

# A Mithraic terracotta from Aquincum

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*The pyramidal upper part of an unusual terracotta object became part of the collection of the Aquincum Museum in 1935. The terracotta object with various symbols on its sides (a swastika, an upright and recumbent cross motif, a vessel and a snake) terminates in a bird's head. A closer look at this pyramidal object and the interpretation of its symbols suggest that it can be regarded as a relic of the cult of Mithras. Made according to individual specifications in all likelihood, the object was recovered from one of the kilns of a pottery workshop in the eastern quarter of the Civil Town of Aquincum, and thus we can at best merely guess its function and intended use. It could equally well have been a votive gift destined for one of the town's known Mithraic sanctuaries or it could have been intended for personal use by one of Mithras' followers in his own house as an expression of personal devotion to the deity.*

**Key words:** *Aquincum, Mithras cult, terracotta, religious symbols, votive object, private religiosity*

In 1935, the Roman Collection of the Aquincum Museum was enriched with a most unusual terracotta object (Budapest History Museum, Aquincum Museum, inv. no. 50071), namely the upper part of a pyramidal object (Figs. 1–2). Even though the object was regularly displayed as part of various exhibitions in the Aquincum Museum and it is currently also on view in the museum's permanent exhibition (Zsidi et al. 2009: 166, Cat. no. 1069), a critical re-assessment of this curious object is still lacking. Lajos Nagy, on whose excavation the object came to light, mentions it in his brief excavation report (Nagy 1937: 274), and then cites the enigmatic object in an article discussing the small clay lamp chimneys from Aquincum (Nagy 1945: 188–190). He briefly describes the terracotta and assigns it to the class of sepulchral relics on the strength of the symbols appearing on it. He did not treat the depiction in detail and merely noted that “Their symbolism would deserve a special examination”. The present study has chosen this theme as its subject.

The terracotta came to light some 300 m east of the Civil Town's northern gate during a salvage excavation made necessary by construction work (Fig. 3). The findspot lies on the fringes of the so-called Gas factory pottery workshops, part of the town's eastern industrial quarter (Kuzsinszky 1932). The pyramidal object came to light from one of the rectangular pottery kilns uncovered in 1935. This part of the potters' quarter was later designated as the Papföld kilns (Póczy 1956: 121–125). On the testimony of the pottery finds, the workshops were active during the first decade of the third century (Vámos 2010: 68).

The terracotta is a red-coloured, solid pyramidal object that had probably been the upper finial of a larger object (H. 19.6 cm, L. 18 cm, W. 9.6 cm). Its fabric is made up of a lighter grainy core that was coated with darker, red-coloured, more finely levigated clay. The outer coating is cracked in some spots or flaked off, probably due to thermal stress during firing. Traces of smoothing can be made out along the edges and near the base, and in addition to the tool used during this procedure, imprints of the potter's fingers were



Fig. 1. The terracotta object from Aquincum, front-view. (Photo by P. Komjáthy).



Fig. 2. The terracotta object from Aquincum, viewed from back. (Photo by P. Komjáthy).



Fig. 3. The findspot of the terracotta in the Civil Town of Aquincum. (Aquincum Museum, Archive).

also preserved. The base of the pyramidal object was not coated with a layer of finer clay and thus the base is lighter with visible specks of mica and sand. The imprints of three fingers can be seen on the smoothed surface, left during its preparation for fitting it to the one-time lower part.

Betraying more about potting skills than artistic inspirations, the object was assembled from two halves. The lower, rectangular part is decorated with incised or impressed symbols, while the upper part is topped with a bird's head (Fig. 4). Although most traces of the join were concealed by the coating of finer clay added subsequently, the join of the two parts can be clearly made out under the tail of the dove, where

