referring to its function. In case of Eileithyia, the Greek goddess who helps childbirth, the gesture of the hand is of utmost importance. She is often depicted on ancient vases with lifted arms and loosely extended fingers. It is associated with the magical theory of matching and solving. By this gesture does she remove the obstacles of the childbirth. We may wonder the cult of what kind of deity or deities these object can be associ-

³² Apul. *Metam.* 11,10: *Quartus aequitatis ostendebat indicium deformatam manum sinistram porrecta palmula, quae genuina pigritia, nulla calliditate nulla sollertia praedita, uidebatur aequitati magis aptior quam dextera.*

³³ Sallust. *Phil. De deis et mundo.* 6. ed. A. Darby Nock.

ated with in the Mediterranean region, what old beliefs revived during the confused search for identity of the last centuries of the imperial period, during the syncretistic merging of the gods of various nations.

From the temple of Hathor in Egypt, we know such castanets that end in a hand with fingers pressed against one another and the face of goddess Hathor at the other end.³⁴ The participants of the ceremonies accompanied their cultic dances with these bone castanets. The cult of Hathor gradually melted into the cult of Isis. Isis from Pannonia puts on the forms of a classic Hathor type by the cow horn and the sun. The hand depictions here are doubtlessly associated with a fertility rite, a female goddess. This female deity is the goddess of love and birth; she herself is the sycamore tree that nourishes the Pharaoh with her own milk.³⁵ From the time of the Middle Empire, this system of symbols grew richer: the lotus flower that symbolizes childbirth and the hand became interchangeable symbols. The infant Horus who emerges from the lotus flower, who sits on it as on a throne is the ancient symbol of childbirth, just as the so-called "donna fiori" type of depictions represent the childbirth, the goddess of childbirth. The best example for the identity of the lotus and the hand, the mutual interchangeability of them is the Harpokrates depiction from the second-third century A.D. This infant-god at the end of the bone pin represented with the Sun and the dual crown of Egypt is sitting not on a lotus flower but on a hand. Surprisingly enough, on the bronze find from the third group (hand-shaped pins with bracelets) an infant is held in the place of the oval fruit. The hand depictions in Egypt from the Middle Empire attestedly belonged to the cult of a fertility-childbirth-love goddess. This goddess was first called Hathor, later Isis. The sycamore tree next to a river, its crop: the pharaoh fig, the lotus, the hand, the ureus snake, and the sacrificial incense are all the elements of the iconographic cycle of the goddess of love and childbirth, and each of them denotes the Child and her Mother embodied in the tree, in the flower and in the figure of an earthborn woman.

The present study should answer the question whether the unquestionable identity of the archaeological finds in the Egyptian, Greek and Roman regions means copying, imitating the Egyptian objects or whether there was a similar belief world into which the objects from East fitted organically. The Terra Mater of the Neolithic period, the Great Mother goddess would be a too simple and a rather far starting point. However, it is the distance in time that matters. Nils-son's presumption that the religious life of men and women in the antiquity was clearly separated has been proved a scientific fact by now. The two types of the

³⁴ Sourdive, 202, Ivoires de l'Orient Ancien aux Temps Modernes. Paris 2004, 46, fig. 40.

³⁵ Grave of Thotmes III, Thebes, Valley of the Kings.

male and female sacrality originate from the irreconcilable contrast of the gender.³⁶ The most exclusive female sacral experience is the mystery of childbirth, the sacrality of life, the experience of the universal fertility.³⁷ Lucian says: “The miserable male gender does not even know the name of the gods revered by the women! As examples, take the Colias, Gentyles or Phrygian goddess, the noisy roam of the shepherd’s unhappy lover.”³⁸ Without written sources, the closed sacral life of the women can be reconstructed by the help of the earth-bound, literally unearthed archaeological finds in the most authentic way. But we should accept the theory as a premise that there had not been any self-serving decorations before the modern European industrial society; all the clothes they wore, every symbol on their daily used objects had their own meanings, their own sacral meanings. In our case, the gestures of the depicted hands, the fruits held in the hands and the signs on the hands also had their sacral meanings.

