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**Danae.
Bagliori del mito**

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Danae.

Bagliori del mito

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Carlo Sala

A Terracotta Mould from Aquincum depicting the Story of Danaë

Gabriella Fényes*

“... Danaë’s son, who, I affirm, was born of the raining gold”
Pind. *P.* 12.16 (trans. R. Lattimore)



1 | Terracotta mould from *Aquincum* depicting the story of Danaë (photograph by Nóra Szilágyi).

The *Aquincum* Museum of the Budapest History Museum houses a small terracotta mould [Fig. 1], which features an episode from the life of the Argive princess Danaë from Greek mythology: the conception of her son, Perseus. The fullest account of the story depicted on the disc can be read in the *Bibliotheca* of Pseudo-Apollodorus:

Ἀκρίσιος δὲ περὶ παίδων γενέσεως ἀρρένων χρηστηριαζομένῳ ὁ θεὸς ἔφη γενέσθαι παῖδα ἐκ τῆς θυγατρὸς, ὃς αὐτὸν ἀποκτενεῖ. δεῖσας δὲ ὁ Ἀκρίσιος τοῦτο, ὑπὸ γῆν θάλαμον κατασκευάσας χάλκεον τὴν Δανάην ἐφρούρει. ταύτην μὲν, ὡς ἔνιοι λέγουσιν, ἔφθειρε Προῖτος, ὅθεν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἡ στάσις ἐκινήθη: ὡς δὲ ἔνιοι φασί, Ζεὺς μεταμορφωθείς εἰς χρυσὸν καὶ διὰ τῆς ὀροφῆς εἰς τοὺς Δανάης εἰσρueis κόλπους συνῆλθεν.

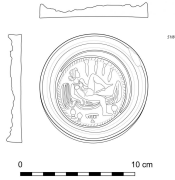
When Acrisius inquired of the oracle how he should get male children, the god said that his daughter would give birth to a son who would kill him. Fearing that, Acrisius built a brazen chamber under ground and there guarded Danaë. However, she was seduced, as some say, by Proetus, whence arose the quarrel between them; but some say that Zeus had intercourse with her in the shape of a stream of gold which poured through the roof into Danaë's lap (Apollod. 2.4.1, trans. J.G. Frazer).

There are many who hold that the child's father was none other than Zeus, an assumption confirmed by the works of Homer, Herodotus, Pindar, Diodorus Siculus and Nonnus, to name a few (Hom. *Il.* 14.319-320; Hdt. 7.61; Pind. *P.* 12.16; Dioid. 4.9.1; Nonn. *D.* 7.110). Ovid, too, recounts that it was the supreme god of Graeco-Roman mythology who fathered Perseus. From him we also learn – as we have already seen in Pindar's ode – that the deity came to the girl in the form of a shower of gold: Acrisius “*neque enim Iovis esse putabat Persea, quem pluvio Danaë conceperat auro*” – “Nor did [Acrisius] admit that Perseus was son of Jove, whom Danaë had conceived of a golden shower” (Ov. *Met.* 4.610-611, trans. F.J. Miller). And later: “... *Perseus Iove natus et illa, / quam clausam implevit fecundo Iuppiter auro*” – “... Perseus, son of Jove and / that imprisoned one whom Jove filled with his life-giving shower” (Ov. *Met.* 4.697-698, trans. F.J. Miller). The story appears in a similar way in the mythological handbook of Hyginus:

Danaë Acrisii et Aganippes filia, huic fuit fatum ut quod peperisset Acrisium interficeret; quod timens Acrisius, eam in muro lapideo praeclusit. Iovis autem in imbrem aureum conuersus cum Danaë concubuit, ex quo compressu natus est Perseus.

Danaë was the daughter of Acrisius and Aganippe. A prophecy about her said that the child she bore would kill Acrisius and Acrisius, fearing this,

shut her in a stone-walled prison. But Jove, changing into a shower of gold, lay with Danaë, and from this embrace Perseus was born (Hyg. *Fab.* 63.1.1 trans. M. Grant).



2 | Terracotta mould from *Aquincum* depicting the story of *Danaë* (drawing by Tamás Lajtos).