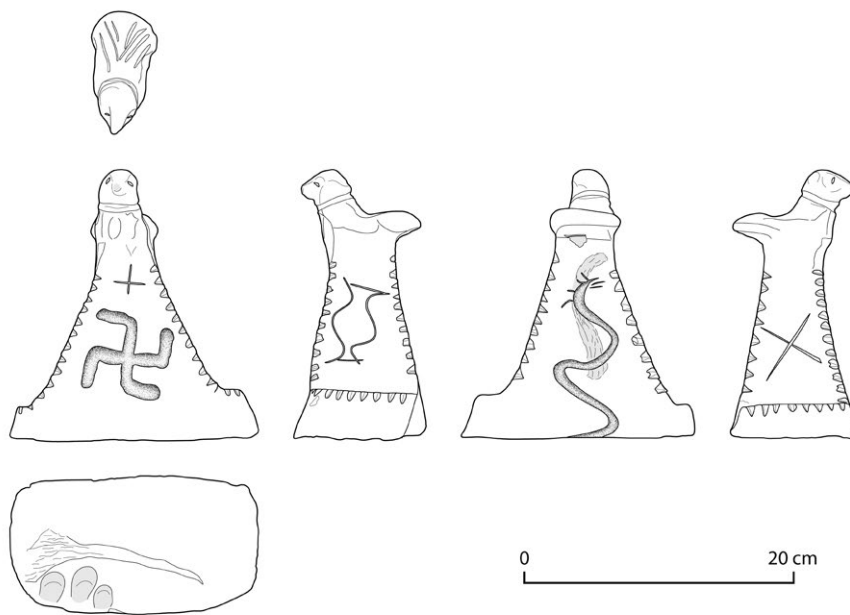


Fig. 4. Roll-out of the pyramidal terracotta (Drawing by T. Lajtos).

the fine coating flaked off. The dove was not set exactly in the axis of the pyramid and thus the dentition along the edges adjoining the bird figure is not symmetrical. Two steps of unequal height were made on the short sides of the pyramid near the base. The bird has a conical beak (whose tip broke off), the two incisions marking the eyes on the two sides of the head were added subsequently with a sharp implement. There is a shallow circumferential groove around the neck, made when the clay was still soft. The flat tail feathers are marked with incised lines on the rounded rear side. Each edge of the pyramidal part and the edges of base's shorter sides are denticulated. Each side of the pyramidal form is decorated, although the technical execution differs, as does its skilfulness. While excess material was removed after creating the more prominent motifs such as the swastika and the snake, both made with wider lines, the excess material remained in place in the case of the incised motifs (the vessel and the upright and recumbent cross). The front side is dominated by a counter-clockwise swastika, with the motif itself turned slightly to the right. Its regular form was probably made using an implement with a blunt rounded tip. Although Lajos Nagy suggested that it had simply been drawn with a fingertip (Nagy 1945: 188), this can be rejected in view of the narrow groove and the traces left by the implement. The potter incised an equal-armed cross above the swastika. The other prominent motif can be seen on the opposite side of the pyramidal form. The upward winding sinuous line was similarly created with a deep and wide line as the swastika motif. Another sinuous line, carefully smoothed away, can be made out underneath, perhaps representing an earlier attempt. Short, irregular and occasionally intersecting lines can be seen at the upper end of the sinuous line. A handle-less vessel with elongated body appears on the short side to the bird's left. The vessel was carelessly drawn, the lines do not always touch, the vessel tilts to one side and is not set in the centre. The other narrow side to the bird's right bears a recumbent cross of oblique, intersecting lines.

We submitted samples from the terracotta to archaeometric analyses alongside samples from two other artefacts from Aquincum. These were performed by Mária Tóth in the Mineralogical-Petrographic Laboratory of the Archaeometry Research Group. One of these was the discus of an oil lamp bearing the depiction of a snake and inscribed with a Greek name (Zsidi 2009), the other was the fragment of a terracotta statue portraying Mithras from the mithraeum of Symphorus (Zsidi 2014). Of the three objects, the discus and the pyramidal object discussed here came to light where they had been produced, in two different pottery workshops of the Civil Town of Aquincum, while the terracotta statuette was found in one of the town's mithraeums. The analysis of the samples revealed that the terracotta statuette and the pyramidal object discussed here had an identical fabric and were fired at the same temperature, suggesting that they perhaps been made in the same workshop.

