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## THE SILVER MOUSE FROM NOVAE<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article describes a silver mouse figurine found in the military camp at Novae in 2023, an intriguing example of ancient art. In Antiquity, mice carried rich symbolism and were depicted in religious, decorative, and even funerary contexts, not always connected with the cult of Apollo Smintheus. Such figurines were often used as lamp ornaments, gaming pieces, pendants, or furniture fittings. Owing to its state of preservation, material, and possible function, the Novae mouse merits attention in further research.

**Keywords:** mice, silver, Novae, lamps

Mice enjoyed a certain degree of popularity in the ancient world as a motif used in literature, art, and numismatics, both in Greece and in Rome.<sup>2</sup> It is enough here to mention the short heroic poem *Batrachomyomachia*—wherein they were the main protagonists of the clash, together with frogs—or the fables of Aesop.<sup>3</sup> These rodents were also depicted on coins, for instance in Metapontum,<sup>4</sup> Alexandria Troas,<sup>5</sup> and on Roman denarii,<sup>6</sup> as well as on mosaics and gems.

Mice were also associated with Apollo, who was given the epithet Smintheus, and whose sanctuary was located in Hamaxitus (Chryse), where, according to tradition, these animals were fed.<sup>7</sup> Ancient accounts mention that this god was perceived, on the one hand, as the ruler presiding over rodents, and on the other, as a protector against the plague they carried.<sup>8</sup> The mice that gathered in his shrine were themselves considered sacred. According to Strabo, the statue of Apollo in this temple, made by Scopas, was crafted in such a way that the god rested one foot on a mouse.<sup>9</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that for decades almost all figurines of mice found in museum collections were linked with the cult of Apollo. In many cases these objects were made of bronze

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<sup>2</sup> RUŽIĆ 2017, pp. 129–140.

<sup>3</sup> LESKY 1971, p. 111. It was once believed that the *Batrachomyomachia* was composed in the sixth or fifth century BCE; today, however, this date is shifted to the Hellenistic Period.

<sup>4</sup> BMC 123 (340–330 BCE). The obverse of this coin depicts the head of Demeter; the reverse, centrally, shows an ear of barley on which a mouse is sitting.

<sup>5</sup> Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett (inv. no. IKMK 18244924); KIERNAN 2014, p. 605.

<sup>6</sup> RRC 378/1b.

<sup>7</sup> Strab. 13.1.48; KIERNAN 2014, p. 604. According to Strabo, the cult statue of the god was accompanied by depictions of mice.

<sup>8</sup> Hom. *Il.* 11. 37–39.

<sup>9</sup> Strab. 13.1.48.

<sup>10</sup> The largest number of specimens (15) is held in the collections of the British Museum.

and lacked any broader archaeological context, having entered museums mainly as a result of purchases or donations.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, such figurines were also often used as decorative elements, for instance on oil lamps<sup>11</sup> or on various types of bronze stands, candlesticks, or shelves, as in the case of a find from Augusta Raurica.<sup>12</sup> They were also used as gaming pieces, fittings, pendants, or finials for handles.<sup>13</sup>

Fortunately, in 2023, another mouse figurine was discovered in the camp of the *legio I Italica* at Novae (Sector XII),<sup>14</sup> which, given its craftsmanship, material, and state of preservation, deserves scholarly attention. Such small objects are often omitted from excavation reports in favour of more spectacular finds; therefore, every new discovery should be discussed, even if only in a short article.<sup>15</sup>

The Novae mouse (Fig. 1) is preserved in its entirety (2.3 × 1.3 cm) and represents one of the two most popular types of depictions of these rodents in art.<sup>16</sup> The animal is shown standing on its hind legs on a small base, which probably served to attach it to a larger object. In its front paws, it holds a round object, which may be interpreted as a breadcrumb or a nut. The tail is preserved in full and is coiled into a loop. Notable details include clearly marked fur, eyes, snout, and three toes on the front paws. It was found on the outer side of the apse of a large room, which served as the *caldarium* of the baths in the House of Centurion (southern wing) and was dismantled around 238 CE. Although this room had been in use since the 70s–80s CE, we may assume that the figurine was made later, probably at the end of the second century or at the turn of the second and third centuries CE. Given its good state of preservation, it cannot have been in use for a long time.