It appears the maker of the disc from *Aquincum* was familiar with the story, depicting the union of Danaë and Zeus (Jupiter) similarly to the works of Apollodorus, Ovid and Hyginus, although in a rather risqué manner [Fig. 2]. An almost naked Danaë is shown lying on a sheet-covered *kline*, with perhaps a light veil over her upper body, wearing a necklace with four beads around her neck. Her hair is held by a band, with a bun on

her nape. Her head is depicted in profile, her body in three-quarter view. With her back she leans against the headrest of the couch – covered with a richly-draped sheet – or a thick cushion. She spreads her legs to receive Zeus sensually, who appears in the form of a golden shower. The shower of gold is represented in the upper right section by four phalluses falling like raindrops. The insemination – and the conception of the mythical hero Perseus – is indicated directly and unambiguously by a fifth phallus. On Danaë's bed there is a thick mattress, covered with a richly-draped sheet also covering the footboard. Three of bed's legs appear below the sheet, the fourth is hidden by Danaë's right leg dangling from the bed. The profiled legs of the bed are each divided into four parts, one of which is a large, globular ornament. Under the bed there is a small, low stool. This and the spherical bed legs were interpreted by previous researchers as vessels for collecting the gold (Kuzsinszky 1932, 224; Alföldi 1938, 316, 330).

The depiction of Danaë and the shower of gold, however obscene, seems to follow a 'classical' antecedent. Various episodes from the story of Danaë were frequently depicted in art, on ancient vases, gems, reliefs and wall paintings (Digital LIMC; Settis 1985, figg. 47-52). Danaë collecting the golden shower in her lap or Danaë in the company of Eros appears in several forms (*Jekhytos*, London, British Museum Digital LIMC ID 33679, *hydria* Eichenzell Schloss Fasanerie Digital LIMC ID 33678, gems Boston

Museum of Fine Arts Digital LIMC ID 33685, 33687, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum Digital LIMC ID 33698). The depiction most similar in composition to that of the mould from *Aquincum* is known from two Greek red-figure vases: the *calyx-krater* of the Triptolemos Painter from Cerveteri, held today in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (and Digital LIMC ID 33674 and Classical Art Research Centre Vase Nr. 203792), and a red-figure bell-krater from southern Italy held in the Louvre (Digital LIMC ID 33683 and Classical Art Research Centre Vase Nr. 1009208).



3 | Terracotta mould from *Aquincum* depicting the story of Danaë (photograph by Nóra Szilágyi).

The depiction from *Aquincum* is a negative image, used to produce a positive design [Fig. 3]. The fabric of the disc is hard-fired, fine clay, fired brick-red (Munsell soil colour chart 10R 5/8). The mould was wheel-thrown, with the design stamped in. Its diameter varies between 93.4 and 95.3 mm. Its thickness at the rim is 15 mm; at the thinnest point (the left side of the image) it is 9.5 mm. The design was stamped into a surface

surrounded by a 14 mm wide rim punctuated with two concentric circles. The image, however, was not stamped exactly in the middle, but somewhat to the left, leaving a crescent-shaped area – 6 mm wide at its widest point – free on the right. The diameter of the image itself is 61 mm. The scene is framed by a thin circle (2.7 mm) punctuated by diagonal notches. The contours of the design are sharp; it appears to have been stamped by a metal object or another very precise practice. Half of the impression is visibly deeper; here the design was stamped more firmly while the back of the mould is completely smooth and flat. The artefact can be seen at the *Aquincum* Museum's permanent exhibition; its inventory number is 51184.