The most prominent element on the pyramidal object is the modelled bird figure on its top. In his initial report, Lajos Nagy described and interpreted the bird as an eagle (Nagy 1937: 274), an identification he

discarded in favour of common wood pigeon in a later study (Nagy 1945: 188). The bird's conical beak and spread-out tail feathers indeed resemble those of pigeons, and Lajos Nagy's subsequent identification was no doubt also motivated by the shallow groove around the bird's neck. This depiction resembles the bird figures topping the lamp chimneys from Aquincum (Nagy 1945: 163, Figs. 5–6), although it is more finely crafted. Lajos Nagy notes that pigeons were symbols of immortality and of life in the afterworld and he associated the find with funerary cults. The association between pigeons and the human soul appears in early Christian imagery, where the Holy Spirit was depicted as a pigeon (Vanyó 1988: 61). The pigeon was the bird of Venus in Graeco-Roman mythology, explaining its presence among the symbols of the Mithraic Mysteries, which also had an astronomical dimension. Venus was the planet of the second grade of initiation (*nymphus*), whose personifications include pigeons as well (Merkelbach 1984: 85). These are occasionally depicted, as on two gems portraying the tauroctony, where a pigeon, Venus' bird, appears among the stars beside Mithras' head (Merkelbach 1984: 393, Abb. 165a, Abb. 166).

The swastika motif on the front side undoubtedly occupies the most prominent position among the symbols. Its position, size and form all accentuate its important role. As a symbol of the Sun, the swastika is known since the Neolithic, and it is frequently encountered among the depictions of the Roman Age (Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota 2014: 33–35). It appears as a simple ornamental motif, for example on mosaic floors (Wellner 1969: 249, Fig. 12, Pl. LXV). In the Roman period, one widespread occurrence of swastikas is represented by swastika brooches, mostly found in military contexts (Böhme 1972: 46). Swastikas are depicted on relics that can be clearly associated with the cult of Mithras, although, curiously enough, their number is low. A swastika can be seen between Mithras' head and a depiction of Luna on a relief with the tauroctony scene from Gigen (Oescus; CIMRM 2247; Dölger 1934). Franz Dölger claimed that together with the two crosses, the swastika carved onto the frame of the relief was designed to represent the stars in the sphere of the Sun with his radiate crown and Luna (Dölger 1934: 64). The swastika similarly appears together with two stars on the fragment

of a bronze statue (CIMRM 765): in this case, the symbol of the Sun adorns the lower arm. The statue fragment found in Italy is regarded as coming from a statue of Mithras exactly on account of the sun symbol on its body. However, Maarten Vermaseren argued that owing to its posture, the arm fragment cannot be associated with any of the known Mithras imageries and that the swastika is rarely encountered among Mithraic relics, making it uncertain that this find can indeed be related to the deity's cult. Yet, we should at this point recall Franz Dölger's contention that as a symbol of the Sun, the swastika can be considered as one of the secret signs of the Mysteries of Mithras (Dölger 1929: 91). Mention must here be made of a bust carved from limestone found in Aquincum, which similarly had a swastika subsequently carved onto its left arm (Zsidi 2012). Originally set up in a funerary chamber, the bust portrays one of the high-ranking soldiers of the legio II Adiutrix. The soldier's name and his rank as well as the swastika, the latter perhaps a reference to the soldier's beliefs, was most likely added locally to the bust that had not been made in a Pannonian workshop. The burial did not contain any other known symbols or finds indicating a direct link with the Mithraic cult. However, another find from Aquincum directly relates to the swastika appearing among the symbols of the Mithraic Mysteries. Klára Póczy published a factory lamp