Stylistically, this depiction is similar to a specimen currently in the British Museum,<sup>17</sup> as well as to a mouse from Labricum, both of which were likewise made of silver. Naturally, examples made from this precious metal are rarer than those cast in bronze. It is enough to note that Philip Kiernan mentioned only three silver figurines, two of which are in British collections, and one described by the eighteenth-century collector Francesco de Ficoroni.<sup>18</sup> This is, however, not the first mouse to be found in Bulgaria; two others come from Chirpan and Beshly.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is also not the first depiction of this rodent to be found in a Roman camp, as one such specimen was discovered during archaeological works at Oberstimm.<sup>20</sup>

In the ancient world, depictions of mice carried rich symbolism, which should be briefly outlined before proceeding to the interpretation of the figurine from Novae. First of all, drawing on the aforementioned study by Kiernan, it must be noted that linking all mouse figurines with the cult of Apollo Smintheus is unfounded. In the Troad, where the sanctuary of this god was located, not a single figurine has so far been discovered. Moreover, the greatest number of such objects, whether as individual pieces or as decorative elements of various artefacts, has been found in Southern and Western Europe, where the cult of Smintheus was not particularly popular.<sup>21</sup> It is also worth noting that, although this god is mentioned already in the *Iliad*,<sup>22</sup> the figurines in question are dated mainly to the Hellenistic and Roman periods (third century BCE–second century CE). Their production was therefore considerably later than the earliest attestation of the cult.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>11</sup> WALTERS 1914, pl. I 6e.

<sup>17</sup> British Museum (inv. no. 1995.0903.1).

<sup>12</sup> KAUFMANN-HEINIMANN 1998, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> KIERNAN 2014, p. 603.

<sup>13</sup> Rörmuseum in Augst (inv. no. 1984.27187); EGRI 2015, p. 228.

<sup>19</sup> ILIEVA 1994, p. 221.

<sup>14</sup> DYCZEK 2018, pp. 27–71.

<sup>20</sup> KIERNAN 2014, p. 618.

<sup>15</sup> EGRI 2015, p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> KIERNAN 2014, p. 616. So far, this cult has not been attested in any of the Danubian provinces, although mice themselves have been found in these areas, see SZABÓ 2022.

<sup>16</sup> The second most popular variant depicts mice on all fours. There are also known examples of mice with theatrical masks (British Museum, inv. no. 1876.0510.2) or playing small trumpets.

<sup>22</sup> Hom. *Il.* 1. 36–42.

<sup>23</sup> RUŽIĆ 2017, p. 132. Although mice enjoyed greatest popularity from the Hellenistic Period onwards,



Fig. 1. Silver mouse from Novae (inv. no. 38/23; photo: K. Narloch).

Furthermore, depictions of mice do not have to be attributed only to Smintheus. These rodents also appeared on coins of the goddess Ceres. The obverse of *denarii serrati* issued in 81 BCE bears the image of the goddess of fertility, vegetation, and agriculture, while on the reverse there is a ploughman with a team of oxen, and beneath them a mouse sniffing food.<sup>24</sup> In this case, the depiction may refer to the goddess herself as the protector of harvests, rather than to the cult of Smintheus. The mouse would then be seen as a symbol of abundance.

In his study on representations of these rodents in art, Mira Ruzić also analysed them in a funerary context, as a symbol of the underworld, as for example on the stele of Quintus Cornelius Zosimus from Viminacium.<sup>25</sup> Even these two examples alone challenge the old interpretation linking mice exclusively with the cult of Apollo. Moreover, as already mentioned, such figurines were often used as decorative elements. In the case of lamps, this practice is particularly well-attested and finds some support in narrative sources.

Timotheus of Gaza, writing in Late Antiquity, noted that mice would eat the oil from lamps.<sup>26</sup> In the *Batrachomyomachia*, mentioned earlier, these rodents are accused by Athena of making noise and damaging wreaths and lamps while searching for oil in her sanctuary. In the same work, there is also a reference to mice using the lids of these containers to make shields.<sup>27</sup>

Echoing these literary accounts are mouse figurines placed on lamps—on the bodies, lids, or as handles.<sup>28</sup> Given that the Novae specimen also stands on a small base, it may have been

at least two earlier specimens are known from the sixth century BC.

<sup>24</sup> RRC 378/1b; Ruzić 2017, p. 136.

<sup>25</sup> Ruzić 2017, p. 137.

<sup>26</sup> Timoth. *De Anim.* 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Batrachomyomachia*, 122–29; 174–180.

<sup>28</sup> Kiernan 2014, p. 615; Egri 2015, p. 230; Varga 2015, pp. 188–189; Ruzić 2017, p. 135.

mounted or soldered to a larger object. It is therefore possible that this silver figurine was likewise part of a lamp or its lid. Unfortunately, no other remains were found at the site.<sup>29</sup> It is conceivable that, given the precious metal, the lamp was melted down, and the mouse had come loose beforehand. Could it have been used in another way? There is no definitive answer to this question, but the fact that its tail is curled into a loop suggests that the figurine may have been worn as a pendant. If we accept that rodent depictions placed on lamps had an apotropaic function<sup>30</sup>—warding off real animals from eating the oil—then, in the case of its use as a pendant, it could have protected its wearer, perhaps against diseases transmitted by mice, or served as a symbol of abundance or good fortune.

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<sup>29</sup> As for metal lamps, only three such specimens have so far been discovered in Sector XII. They are, however, made of bronze rather than silver. Two are preserved

in fragments, while one is almost complete, lacking only the lid.

<sup>30</sup> KIERNAN 2014, p. 614.