

Zeitschrift: Schweizer Münzblätter = Gazette numismatique suisse = Gazzetta numismatica svizzera

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Numismatische Gesellschaft

Band: 23-27 (1973-1977)

Heft: 98

Artikel: An Asiatic mother-goddess on a contorniate

Autor: Samson, Jules M.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-171060>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 03.05.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

beinen des Pferdes befindet, handelt es sich um einen Teil, möglicherweise um den Anfang oder die Abkürzung des Namens eines Prägeherren³. Die beiden lambda-förmigen Spitzhaken oberhalb des Pferdes am Schrötlingsrand⁴ deuten die Fortsetzung der Legende an und können vielleicht als M gelesen werden. In Höhe des Pferdeohres läßt sich noch eine diagonale Haste erkennen. Der Name des Prägeherren kann aufgrund der hier vorgelegten Tetradrachme jedoch nicht sicher ergänzt werden⁵.



Der Vorderseitenstempel ist charakteristisch für den Freien Samobor/C 23-Typ⁶. Der Rückseitenstempel war bisher lediglich ohne Aufschrift bekannt⁷, die, nachdem der Stempel bereits einige Zeit in Benützung war, nachträglich eingeschnitten wurde. Epigraphie Tetradrachmen waren bislang nur für die Freien Samobor/C 24- bzw. 25-Typen bekannt, die der von R. Göbl erarbeiteten relativ-chronologischen Schicht VI angehören⁸. Mittels der nur fragmentarisch lesbaren Legende ..N-AM.., durch die ein weiterer, bislang namentlich unbekannter, «ostnorischer» Prägeherr vorgestellt wird, läßt sich nun Beschriftung für die Freien Samobor/C-Typen bereits in der Schicht V nachweisen.

³ Zu den epigraphen, «ostnorischen» Tetradrachmen siehe R. Göbl, *Typologie und Chronologie der keltischen Münzprägung in Noricum*. Österreich. Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Denkschriften, Bd. 113 (1973), 31 ff., 57 f., 98 ff. (im folgenden R. Göbl, TKN abgekürzt).

⁴ Freundlicher Hinweis von Herrn Prof. Dr. R. Göbl (Wien), dem hierfür herzlich gedankt sei.

⁵ Nimmt man an, daß ..N-AM.. die ersten drei Buchstaben eines Namens sind, so kann allgemein auf A. Holder, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz*, Bd. 2 (1904), 674 ff. verwiesen werden.

⁶ R. Göbl, TKN, Taf. 43, SC 23, 1–11 (Aversstempel 102).

⁷ R. Göbl, TKN, Taf. 43, SC 23, 2 (Reversstempel 197).

⁸ R. Göbl, TKN, 37 f., 113 f.

AN ASIATIC MOTHER-GODDESS ON A CONTORNIATE

Jules M. Samson

This study will examine the reverse of a contorniate¹ whose iconography has received little attention by scholars. Though the type is represented with some frequency on contorniates, the group as a whole, and the individual figures depicted are not readily found on other monuments. The search for prototypes to allow a more accurate interpretation of the group shown on our contorniate has had only a limited success.

¹ A. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniaten*, Budapest 1943, p. 107, no. 40, pl. VIII 8–10. The obverse to this reverse has a portrait bust of Antoninus Pius.

A. von Sallet² published this contorniate in 1883 but confined his discussion to the main central figure whom he identified as Cybele-Rhea. He was unable to identify the other figures in the group.



Andreas Alföldi³ points out that this grouping is something other than the usual representation of Cybele. He identifies the central figure as a Mother-goddess and suggests that on her right is either an Amazon or an attendant of Ma-Bellona, while on her left is an Asia Minor city-goddess. No attributes appear, however, that enable the identification of the city-goddess with a specific locality.

All the specimens published by Alföldi⁴ in his *Kontorniaten* are badly worn. The present specimen from the collection of the American Numismatic Society in New York (Inv. No. 731042) is somewhat better preserved and thus it facilitates a more detailed description of its figures and accessories which will be helpful for the ultimate interpretation of this scene.

Description

The hieratic central female figure is seated with her feet on a low footstool, the right foot placed slightly forward. She wears a *chiton* which may be sleeveless. On her head is a *kalathos*⁵, a headpiece worn occasionally by divinities as an emblem of abundance⁶. A spear rests against her left shoulder. Whether this

² Zeitschrift für Numismatik 10 (1883), 165–168.

³ A. Alföldi, op. cit., pp. 107 ff.

⁴ Ibid., p. 108. The obverses are the following: Theatre Mask (pl. V 7); Alexander the Great (pl. VI 1–4); Nero (pl. VIII 1–2); Antoninus Pius (pl. VIII 8–10); Trajan (pl. X 1).

⁵ Ibid., p. 107.