Some of the hand-shaped pins – on the basis of the Egyptian parallels - are holding incense spheres presumably. In the Greco-Roman ritual routine, incense sacrifice was offered only to Aphrodite-Venus. The cult of Aphrodite spread to the Greek regions from Asia bringing the temple prostitution and the use of incense sacrifice at performing the rites, which were both unfamiliar to the Greek world. The use of the incense is a purifying act causing spiritual renewal; moreover, it is quite disinfective from medical point of view. In Rome – as Ovid informs us – the incense sacrifice was the straight path to win the benevolence of goddess Venus.³⁹ The miniature bronze Venus statue in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is holding the incense sphere between her thumb and index finger with the same gracile gesture as we can observe it on the finds from the second group. Another interesting feature of this specific statue is the figure of the infant: Venus is holding a real baby in her arm, not a small, winged Amor (Fig. 2).

The snapping of the fingers and the phallus depictions associated with it and the other references for love and sexuality of the pins depicting hands. The *fica*, the hand with snapping fingers was not the sign of rejection, the illustration of the expression „I’ve got your nose”, but a quite obvious sexual sign. Its association with the word *fig*, *fica* isn’t random at all: the fig tree is the symbol of fertility and nourishing motherhood, but the fig crop itself was also known as a sexual stimulant.

³⁶ M. Eliade, *Naissances mystiques. Essai sur quelques types d’initiation*. Paris 1959, 160.

³⁷ Eliade 1959, 159.

³⁸ *Amores* 42.

³⁹ Ovid *Fasti* IV. 865-868: *numina, volgares, Veneris celebrate, puellae: / multa professorum quaestibus apta Venus. / poscite ture dato formam populique favorem, / poscite blanditias dignaque verba ioco.*

The snake was also a symbol of fertility, the emblem of the fertility of the Earth, of the Mother Earth, of *Terra Mater*. People offered snakes made of milk-loaf and fruits on the feast of the cult of the Athenian Aphrodite. According to Pausanias, the snake and the fruit as symbols were interchangeable.⁴⁰ The snake-shaped bracelets were also significantly important accessories of Aphrodite's statues.

The snake, the fertility of the Earth, the fig-tree which symbolizes the nourishing motherhood are all integral parts of the cult of goddess Aphrodite, who was worshipped as the garden Aphrodite, Ἀφροδίτη ἐν Κήποις in Athens.⁴¹ The details of Aphrodite's feast, the Skirophorion, will always remain unknown for us, but we have information on such a feast of the garden Aphrodite in Athens when the goddess was not only worshipped as the erotic patron of love, but as the Great *Terra Mater*, mother of nature.

The Roman Aphrodite – with Kerényi's term – stepped ashore in south-Italy. Aphrodite's vegetational cult linked to those of Dionysos' and Priapos' originated from the region of the Black Sea.⁴² The Roman Venus was also originally a *numen*, a goddess with similar function to that of Ceres, Flora and Pomona. In his agricultural dissertation, Varro mentions that Minerva protects the oil tree plantations, whereas Venus the gardens of vegetables.⁴³ Pliny the Elder cites Plautus, who called Venus as a female protector of the gardens.⁴⁴ In the classical era, Aphrodite-Venus gradually reacquired her ancient function of *Magna Mater*, which was originally her own in the prehistoric era, irrespectively of whether she comes from Asia or the region of the Black Sea. Lucretius calls Venus the mother of the whole world (*genetrix, hominum divumque voluptas*).⁴⁵

The mother goddess puts on her figure whose small statues appears on the bone distaffs in the third-fourth century A.D.⁴⁶ On the find from Intercisa, which is the most detailed one from iconographical point of view, the goddess is standing under a fig-tree (sycamore tree). She is holding up the crop of the fig tree exactly with such a gesture of the hand that we can observe on the hand-depictions from the fourth group. She is holding the fruit in her right hand

⁴⁰ Pausanias IX, 19, 2.

⁴¹ Pausanias I, 27,3.

⁴² R. Schilling, La religion romaine de Venus. Depuis les origines jusqu'au temps d'Auguste. Paris 1954, 18.

⁴³ Varro *Agr.* 1. 1. 6.

⁴⁴ Plin. *Nat. Hist.* XIX 50: "*hortos tutelae Veneris*".

⁴⁵ Lucr. *De rerum natura* I. 1-20.

