

AKTI VIII. MEĐUNARODNOG KOLOKVIJA O PROBLEMIMA RIMSKOG PROVINCIJALNOG UMJETNIČKOG STVARALAŠTVA

AKTEN DES VIII. INTERNATIONALEN KOLLOQUIUMS ÜBER PROBLEME DES PROVINZIALRÖMISCHEN KUNSTSCHAFFENS

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON PROBLEMS OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL ART

LES ACTES DU VIII<sup>ÈME</sup> COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR LES PROBLÈMES DE L'ART PROVINCIAL ROMAIN

ZAGREB 5.-8. V. 2003.

RELIGIJA I MIT KAO POTICAJ RIMSKOJ PROVINCIJALNOJ PLASTICI

RELIGION UND MYTHOS ALS ANREGUNG FÜR DIE PROVINZIALRÖMISCHE PLASTIK

RELIGION AND MYTH AS AN IMPETUS FOR THE ROMAN PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE

LA RELIGION ET LE MYTHE COMME INSPIRATION POUR LA SCULPTURE ROMAINE PROVINCIALE

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Odsjek za arheologiju Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu  
Sva prava pridržana

Nakladnik  
Golden marketing-Tehnička knjiga  
Jurišićeva 10, Zagreb

*Za nakladnika*  
Ana Maletić

*Sunakladnici*  
Odsjek za arheologiju Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu  
Arheološki muzej, Zagreb

*Recenzenti*  
prof. dr. sc. Aleksandar Durman  
prof. dr. sc. Tihomila Težak Gregl

*Motiv na naslovnici*  
Reljef Dijane kipara Maksimina iz Prološca kod Imotskog. Arheološki muzej – Split  
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UREDNICI  
MIRJANA SANADER  
ANTE RENDIĆ MIOČEVIĆ

SURADNIK  
DOMAGOJ TONČINIĆ

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# THE SYNCRETISM OF BELIFES AS EXPRESSED IN ROMAN PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE

BY CLAIRE K. LINDGREN

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The number three and depictions in threes possessed unprecedented importance for ancient European peoples. From the Mediterranean to the northernmost areas threes are omnipresent in the traditions of this formerly barbarian, primarily Celtic world. I have chosen here to use the words three or threes rather than triplication or triune or triad because of the implications inherent in those words. The word triplication suggests one form or symbol for a form repeated three times, the word triune indicates a group of three things united as one, and the word triad indicates the combination of separate and essentially individual entities. Initially then, three or threes seem to be a more general connotation to employ when first considering questions which arise when this affinity for threes is found in the context of the religious art of the Roman provinces.

Namely, is the use of three or threes an expression of a trinitarian concept (a triad) and indicative of a possible syncretism of beliefs, illustrated by either the Romanization or provincialization of form, or, as T.G.E. Powell stated years ago, "It is not a tendency to trinitarian concepts, or of the union of three distinct supernatural beings. It is, in fact, an expression of the extreme potency of anyone deity. It maybe likened 'to the power of three' and this number was sacred, and auspicious" (Powell p.124). Thus, he contended it was not necessarily indicative of a conflation of religious concepts by virtue of being either triune or a trinity. Moreover, if a tripled deity is indigenous to the Celtic cultural horizon can this be interpreted as tacit resistance to Romanization?

One of the earliest representations of the symbolic use of three found in the Celtic culture is the *triskele* possibly associated with three aspects of the material world as understood by the Celts, land, sea and sky; or perhaps another Celtic belief, the incarnate cycle of

life, birth, death and rebirth; or most probably a combination of the two, the life cycle within the material world. Curiously, the ancient Greeks also used a stylized *triskelion* and in Mediterranean regions it was associated with competition or progress, sometimes delineated as three attached running legs or as an abstraction of those three legs, a completely different meaning for a visually similar icon. Moreover, Greek thought was more pragmatic with regard to the material world; to the ancient Greek there were four elements earth, air, fire and water and no cycle of reincarnation.

Thus, It seems surprising to find a *triskelion* in repoussé technique on a **Celtic roundel of silver from Brescia, Italy** (Fig. 1) This work, the largest of several silver discs (3 large discs were found with 14 smaller discs or portions thereof), is 19.2 cm. in diameter and was considered by Jacobsthal to be an ornamental attachment for clothing rather than a phalera and is dated to the III or II century BCE. Decoration consists of a central Greek *triskelion* within a circle of 20 identical decapitated heads. A slightly smaller disc of a similar design consists of 18 heads surrounding a *triskelion*. The smaller discs approximately 9 cm. in diameter show 8 heads of a similar type but no similar central design, simply a raised hemisphere. The importance of the human head in Celtic religion and art is undisputed, a symbol of divinity and power. Do these works then indicate a conflation of beliefs or is the answer simpler, the borrowing of a similar form for the central design; the Greek *triskelion* mistakenly believed by the artist/creator to mean a *triskele*. An impossible question to definitively answer, however in the larger discs, the synthesis achieved by the uniting of the icon for competition or progress with the symbol of supreme divinity or power in an emblem to be worn, perhaps by a champion, seems plausible for an iconographic conflation.