⁶ Hug in RE 10², 1549 and E. Saglio in Daremberg-Saglio, Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines d'après les textes et les monuments, Paris 1887, v. 1, pp. 813 ff. Cf. «Calathus». Hug and Saglio make reference to the Ephesian Artemis, Serapis, and Hekate. It is also associated with other divinities representing abundance such as Ceres, Terra, Fortuna and others who would be represented wearing the *kalathos*.

spear is held by the left hand or whether the left hand rests on the thigh is not clear; this creates an ambiguous position for the left arm and hand. The right arm is raised, with the hand open and the palm facing outwards in the form of a salutation or blessing.



This would be a most unusual representation of Cybele, the goddess suggested by von Sallet. Monuments representing Cybele usually show her wearing a mural crown on her head; frequently a veil surmounts the crown. Her right or left arm rests on an upright tambourine which acts as an arm rest. In the other hand she may hold either a pine branch⁷ (the pine being her sacred tree), a long sceptre⁸, or a *patera*⁹. At either side of her is a lion. Her Phrygian lover, Attis, is nearby.

Our contorniate is fundamentally different. The central figure does not wear a mural crown but a *kalathos*, and she is not veiled. The tambourine is conspicuously absent. Neither does our figure hold in her hand a pine, a long sceptre or a *patera*, but rather a spear. Instead of lions, a pair of sphinxes¹⁰ sit on either side, and the figure on her right does not conform to the usual representation of Attis.

To the central figure's left is a city-goddess. She wears a sleeveless *chiton* belted high and draped to leave her right breast uncovered. A mural crown is on her head. In her left hand she holds a spear, while in her right she holds a wreath above the head of the central figure. Her Amazon-like dress suggests a localization to northern Asia Minor.

The most enigmatic figure is that on her right. Alföldi¹¹ has described this figure as female and Amazon. He suggests that it represents an attendant of Ma-Bellona. The figure appears to wear a cuirass shown by a terminating rim to which a kilt would be usually attached. However, the kilt is here obscured by the upright position of the sphinxes' wings. The figure holds a spear and shield in his left hand and in his right arm rests a double axe¹². An identification of this figure with an Amazon ought to be ruled out because of the anatomical features of the head and torso which appear definitely masculine when compared to the

⁷ M. J. Vermaseren, *The legend of Attis in Greek and Roman art*, Leiden 1966, pl. XIV 1, XXV 1. Also M. Bieber in *Hommages à Marcel Renard* (1969), v. 3, pl. XVII 7 a-b. Various representations of Cybele in Roman art are discussed by Bieber pp. 29 ff., pl. XVI, XVII.

⁸ H. Graillot, *Le culte de Cybèle, mère des dieux, à Rome et dans l'empire romaine*, 1912, pl. VIII.

⁹ Vermaseren, *op. cit.*, pl. XIII 4.

¹⁰ We find similar sphinxes represented by themselves on Ionian coins of the second and third century A.D. SNG. Sammlung v. Aulock. 16, nos. 2281, 2282, 2285.

¹¹ Alföldi, *op. cit.*, pp. 107 ff.

¹² On an Egyptian relief in the Bissing collection a very similarly dressed figure is represented, likewise holding a spear and double axe, although the sides have been reversed. Cf. *Syria* XLVII (1970) 106, fig. 27.

other two figures. In addition, the double axe is, of course, not the exclusive domaine of the Amazon but identifies the barbarian warrior in general, especially the Scythian¹³. The cap worn by our figure terminates in an animal head. This kind of a head gear is of Indo-Iranian origin¹⁴, and is found with frequency during the Sassanian period on reliefs and coins, although it is of much earlier origin¹⁵.

The identification of the animal head on the cap of the contorniate figure suggests either the head of a griffin or a dog. Both have long pointed ears, although the dog has a muzzle and the griffin a beak. Comparison with Sassanian sources reveals close affinities to the beak, and a griffin is likely intended¹⁶. It is possible that, rather than wearing a cap that terminates in the head of a griffin, the figure is wearing the actual head of a griffin in the same way that Hercules wears his lion cap.

There are two reclining figures in the exergue. In none of the specimens preserved are the figures correctly centered and the rim of the coin cuts off part of the design. Alföldi¹⁷ has identified these figures as either Oceanus and Terra, or as two river-gods. The reed-like stem that runs along the rim next to the figure on the right¹⁸ seems to indicate the latter possibility. The other figure has no attributes that would suggest that it is anything other than a river-god¹⁹.

In the main field, along the rim to the left and right of the sphinxes, are two accessory motifs. On the right we have what appears to be a cornucopia and we might assume because of its location that it is in reference to the city-goddess. The shape of the motif on the left makes identification less clear. It might well be another cornucopia. However, its sides are straight and upright and it appears as

¹³ Daremberg-Saglio, op. cit., I, 712, cf. «Bipennis». The double axe is carried also by the barbarian deities of Labraunda and Doliche.