⁴⁶ M. Biró, The Unknown Goddess of Late Roman Popular Religious Belief. *Acta Archaeologica* 46 (1986) 195-229.

and her child in the left. We may wonder whether she is the late Roman goddess that puts on the figure of Aphrodite from Knidos, Melos, and whether the hand-depictions associated with her cult, the hairpins, and the incense sticks are the last testimonies of an earlier uniform belief world in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea. In that ancient belief world, the Great Mother and her male companion (*inferior potestas*) are regarded as a divine pair. The fundament of the archaic world view is that the Great Mother and her male companion can later be called the Phrygian-Thracian Dionysos,⁴⁷ Priapos, Sabazios, and Ma, Hipta⁴⁸ Aphrodite, Venus.

The *Genetrix Mundi*, who had countless plenty of names during the several-thousand-year-old religious tradition, stands behind each name.⁴⁹ The duplication or triplication of the individual deities is an abundantly documented phenomenon in the antiquity.⁵⁰

In the introduction of this study, I distinguished the *vota* offered to deities as votive gifts dedicated to the worshipped deities with clerical order and sacral places from the damage averting apotropaic miniature objects that were used daily. But the borderline between religious and magical rites can not always be clearly determined. Generally it can be observed that superstitions tend to proliferate in the late period of the religious and social development in the high-level cultures and the popular beliefs gain more and more ground in the public-thought.⁵¹ But such symbols exist which have been in use for more than two thousand years. It is quite probable that the symbol-system or the magical spells of specific cultures do not mean descendancy, but a common psychological root.⁵² The people of the unifying oikumene created by the Hellenism and the Romanization recognized the identity in one another's sacral traditions and the globalised industry and commerce guaranteed the spreading of the universal shriny objects in the whole empire. The common shape of the hand-shaped, miniature objects from Britannia to Palestine can probably be explained by this theory. The only question to be clarified is whether these small finds that have

⁴⁷ Already *J. J. Bachofen* (Das Mutterrecht. Stuttgart 1861) stresses that Dionysos is the male god whom all the major female goddesses get in connection with, to whom the significant nature-mothers e.g. Cybele - Sabaios, Demeter - Iachos etc. He is the *inferior potestas* next to the superior woman.

⁴⁸ *M. P. Nilsson*, Geschichte der griechischen Religion. I. Die Religion Griechenlands bis auf die griechische Weltherrschaft. Berlin 1992, 579: Mhtr̃ kã Iptv kã Diẽ Sa[baz...w]

⁴⁹ *M. Biró*, The Bone Objects of the Roman Collection. (Catalogi Musei Nationalis Hungarici. Ser. Archaeologica II.) Budapest 1994, 195-229.

⁵⁰ *C. Ginzburg*, Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba. Torino 1989, 179, fig. 7.

⁵¹ *L. Kákósy*, Varázslás az ókori Egyiptomban [Magic in Ancient Egypt]. Budapest 1974, 53.

⁵² *Kákósy* 1974. 118.

magical shapes can be associated with the cult of any specific god, and if so, with which?

According to the testimony of the archaeological finds, the magic hands had a significant role in the cult of the Thracian-Phrygian god Sabazios. Most of the several interpretable and uninterpretable, sometimes disgusting negative figures that adorned the bronze hands offered to the god are observable on the bronze and bone hands as well. We know from the inscriptions of the bronze hands that the objects were offered to a male god Sabazios by the makers. Women wore the bronze and bone hairpins, and it is quite probable by the evidence of the bracelets that the hands are female hands. In all regions, the hand depictions belong to a goddess who dominates the love-birth-fertility sphere. The depictions of the mother stepping out of a tree, holding a fruit and an infant have come down to us on distaffs from the third-fourth century A.D. The mother-goddess, whose figure was borrowed from the monumental statues of Aphrodite-Venus (statues from Knidos, Melos), was worshipped primarily in the Balkanian regions. The northern border of the occurrence of the finds was the Black Sea and the easternmost premise was Brigetio in Pannonia.⁵³