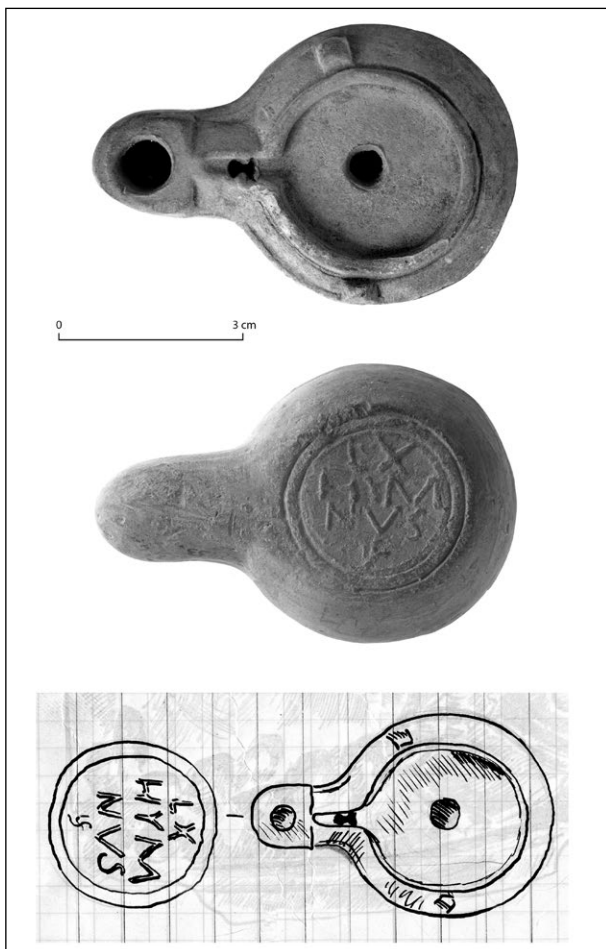


Fig. 5. Drawing of the oil lamp from the western cemetery of the Military Town and a photo of its base. (Photo by P. Komjáthy).

recovered from a cremation burial in Aquincum, which had a sign resembling a swastika under the LX/HYM/NVS stamp on its base. (Póczy 2000). In her view, the text of the stamp and the swastika refers to Hymn LX of Sol, and in this sense, the lamp can be expressly associated with the cult of Mithras, or had been commissioned by one of the deity's devotees as a symbol of the coming of light. The lamp found in 1937 is depicted with the stamp and the swastika underneath in the museum's illustrated accessions register (Fig. 5). Another reading of the stamp was proposed in the publication of the cemetery where this oil lamp was found (the western cemetery of the Military Town, the so-called Bécsi Road cemetery: Topál 2003: 106), according to which the text of the stamp is EX/HYM/VS and the swastika-like sign should be read as the letter F. However, the interpretation of the sign under the stamp as an F would only be possible if it were written in the cursive, which would be unusual in this position. Given that the sign is rather indistinct, its exact identification remains uncertain in the lack of analogous finds. It is possible that it is indeed a swastika, but it can equally well be "read" as a branch (Iványi 1935: 2, Type VII, Pl. LXXVIII. 12).

The equal-armed cross depicted above the swastika too confirms that the latter symbolised the Sun, the heavenly body in the Mithraic Mysteries (Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota 2014: 35). The smaller incised cross appearing together with the prominent swastika was placed there intentionally and not as a filler or a decorative element, even though this would not be unusual in the period (Tóth 1998–1999: 119–121). Given that the artefact dates from the early third century, the interpretation of the sign as an early Christian symbol can be excluded (Tóth 1998–1999: 119). As we have seen, an equal-armed cross appears together with a swastika on the Mithras relief from Gigen (CIMRM 2247), and it is also encountered on several other reliefs depicting the tauroctony (e.g. Merkelbach 1984: 297, Abb. 41, and 378, Abb. 143). These symbols can be found around Mithras' head and shoulder, usually among multi-ray stars denoting a specific number of planets. The cross on the pyramidal object from Aquincum thus reinforces the astral nature of the swastika.

The recumbent cross incised onto one of the short sides of the pyramidal object likewise symbolises a star. The seven planets are represented by upright and recumbent crosses on the celestial sphere on the left side of the Heddernheim altar (Merkelbach 1984: 346, Abb. 106).

An upward gliding snake, a depiction as prominent as the swastika, can be seen on the back side. The snake's head is accentuated with small incised lines, perhaps the depiction of a crested snake. Snakes can be associated with various deities of the Graeco-Roman pantheon, from Aesculapius to Mercury, and they are also attested on the relics of Liber-Libera, Sabazios and the Danubian Rider Gods. In addition to these depictions, snakes are often encountered on the cult vessels used during the rituals of these cults (Vámos 2009: 537–538). At the same time, portrayals of snakes occur within the framework of private religious practices, one of these being the personification of one of the *genii* protecting the house (Cvjetičanin 2008: 159–160; Schmid 1991: 68). There is a close association between snake depictions and Mithraism: snakes occur on the cult vessels used in Mithraic rituals (for example in the mithraeum of Symphorus in Aquincum: Vámos 2009: 538), and a crested snake is depicted on a vessel lid from the Tienen mithraeum (Martens 2004: 34, Fig. 9. 2) and on the fragment of a three-handled vessel from Carnuntum (Gassner 2004: 232, Fig. 5, top). Snakes figure prominently on the altars associated with the cult too. The snake on the back of the altar of the San Clemente mithraeum in Rome can be interpreted as a symbol of the second grade of initiation (Merkelbach 1984: 299, Abb. 43, and 301, Abb. 45). Snakes are also creatures essential to the tauroctony scenes, where they are shown drinking the blood spurting from the slain bull. On these depictions, the snake, representing the Hydra constellation, appears between the scorpion, the chalice or krater (if there is one) and the dog, conforming to the position of the constellations they symbolise (Tóth I. 2003: 72–74).