¹⁴ A. Alföldi, in *Jahrbuch der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Urgeschichte*, 1949/50, p. 30.

¹⁵ V. G. Lukonin in *Persia II* (1967) points out that in Sassanian court art, Zoroastrian divinities were created in the image of official portraits of the ruling family of Iran who would be wearing caps that terminate in different animal heads. These animals represent the various identities that these divinities might assume in accordance with the Zoroastrian texts. The wearer, by virtue of donning these caps, assumes symbolically that particular divinity. We find Sapur I (214–272) wearing this kind of a cap, but it is especially in the reign of Varahran II (276–293) that this kind of a cap is worn by the queen of queens, and heirs. The animal heads represented consist of the heads of a wild boar, lion, horse, the bird Varagn (an eagle or raven) and a dog-headed bird. According to Zoroastrian mythology, the god of victory, *Verethragna*, assumed some of these forms; that is he may take on the identity of a boar, a horse or the bird Varagn. Similarly, the god of good fortune, *Hvarnah*, who appeared to kings and heroes, assumed the shape of a bird of prey or a wild horse (pp. 177 ff., 181, also fig. 113). For the coin representations of Sapur I and Varahran II cf. R. Göbl, *Sasanidische Numismatik*, Braunschweig (1968), pl. 2, no. 34; pl. 4, nos. 55, 56, 58, 59, 63–70. The attendants of Narse (293–303) wear caps terminating in the head of horses as seen on the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam. We also have bronze censers of the fourth to sixth century A.D. that are in the form of a female head wearing a cap terminating in an animal head, cf. *Exhibition Catalogue of Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 1947, nos. 275, 276, pl. XL.

¹⁶ Cf. Sassanian griffin and dog representations in Lukonin, *Persia II*, figs. 42, 165.

¹⁷ A. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniaten*, p. 108.

¹⁸ Cf. the river-god left on the Parabiago dish in Milan. W. F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art*, London 1961, pl. 107.

¹⁹ Oceanus is usually identified by crab claws on his head, whereas Terra tends to hold a cornucopia in her arm or has gathered fruit in her lap. Cf. the Parabiago dish, also see Eugénie Strong, *JRS* 27 (1937) for various representations of Terra Mater. For Asia Minor coins with representations of facing River-gods and Nymphs see v. Aulock, op. cit. nos. 1408, 7374, 8249.

if the curve of the rim would cut off the lower part. Therefore, an altar-like structure may be suggested in reference to the figure holding the double axe and spear, if he is an attendant or priest of Ma-Bellona.

Conclusion

The description of the details suggests the following interpretation of our contorniate. We have here a representation of Ma-Bellona, the Asia Minor war goddess associated variously with Athena, Artemis and Cybele. She is flanked on one side by an attendant or one of her priests, who may have an altar beside him; on the other she is crowned by the personification of one of her main places of worship in Asia Minor. Her principal sanctuaries were located in Comana, Pontos and in Comana, Cappadocia²⁰, although her worship was widespread elsewhere in Asia Minor. For members of her cult, the double axe and spear were of particular importance. During her festivals, her worshippers would pull her cult statue behind them. Overcome with orgiastic frenzy, they would gash their arms and thighs with the double axe and pierce their breast with the spear to splatter the cult statue with their blood²¹.

The worship of Ma-Bellona was still practiced in late-antiquity and a revival of her cult took place under Julian the Apostate who sacrificed to her in Basel before setting out on his campaign against his rival Constantius in 361 A.D.²².

The question to be raised is how a representation that is of Asia Minor origin both in content and form came to be struck on a Contorniate minted in Rome between 356–395 A.D.; and why this particular representation was so popular on the contorniates? Why has it not been possible to find direct prototypes either for the individual figures or for the group as a whole on Roman monuments in the West, or the East²³? It must be assumed, however, that the die cutters did draw on some well known model now lost to us as they have done for other iconographic types found on the contorniates of this period.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Professor Elizabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum for her advice and criticism in the preparation of this paper, and for supplying the photographs. I would also like to thank Professor Andreas Alföldi for reading this paper. I am grateful to Mr. Arthur Wood who kindly improved the English and to my wife for the typing of the text and notes.

²⁰ On the subject of the Asia Minor Mother-Goddess see André Dupont-Sommer and Louis Robert, *La déesse de Hierapolis Castabala (Cilicie)*, Paris 1964, especially p. 95. We should note, however, that a precise iconographic parallel for our reverse has not been found so far.

²¹ A. Hartmann, in *RE* 14, 82, 85 ff.; also L. Preller, *Römische Mythologie*, Berlin 1865, pp. 734–735.

²² A. Hartmann, *op. cit.*, 90.

²³ Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre* (1962), p. 368, fig. 201, published a relief of the seated Atargatis, tyche of Palmyra, being crowned by a Victory in a similar manner to Ma-Bellona on our contorniate.