The distaffs and hands (hairpins, incense sticks) can be associated with the cult of Sabazios not only by the snake, cone or fruit. On the inner side of the wrist of the best-known Sabazios hand in the British Museum, a very interesting scene is depicted: under a rainbow or rather a semi-arch signifying a cave⁵⁴, there is the figure of a reclining mother half-covered embracing or perhaps breastfeeding her infant. In the photo published in Chini's monograph entitled *La Religione*⁵⁵, this scene is clearly observable; it is in contrast with the publications of the Sabazios hand from Neviodunum since only from the descriptions of the authors can we learn that on the inner side of the wrist - beside many poorly interpretable signs - a reclining woman with her embraced infant is depicted.⁵⁶ The mother depiction is well observable on a colour copy owned by the Dresden Museum. The goldsmith's work named 'The Birthday Present of the Great-mogul' was made between 1701 and 1708 by Melchior Dinglinger. According to the interpretation of the goldsmith, on the golden wrist of the Sabazios hand the woman embracing her infant half-covered by a blue blanket is

⁵³ The investigation of this group of questions is detailed in my monograph to be published. *Bíró* 1986.

⁵⁴ A Guide 1906, 47, fig. 31; *P. Chini*, *La religione* (Museo della Civiltà Romana 9). Rome 1990, 18, fig. 10.

⁵⁵ *Chini* 1990, 18.

⁵⁶ *P. Petru-S. Petru*, *Neviodunum. Drnovo pri Kreskem* 1972, 44, fig. 30; *Religions and Cults in Pannonia. Exhibition at Székesfehérvár* 1996. Székesfehérvár 1998.

lying under an arch that symbolizes the blue firmament.⁵⁷ We referred to this latter baroque artwork to give evidence that – together with the photos of low quality – the scene did not deceive the eye of the researcher. This representation combines the cult of the Thracian vegetational God (about whom we have rather little precise information) and the cult of the Balcanian mother-goddess; our knowledge of her cult is even less complete as of the previous one. During the research of the Thracian origin of the cult of Dionysos, Nilsson regarded Semele as an ancient Earth-mother (Erdgöttin) beside Dionysos – before the discovery of the linear texts.⁵⁸ The female consort of the Thracian Dionysos-Sabazios – as attested to by the evidence of the epigraphs – is a certain Meter, called Hipta in this region. Inasmuch as it is possible for me – without the mention of written texts – I tried to prove that the magical hands were associated not only with Sabazios-Dionysos, but also with the female consort of the mysterious Thracian-Phrygian deity, with the cult of a goddess primarily symbolizing maternity and fertility, who was originally a vegetational deity similarly to Sabazios. The name and the figure of the goddess were modified during the centuries, but her functions, her role to protect the fertility of the nature and humans remained unchanged.

The cause of the different interpretations of the history of religion should be searched not in the different facts, but in the different methods; however, if the mosaics of the epigraphic and archaeological relics may reveal such a path that is new and can lead us to unexpected directions and does not contradict the contemporary written sources, these mosaic pieces should be collected even if our hypotheses built on them need to be revised again and again. The study above is a part of a monograph to be published in which I interpreted the role of the magical hands in a much wider perspective; with the help of archaeological relics I tried to introduce the rich belief world of nations that are considered peripheral from geographical point of view (present East-Europe), socially closed (female religiosity) and belong to the lower layers of the empire economically (folk traditions of the inhabitants of the provinces).

⁵⁷ L. Hansmann–L. Kriss-Rettenbech, *Amulett und Talisman. Erscheinung und Geschichte*. München 1966, 195, fig. 607.

⁵⁸ M. P. Nilsson 1992, 568.