Thus, the presence of a vessel on the fourth side is hardly surprising. Lajos Nagy initially identified this vessel as a krater (Nagy 1937: 274), but later described it as a one-handled chalice (Nagy 1945: 188). In fact, the depiction clearly shows a handle-less vessel with elongated body, recalling the form of the one-handled jugs appearing on Roman grave monuments and sacrificial altars, which played a role in various sacrifices. In our case, the vessel can be related to the symbolism of the Mithras relics. Together with the dog and the snake, the vessel has a distinctive role in the tauroctony scenes. Although most of the vessels appearing in the tauroctony scenes have two handles, the vessel holding the bull's blood is occasionally a chalice lacking handles (e.g. Merkelbach 1984: 353, Abb. 116, and 358–359, Abb. 122). Vessels are

depicted in other Mithraic scenes too, not only in portrayals of the tauroctony (e.g. on an altar: Merkelbach 1984: 319, Abb. 70, and on a gem: Gordon 2004: 277). While the depictions show a variety of vessel forms, most of these can either be associated with water (e.g. Merkelbach 1984: 321, Abb. 72) or appear together with a snake (CIMRM 942). The mixing vessels shown beside Mithras are symbols of water springs (László 2005: 247–248) and also of the Crater constellation (László 2005: 260). The latter interpretation fits in nicely with the astral dimensions of the other depictions appearing on the object.

The above overview of the depictions appearing on the sides of the pyramidal object has shown that each appears separately among the attributes or symbols of various deities of the Roman pantheon as well as on early Christian relics dating from a later period (Nagy 2018: 60). However, one shared trait of the depictions on the object is the astral association of their symbolism and their interrelated meaning. This astral dimension is perceptible, even though only a part of the original object has survived. The prominent elements are the Sun (swastika) and the constellations around it, the Water Serpent (Hydra) and the Cup (Crater). Together, these symbols are part of the visual idiom of the Mysteries of Mithras and can be interpreted together in this context. Another coherent system of the astral symbols, among which we can find some of the elements depicted on the pyramidal object even if in different visual representations (e.g. the Sun and the constellations), has been documented on a specific group of Pannonian gravestones, on which these symbols refer to the soul's journey to the otherworld (Tóth I. 2009: 11). This is perhaps the point where a link can be forged between the pigeon and the astral symbols, expressing the desire of Mithras' followers to attain immortality after life in this world (Merkelbach 1984: 76–77).

Lajos Nagy interpreted the terracotta object as a funerary ornament or the upper part of a sacrificial lamp chimney (Nagy 1945: 190). In our case, however, a function as an oil lamp (*Lichtturm*, *Lichthäuschen*) is contradicted by the rectangular base and the solidness of the object without any fenestrations, despite the presence of the pigeon on top. The form and the solidness has much more in common with the finials (*Abkrönung*) of stone funerary altars that were modelled in the shape of a roof and were sometimes provided with relief ornamentation (Ertel 2010: 158). The fabric and the size of the pyramidal object suggest that it was perhaps a miniature version of these altars, which the potter had made according to the specifications of his customer. It seems unlikely that it would have been made to be used as part of the furnishings of one of the mithraeums active in Aquincum, but it is possible that it had been intended as a votive offering. Another option is that it was destined for private use in the house of one of Mithras' followers, an initiate who had kept a variety of smaller objects in his house as an expression of his personal devotion to the deity (Gordon 2004: 278; Sas 2004: 360). The terracotta altar whose finial bore the astral symbols of the Mithraic cult was probably intended as another addition to these relics.

## Abbreviations

CIMRM                    M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mithriacae I-II*, Hague, 1956, 1960.

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