FIG. 1 CELTIC ROUNDEL OF SILVER, MUSEO CIVICO, BRESCIA.



FIG. 2 BRONZE DISC FROM ANTRIM, ULSTER MUSEUM, BELFAST.

Another bronze disc 10.5 cm in diameter from River Bann, Co. Antrim Ireland (Illustration 2), dated I century CE was probably also used as an ornamental breastplate attachment or phalera because of the holes and one extant suspension ring, is decorated with a *triskele* joining a central spiral which itself contains a *triskele* incorporating three individual crested bird heads at the center of each spiral. Birds, “figure throughout the entire Celtic tradition as symbols of divinity and as servants and messengers of the gods” (Ross p.234). This is a more abstract evocation of the power of three with no indication whatsoever of stylistic conflation in form with any Mediterranean icon. In these decorative adornments the power of three manifest in the *triskele* or *triskelion* may have been perceived as being inherent in the metal talisman conceivably worn to protect and likewise imbue the wearer with superhuman attributes, as a magico-religious icon.

Larger sculptural works which combine the importance of the head with the number three are the tricephaloi. Since as Jacobsthal, Powell, Ross, Green and others have shown, among the Celts the human head was venerated above all else as the seat of the soul, center of the emotions, as well as life itself, and a symbol of the

power of the other world, this triplication of the head produces a tricephalos, a three faced head, a supremely powerful image. Tricephaloi appear to be mostly male as a work from Corleck, Cavan, Ireland together with an image on a terra cotta vase from Bavay, France suggest. The first of these tricephaloi, has no attribute whatsoever except triplication and it seems correct to assume, as Powell did, that this triplication illustrates the unrestricted power of a deity within the Celtic belief system. Other examples of this type have been found in Denmark and the British Isles at Guernsey, Wroxeter, Sutherland. Moreover, as Bober has shown in an extensive study, the tricephalic image was assimilated to more than one deity.

With regard to formal design, these tricephaloi are very different; the Corleck example exhibits the facial characteristics usually associated with Celtic art. The Bavay terra cotta relief is Romanized, the hair and beard, although subjected to Celtic abstract patterning in the form of whorls, are characteristics associated with the major, most powerful god of the Roman pantheon, Jupiter. This conflation echoes both the Celtic belief in the power of the head, and the majesty of the chief deity in the Roman pantheon which becomes an even greater symbol of power by triplication suggesting



that this depiction might indicate syncretism of beliefs, that of Jupiter and the cult of the head. Other examples of tricephaloi with mixed attributes can be found e.g., a tricephalic cippus from Reims again complete with beard which suggests conflation of imagery and iconography and possible syncretism of beliefs. Triplication is not limited to tricephaloi but is found in depictions of other distinct deities, such as the *genii cucullati* at Housesteads, and the mother goddesses at Cirencester and Vertillum in Burgundy. Sometimes, these examples, as in the case of the mother goddesses, have attributes which emphasize their sphere of influence, but these attributes do not necessarily suggest a Celtic-Roman conflation either of beliefs or imagery. Some seem to be exclusively connected to a region for they appear to be personifications of natural topographical features, e.g. springs and woods essentially local in character, as the water goddess, Coventina, from Carrowburgh on Hadrian's wall. Triplication in these instances serving to emphasize the power of the deity.

By far the most complex use of threes is in triads where the relationship of the entities portrayed is the determining factor as to whether the work is an example of syncretism or not. As Dumézil has theorized, the triad, a religious concept common in Indo-European populations consists of a structure which he calls "the ideology of the three functions" and is explained as follows

"The principal elements and the machinery of the world and of society are here divided into three harmoniously adjusted domains. These are, in descending order of dignity sovereignty with its magical and juridical aspects and a kind of maximal expression of the sacred; physical power and bravery, the most obvious manifestation of which is victory in war, fertility and prosperity with all kinds of conditions and consequences" (Dumézil p. 161)

Prior to the Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva in the Roman belief system there was an initial, archaic triad on the Italic peninsular consisting of Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus. According to Dumézil, Jupiter with the features of the Greek Zeus was the most august of divinities, the celestial king whose conceptualized function was primary, that of sacred power and knowledge. Mars, even though he is identified as the father of Rome's founding twins, his sphere of influence was not lovingly paternal but rather consistently bellicose fulfilling the second conceptualized function of physical power and bravery i.e., attack and war lead

to victory. Quirinus, an old Sabine deity, is sometimes identified with Romulus, the founder and by extension, patron of the Roman people responsible for Rome's well being and nourishment. Moreover identification with Romulus, son of the war god Mars, insinuates that it is through conquest that the Roman people achieve this well being, the father son relationship being a metaphor for that idea. Thus, with this archaic triad the combination of individual entities forms an omnipotent whole, which may be reflective of the early development of the Roman belief system which rationalized tribal activity, reinforcing the king's ultimate control.