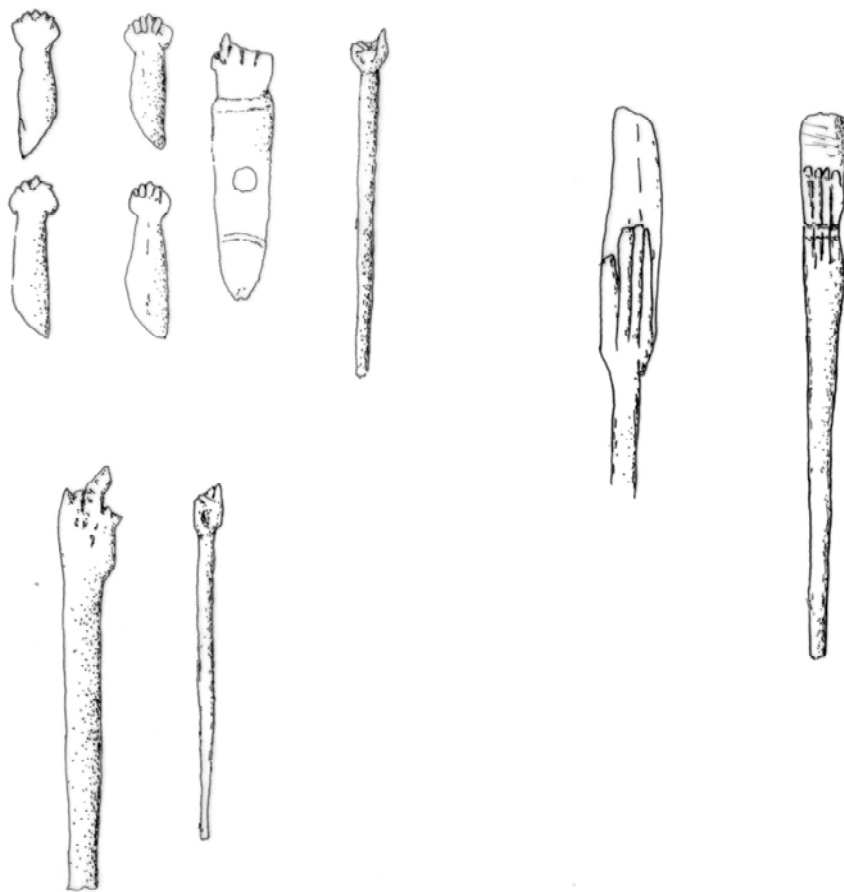


Figure 1. First group

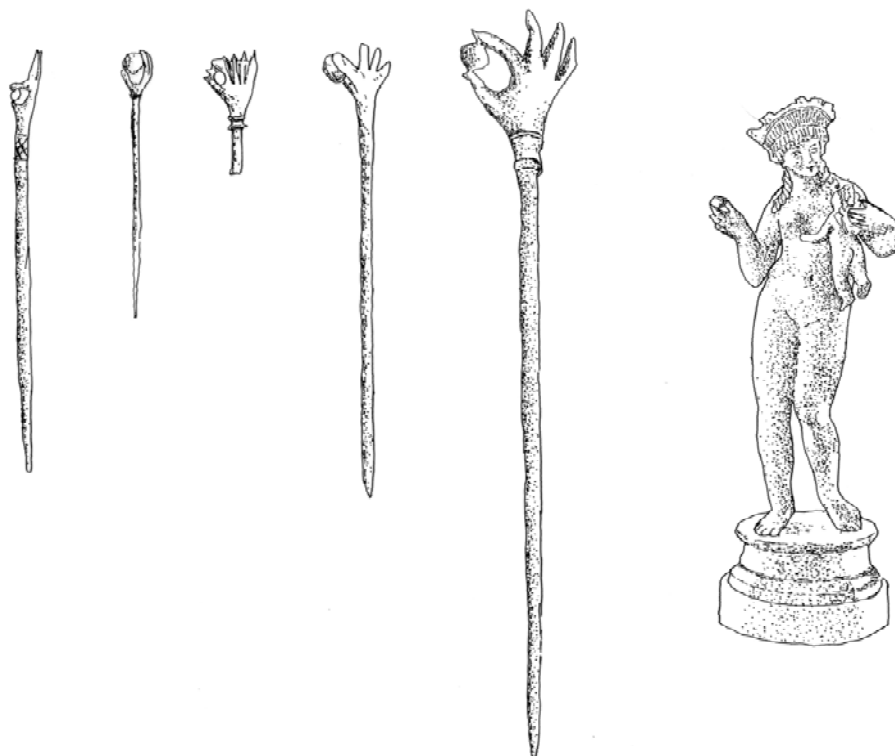


Figure 2. Second group; Venus and Amor (bronze statue no. VI. 33).
Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien

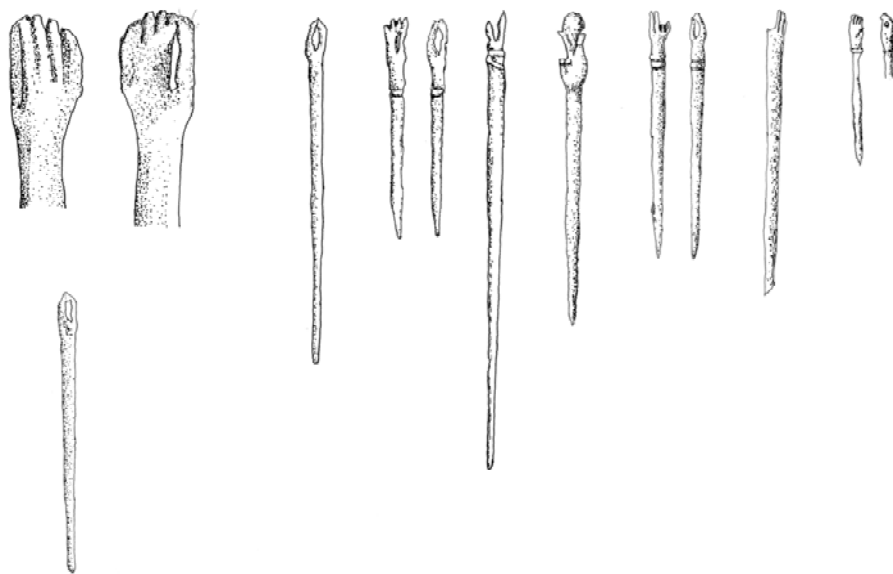


Figure 3. Third group

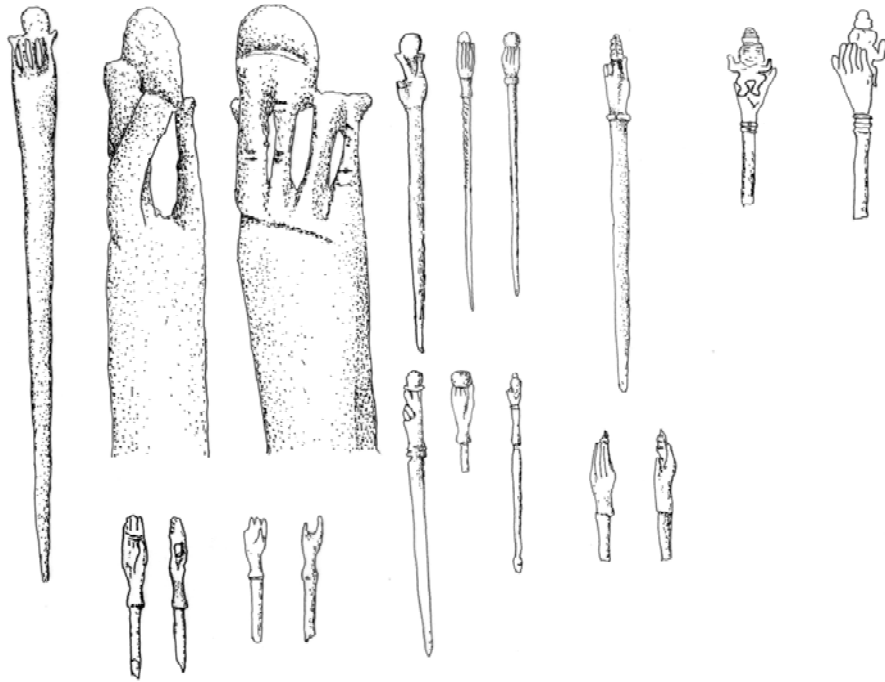


Figure 4. Fourth group; Bone pin, a child (Harpokrates) is sitting in a hand. By Sourdiva