The find-spot of the terracotta mould

The disc with the Danaë depiction was found in *Aquincum* (modern-day Budapest), the seat of the provincial governor of Pannonia Inferior, on the site of a Roman period pottery workshop east of the Civil Town. The pottery workshop was excavated between 1909 and 1913 during the construction of the Óbuda Gasworks. According to the excavating

archaeologist, Bálint Kuzsinszky, the workshop had started operating prior to AD 160 and was still open after 178 (Kuzsinszky 1932, 14). However, it is likely that the workshop had already been producing household pottery earlier, in the first half of the second century (Póczy 1956, 105 – 111). No documentation survives of the excavation. The excavator published the uncovered finds twenty years later. According to his account the mould depicting the story of Danaë was found not among the ruins of the pottery workshop, instead it came from a cist grave at the western edge of the excavation site (Kuzsinszky 1932, 223). This is confirmed by a treatise of András Alföldi, in which he writes that the object was found in 1925 along with a mould depicting Mercury riding a ram. According to this account, which cites archaeologist Lajos Nagy, the other artefacts found in the grave place the date of the burial no earlier than the mid-third century (Alföldi 1938, 330). I have found no further documentation concerning neither the discovery nor the precise find-spot.

The find-spot of the artefact lies east of the ancient Civil Town of *Aquincum*. The main east-west thoroughfare of the settlement, which led to the Danube, crossed this area. During the second half of the second century, this was the site of the largest pottery workshop of the Civil Town, which produced – among others – relief-decorated Samian ware imitations, vessels with applied decorations, cake moulds, lamps, terracotta figurines, brick and ceramic building materials (Kuzsinszky 1932, 7 – 423). After the pottery workshop closed, the area came to be used for burials. Graves were found in 1830 and then in 1892 as well (Kuzsinszky 1892, 446 – 448); at the beginning of the twentieth century, connected with the construction of the gasworks, nearly 100 graves were excavated. These were tile and stone cist graves, located around an apsidal building considered an early Christian burial chapel. It is, however, likely that during the excavation the simpler inhumation burials were not even documented. In 1976, during rescue excavations, further kilns as well as tile and stone cists were uncovered (Topál 2003, 166; Zsidi 1984, 470; Lassányi, Szeredi 2020, 112 – 114). Excavations just south of the area in question were launched from 1998, which led to the discovery of another cemetery of the Civil Town, used during the first third of the century (Lassányi, Szeredi 2020, 114).

Cake moulds from the Danube region

Bálint Kuzsinszky, who had found and published the disc depicting the story of Danaë, identified the artefact as a cake mould (Kuzsinszky 1932, fig. 223, 235). On certain festivals, cakes would be offered as sacrifice to the gods. Cakes would also be handed out or sold during celebrations, and people might give them – and honey wine – as birthday or New Year’s gifts. These were also made using round moulds with a large diameter, whose negative images were reflected as ‘reliefs’ on the baked cakes. Their production was very popular in the Danube region. In *Aquincum*, the pottery workshop, which operated during the second half of the second century on the site where the disc with the Danaë depiction was discovered, certainly made similar cake moulds. They usually measured a large diameter and the vast majority of them featured a political subject, showing the triumph of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus or an alternative image of a victorious emperor (Kuzsinszky 1932, 12, 22, 218-235; Zsidi, Hárshegyi, Vámos 2009, 130-131).

In the case of the cake moulds found in the Danube region, it is rather common that they feature the reigning emperor. These were likely connected with the imperial cult, celebrated with *vota publica* on 3 January. The production of cakes depicting the emperor was an expression of loyalty (Alföldi 1918-1919, 14; Alföldi 1938, 314, 319-321; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 122). On the cake moulds which may be connected with the imperial cult we can also find the depictions of Mars, Victoria, Minerva, Tutela, the Genius of the place, or Sol (Alföldi 1918-1919, 16-17; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 122). Sacrificial cakes were also baked in honour of the Egyptian Isis and Serapis. The festival of Isis, the *ploiaphesia*, occurred on 5th March, but from the second century it was celebrated in January, and it may have even been combined with the imperial cult (Alföldi 1938, 314; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 122). In addition to Isis, we also find a large number of discs featuring Mercury in the Danube region, who is usually depicted on a ram, carrying a money bag in one hand. The depiction serves as a symbol for the New Year’s wishes of good fortune and wealth (Alföldi 1938, 316). Sacrificial cakes were also made for the feasts of other gods, for instance the one in honour of Liber Pater during the *liberalia* on 17th March, the goddess Ceres during the *cerealia* on 12th April (Ruscu, 1992, 126; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 122-123), and perhaps even during the spring festival

of Flora, celebrated between 28th April and early May (Alföldi 1938, Table LXX, 4; Delbó 2015, 102).

Among the imagery of the cake moulds from the Danube region, albeit rarely, we also find various mythological scenes as well as profane subjects – primarily amphitheatre and erotic scenes (Alföldi 1938, 313, Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 123). I did not find any equivalent of the disc with the Danaë depiction in either group. In addition to this and a relief disc depicting Pan – with hands tied back – and a goat, only one other mould with a mythological scene has been found in *Aquincum*. Bálint Kuzsinszky identified it initially as Theseus subduing the Minotaur and later as Hercules killing the Cretan bull (Kuzsinszky 1890, 141, fig. 29; Kuzsinszky 1932, 226; Alföldi 1938, 330-331, Table LVII, 1a-b).

Applied decoration

Compared to the other cake moulds, the disc with the Danaë depiction is quite small. The moulds are usually between 14/16 and 25 cm in diameter, and there are also pieces with a diameter of 27 cm. In the case of the disc presented here, if we exclude the rim, the stamped image measures only 6 cm. It is possible, therefore, that it served not as a cake mould, but a negative mould used for the production of applied decorations. These vessels with applied medallions were originally made in *Gallia Narbonensis* in the Rhône valley, from the reign of Trajan or earlier. From there they spread to neighbouring regions, where medallions were 5-17 cm in diameter. On these red-slipped vessels we frequently find the depictions of mythological scenes, plays from the theatre, chariot races, games in the amphitheatre, and erotic scenes – in addition to those of the gods and the emperors. Lamp reliefs and the relief decorations of metal vessels may have served as antecedents to the motifs. The design was first created from wax, from which a mould was made. The terracotta medallions were made from these moulds, applied to the body of the vessel and then fired together. The vessels are of various forms. The technique could be used to decorate cups, vessels with a globular body, a wide mouth, an everted rim or with one or more handles, jugs with three handles, an everted neck and a globular body, intended beakers, and finally flat or round flasks (Déchelette 1904, 236-306; Wuilleumier, Audin 1952, 9-15; Vertet 1969, 94 – 126). Although there is archaeological evidence of the production of vessels with applied decorations at the

Gasworks pottery workshop in *Aquincum*, so far we have not found a Rhône-valley vessel or an imitation that could have served as a direct template. Interestingly, however, already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Friedrich Drexel and András Alföldi drew attention to the similarity between the motifs used on vessels decorated with applied medallions and cake moulds (Drexel 1916, 19-20, Alföldi 1918-1919, 2-3). This has since been noted repeatedly in the literature on the subject (e.g. Alföldi 1945, 67; Ruscu 1992, 126; Weidner 2009, 137).

Dulcia, libum, crustulum

The find-spot of the disc with the Danaë depiction does not settle the function of the artefact. If the find-spot is recorded incorrectly and the object does not come from a grave, but indeed belongs to the Gasworks pottery workshop operating earlier on the site, both interpretations are still possible. The pottery workshop, after all, produced vessels with applied decorations as well as cake moulds. The punctuated, profiled and wide rim of the disc, however, leads me to accept Bálint Kuzsinszky's identification of the artefact's function and call it a cake mould.

What could be made with such moulds? In a different Pannonian town – Savaria, modern-day Szombathely – a cake mould was found with a rim on which the letters DULC were later scratched. This refers either to the sweet cakes (*dulcia* or *dulciamen*) that were made with it, or to the confectioner (*dulciarius*) (Rómer, Désjardins 1873, 165-166, Nr. 425; Alföldi 1918-1919, 7; Alföldi 1938, 337-338; Table LVII 3a-b; Bollard-Raineau, Szabó 2010, 55, fig. 5). *Dulcia* meant all kinds of cakes made with flour and honey (Darembert-Saglio, entry for *dulcia*, *dulciarius*) and *dulciamen* was used as a synonym of *placenta*, the most common term for cakes (*Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* online, entry for *dulciamen*).

Cake moulds from the Danube region, with a known precise find-spot, were found in pottery workshops (Kuzsinszky 1932, 223 – 244; Alföldi 1938, 326; Delbó 2015, 96; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 124), bakery (Delbó 2015, 99), graves (Kuzsinszky 1932, 223; Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 123), public buildings and private houses (Cociş, Ruscu 1994, 123-124). Dan Ruscu, however, has also published two pieces from the sanctuary of Liber Pater in *Apulum* (Ruscu 1992, 125-126). The motifs on several moulds also suggest that their use was connected with the worship of this deity.

According to Ovid, honey cakes were sacrificed to Liber Pater, and these cakes (*liba*) were named after the god (Ov. *Fast.* 3.733-736). Varro writes that *libum* was given this name because the cakes were sacrificed to the gods (Varro *Ling.* 5.106). He later also writes that priestesses of the god would sell these cakes to customers during the festival of *Liber Pater*, the *liberalia* (Varro *Ling.* 6.14). Martial on his birthday, which fell on the festival of *Matronalia*, also made an offering of *libum* (Mart. 10.24). The recipe of the *libum* has been preserved in Cato's treatise *On Agriculture* (Cato *Agr.* 75, 76). Based on this, *libum* was made with cheese, wheat flour and eggs, formed into a loaf and baked on bay leaves. According to Ovid, honey was also added to the *libum* (Ov. *Fast.* 3.735-736, 761-762). Horace, too, calls *libum* a honey cake (Hor. *Epist.* 1.10.10-11). In his commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*, Servius writes that *libum* was a cake made with honey and oil (Serv. *Aen.* 7.109). It is, therefore, likely that the cake moulds (or a part of them) from the Danube region were used to bake cakes - which may be considered *liba* - to be offered as sacrifice to the gods.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, some four hundred terracotta moulds and fragments were found inside storage vessels in a cellar in Ostia. These were likely used for baking cakes of the same size. The author, who published the discovery, connected the artefacts to the festivities of *epula publica*, during which cake (*crustulum*) and honey wine (*mulsum*) would be handed out (Pasqui 1906, 359-373). Inscriptions, primarily from Italy, show that it was customary for the municipal *élite* to offer their fellow citizens cake and wine (*crustulum et mulsum*) at the unveiling of statues, the construction of temples, on the birthday of the donator or the emperor, during festive games and on other occasions. Researchers connected the flat, circular moulds, popular in the Danube region, with this custom - i.e. that these too were used for *crustulum*-baking (Drexel 1916, 17-18; Alföldi 1918 - 1919, 6; Alföldi 1938, 313, 318). The etymology of *crustulum* (or *crustula* according to the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* online entry for *crusta*), can also be found in Varro, who writes that the term comes from the *crust* (*crusta*) of porridge, since porridge, in a way, casts off its 'hide' (Varro *Ling.* 5.107). *Crustulum*, however, is not necessarily a festive cake. In literary sources, it appears commonly among the products of confectioners (*pistor dulciarius*) (Apul. *Met.* 10.13); teachers gave *crustulum* to boys learning the alphabet (Hor.

Sat. 1.1.25); *crustulum* was used to console children (Sen. *Epist.* 99.27), and *crustulum* vendors also appeared among other peddlers in the baths (Sen. *Epist.* 56.2). This cake type was, therefore, rather common in everyday life as well. The disc depicting the story of Danaë may perhaps have been used for baking such cakes. Beyond the erotic image, it may perhaps have also expressed – by reference to the birth of Perseus, one of the greatest heroes in Greek mythology – wishes for the birth of a brave and strong child who was born of a sensual union.

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English abstract

A small, round terracotta mould is on display at the permanent exhibition of the *Aquincum* Museum of the Budapest History Museum. It portrays an episode from the story of Danaë from Greek mythology: the scene where Zeus visits the imprisoned Argive princess in the form of a golden shower. Although the depiction is rather risqué, it likely has a classical antecedent. The mould came from the site of one of the *Aquincum* Civil Town's pottery workshops, but according to the records it was found not among the ruins of the workshop, but in a grave from the area, which later came to be used for burials. The artefact was either a mould used for producing applied medallions for vessels or a cake mould – highly popular in the Danube region – used for baking cakes (*dulcia*, *liba*, or *crustula*).

keywords | Danaë; Aquincum; terracotta mould.

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