Dumézil discounts a "direct cultic influence from Greece" for the more familiar later Roman triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, observing that the grouping of Zeus, Hera and Athena is "indicated only once in the whole Greek world in Phocis" (Dumézil p. 306). Although the evidence to connect this second triad with an Etruscan origin is sparse, Vitruvius (1.7) states that he takes his information from Etruscan writing and separates these three from all other deities stating that their temples be built IN EXCELSISSIMO LOCO.

That Jupiter, as Jupiter Optimus Maximus, was the preeminent Roman deity is established in literature by quotations from Livy cited by Dumézil together with his belief that it was took some time for the two supporting goddesses to "acquire some permanent stability on either side of the god" (Dumézil p. 291). The archaeological evidence affirms the literature.

The major god of the first triad became the major god of the Capitoline triad. Second in importance was Minerva, whose origin as an Italic cult goddess of arts and trade was later eclipsed by her identification with the Greek Athena whose sphere of influence also included crafts but was more extensive with her major association as chief goddess of war, born armed from the head of Zeus. In the Capitoline triad, she supplanted the archaic triad's Mars. Juno, the other goddess of the later triad, whose functions were facilitated by association with the Greek Hera, was hailed as Juno Regina, Jupiter's queen, and was mainly associated with life of women and the nourishment and preservation of family and nation. It is reasonable to assume that Juno's maternal sphere of influence can be understood as a metaphor for the well being of the state supplanting similar functions of the archaic triad's Quirinus.

Thus, it appears that a syncretism of the theology of the early tribes on the Italic peninsular with the theology of the Greek Olympic system formed the basis for



FIG. 3 STELE OF CERNUNNOS, APOLLO AND MERCURY, MUSÉE A ST. REMI, REIMS.

the Roman state cults with the triad assuming a principal position in the Roman System. This iconographical syncretism extended as well to the formal depiction of the deities, e.g. depictions of the Roman Minerva resembles the Greek Athena complete with aegis, shield and spear, Juno resembles the Greek Hera and Jupiter the Greek Zeus. So complete was the visual conflation that it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a depiction is of the Greek or Roman deity. It is likewise important to emphasize as Dumézil did that "Jupiter is in fact the sole active element of the Latinized triad, the sole master of the capital and sole patron of the Roman

Republic" (Dumézil p.310). In most instances the Roman deities who constituted the triad were individually depicted, that is, while the importance of the Capitoline triad is unquestioned, composite depictions of the deities in a single work is unusual. This differs from the inclusive depiction of triads in Roman provincial art which frequently include deities and their attributes from both the Roman and Celtic belief systems. The well known **Gallo-Roman columned, pedimented stele from Reims** (Fig. 3), unearthed in 1837, 1 meter 30 cm. in height has been dated to the second century. It features a Celtic god, a Cernunnos or horned

one, whose typology had been formed as early as the La Tène period placed in a central position flanked by provincialized classical depictions of Apollo and Mercury. All three are readily identified by their attributes. The Cernunnos sits enthroned in the Celtic meditative or shamanic position wearing the torc, emblematic of warrior nobility, an armlet and has a sling or drape over his left shoulder. He has horns springing from his head and is bearded, in his lap over his covered legs (he wears *bracae*) he holds a cornucopia or large sack overflowing with a substance identified as either coins or grain which he pours out to the bull and stag directly beneath his throne. Directly above his head in the pedimented area is a depiction of a single burrowing rat. To the left of Cernunnos stands Mercury wearing a *chlamys* and winged *petasos*. He holds his money bag in his left hand and his caduceus in his right hand behind his head while gazing at Cernunnos. Apollo, standing to the right of Cernunnos has a long drapery streaming from behind his left shoulder to over his right leg. He leans on his lyre balanced on the arm of Cernunnos throne. He also gazes at Cernunnos. Both Apollo and Mercury are smaller figures than Cernunnos, who would tower over them if he were to stand.

Clearly by the dominant central placement given to the him and his size Cernunnos, possibly the only pan-Celtic deity, is of greatest importance in this sculptural triad. Caesar equated Cernunnos with Dis Pater, divine ancestor and god of the underworld having fertility and chthonic associations (*Gallic Wars* 6.18). In Rome, Dis Pater had a sanctuary near the altar of Saturn belonging to the temple whose subterranean cave was given over to the custody of the Roman state treasury. The pedimental rat above Cernunnos may represent a burrow or underground chamber, the place for storage of treasure. Beneath the throne a stag and bull guard the wealth pouring from Cernunnos' cornucopia. The stag, the most important attribute of Cernunnos, the companion with whom he shares his horned symbol, had been part of solar therapeutic bronze age cults. The bull as a symbol of power and virility also was repeatedly used during the bronze age and the importance of this symbolism extended into the later periods when bulls, according to some legends, were ritually slain presumably for purposes of prognostication and divination. The bull was also an attribute associated with Jupiter, dominant god of the Capitoline triad. The coins or grain pouring on these magico-religious sacred animals may allude to present and future health

and prosperity achieved through worship of Cernunnos and his supporting classical deities whose spheres of influence coincide, parallel, and amplify those of the premier Celtic god. Mercury, was, according to Caesar, most widely venerated by the Celts as the inventor of all arts, guide of commerce and travelers, and as Livy stated connected with the administration of the corn supply, as well as establishment of the merchants' guild (2.27.5), here is subsidiary to Cernunnos, standing to his left holding his money bag.

Apollo, God of light, god of the sun, god of prophecy, was frequently assimilated with native healing gods as dedications and inscriptions attest e.g., with the Celtic healer Belenus. Apollo stands to right of Cernunnos with his lyre prominent, perhaps a reference to the importance of music, chanted incantations and supplications in the worship of deities. As with the Capitoline Triad, the central god is the sovereign supported by the flanking gods whose spheres of influence are subsumed by the central god. In this instance that central figure is a decidedly non-Roman deity, resulting in a syncretism which emphasizes the supremacy of the Celtic component, a squatting seated figure bearded as was Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The representations of the Roman deities are balanced by the Romanized depiction of the Celtic deity resulting in a syncretism that is both formal and iconographic reflecting Dumézil's theory of "the ideology of the three functions". Here the first "sovereignty" is found in the Cernunnos as it was found in Jupiter. The second "physical power and bravery" is found in the provincial Apollo (physical power is the result of health, a gift of the god) and the third "fertility and prosperity" is found in the provincial Mercury. To summarize, it would appear that the identity of the deities portrayed in triads is the determining factor as to whether the triad is an example of the syncretism of beliefs or not, simple triplication of the form of a deity such as the mother goddesses or the *genii cucullati* who are essentially native having no specific Roman counterparts cannot be considered an expression of iconographic conflation or syncretism of belief regardless of how extensively they have been subjected to formal stylistic Romanization. When only one deity is tripled as with the *genii cucullati* or tricephaloi there does not appear to be syncretic intent rather an emphasis and magnification of the power of the individual Celtic deity, which could be understood as a tacit resistance to imported beliefs and the reinforcement of indigenous religious concepts.. Moreover,





FIG. 4 ORNAMENT FROM COUNTY SLIGO, NATIONAL MUSEUM, DUBLIN.

the syncretism evident in the sculpture of the Reims triad of Cernunnos, Mercury and Apollo may be a natural step in the evolution of a belief system, similar to the way in which the archaic Roman triad developed into the Capitoline triad. Syncretism of beliefs, Roman and Celtic appears to be the dominating factor in this provincial triadic representation.

Finally, it must be noted that the religious connotation associated with threes persisted long after the Capitoline triad, provincialized Romano/Celtic triads, tricephaloi and tripled deities ceased to have followers. **A bronze and enamel medallion with a central**

**triskele design in silver dated to early eighth century from county Sligo (Fig. 4)** attests to that fact. As does a carpet page from the Book of Durrow from the early seventh century as well as that great example of slightly later Celtic art, the CHI RHO Monogram page from the Book of Kells dated to the late eighth century and even later sculptural example, the High Cross of Muiredach from Monasterboice, Co. Leath Ireland, dated either to the ninth or tenth century. The Roman and Romano-Celtic belief system had disappeared but the power associated with threes persisted as another belief system itself associated with a trinitarian concept of a Triune God whose nature was defined in the fourth century writings of a Gaul, Hilary of Poitiers (315-367), gradually dominated the former western provinces. Hilary's work *DE TRINITATE* is the earliest latin explanation/defense of Christianity's Nicene Triune Theology, which from that point onward, inspired religious art as illustrated by the books of Durrow and Kells as well as the numerous medallions and stone sculptures whose distinct Celtic design motifs incorporating the love of threes can be traced far back into prehistory.

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