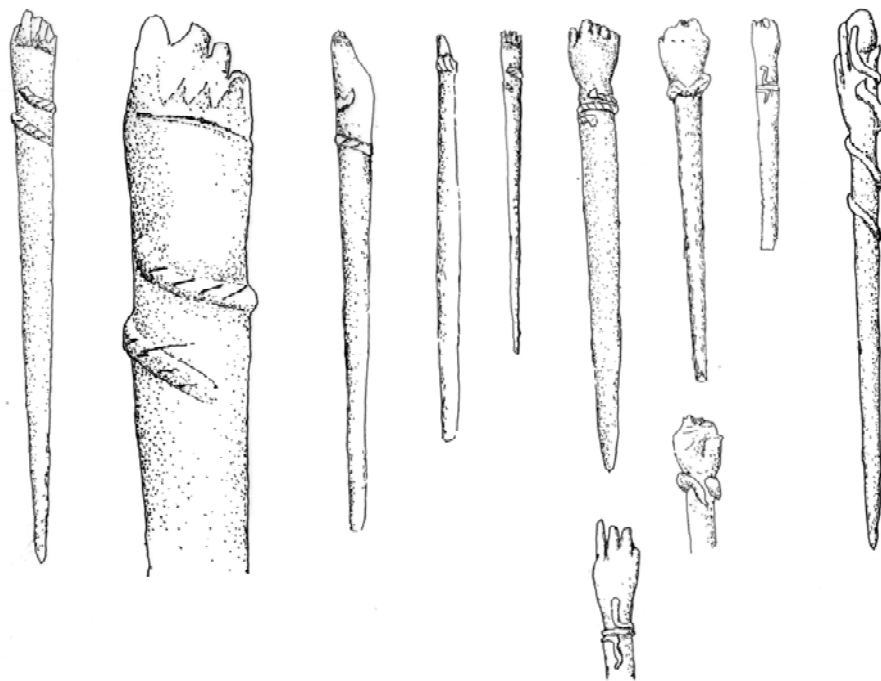


Figure 5. Fifth group

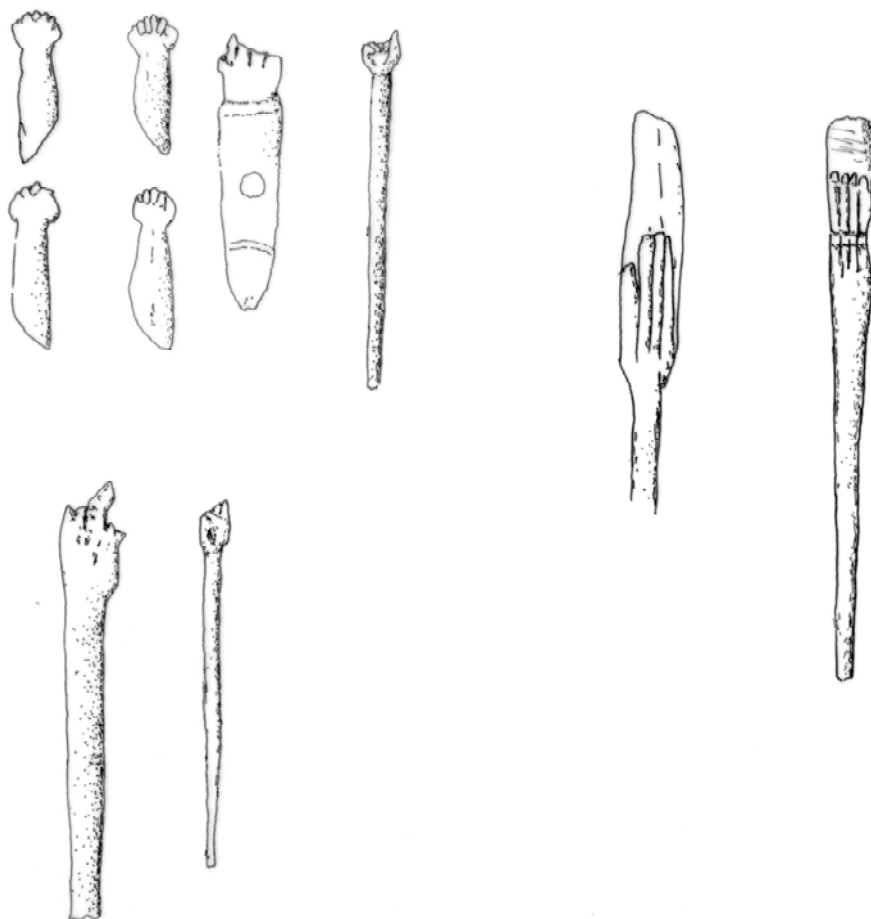


Figure 6. Sixth and seventh group



Figure 7. Sabazios hand in Dresden. The group made by Melchior Dinglinger (1701-1708); Sabazios hand (bronze, no. 107). British Museum, Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities