

GRAVE INVENTORY – A REFLECTION OF THE BELIEF OF DECEASED

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Many objects in graves and funerary practices could be explained as a part of a special rite that is attributable to a particular religion. Following the analysis of the graves with cremation and inhumation from the period I – IV century A.D. excavated at Viminacium, their forms and artefacts found in them we shall try to come to some answers. The huge necropolis of Viminacium has been explored since seventies of XX century. Excavations are still going on, so we could always expect new problems, just as some solutions for already existed.

Considering the overall picture in the Roman Empire, the fact is that cremation was the dominant form of burial. It should be noted that the cremation inherited inhumation and was dominant throughout the Empire, and then again during the third century inhumation prevailed.¹ According to the law of the Twelve tables (III. 890–3) we know that both rites existed. However, they were, in different provinces, coloured with the local indigenous practices. In the case of the graves at the necropolis of Viminacium, characteristic is the ritual of purifying grave pits with fire what could be remarked as red and gray burnished sides. The bodies of the deceased were cremated in a particular public place (*ustrinum publicum*) together with stretcher (*lectus funebris*). Then the cremated bones collected along with the remains of the pyre were simply squandered on the bottom of the grave.

If we analyze the goods in the cremation graves in most cases we can distinguish those who are up there with the deceased at the stake from those which were subsequently added after. Thus with dead man burned his clothes, jewellery, coins and glass. Parts of clothing and jewellery represent buckles, buttons, bronze and bone pins, etc. Very often at the stake were burnt the wooden caskets of which deformed parts of bronze or iron bonds, handles and nails left over. In the very grave after the remains collected from the pyre were deposited would be added other items, mostly pottery, lamps and balsamariums. In the case of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type of graves with two levels there were no explicit rules in the layout of the items. In fact, they could be laid at the bottom of the second level along with the remains of the pyre (fig. 1), but also at the bottom of the first level (fig. 2). In the case of the same kind of ancient tombs at the necropolis in *Mursa*, items are placed only on the bottom of the first, while the remains of the pyre were laid on the bottom of the second².

Inventory in the inhumation graves can be divided into those that were laid in the tomb and directly to those that were put in the coffin. Grave goods placed outside the tomb mainly were footwear, pottery, glass, and metal containers. In the coffin were the typical personal decorations and equipment, coins, tools and needles. Animal bones are found both inside and outside

¹ Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VII, 187) and Cicero (*De leg.* II, 22,56) mentioned inhumation as original custom in Rome, indicating that it was later inherited by cremation. Pliny notes that many of the Roman family, especially gens *Cornelia* abide inhumation, others cremation, and Cicero writes that Sula was the first of *Cornelia* who was cremated.

² Göricke – Lukić 2000, p. 95.

the tomb. We do not know when the coffin was closed. Acceptable theory is that, in light of the familiar Roman burial practices, coffin was kept open as long as possible, or was opened shortly before burial in order to deceased relatives and friends once again “turn” and saw his face³.

If we analyze the inventory from Viminacium graves, the usual repertoire would consist of, for example, jugs, lamp and coin. Some may refer to the occupation, and thus the social status of the deceased. However, placing the certain items that were carrying these data may not be the rule.

Concerning grave architecture should, of course, bear in mind local conditions and natives comprehensions. The mechanisms for accepting certain cultural practices, especially when it comes to those in the field of burial are never uniform and simultaneous. That gives us potential of just a free interpretation or speculation.

When analyzing the grave goods from the Roman period, it is quite clear that the artefacts have a symbolic role above all, the lamps and miniature vessels. Especially the representations on the lamps refer to specific topics related to the funeral cult. However, already balsamariums, whose repertoire in the form of graves is quite limited, are not providing evidence of any symbolic role. Even the Roman writers do not report about this kind of goods during burial or funeral cult. Only in one case is described that the small container of onyx with Syrian gifts and fragrance was attached. All other ethnic, religious or social characteristics were expressed by the goods established by social conventions among Roman inhabitants. Taking over and tending these conventions became an integral part of romanization to be found in the cemeteries of the Roman provinces⁴ Of course, this greatly limits the ability to determine the social status of the buried person. Due to the standard repertoire of balsamariums, lamps and other usual artefacts, the insight into the personality of the deceased is missing. The real picture of the dead and the clarification of its social status are obtained through a more or less solemn funeral ceremony, inscription, luxuriously or modestly built grave and its maintenance⁵

The symbolism of the grave goods, which is unclear at the present time, could be quite obvious to participants and organizers of the funeral. Generally accepted explanation is that the grave goods are not used to indicate the status of the deceased, but to provide food, comfort and protection, while remaining the spirit of the deceased in the tomb is on the way to or in the afterlife. However, some items were specifically tied to the deceased and the family members feel the need to attach them to the grave or to the stake, not only for appeasing the spirits, but that was to avoid the spirit of a deceased person through that exact item adversely affect the eventual new owner. Special measures could be undertaken in cases when the deceased person was young and unmarried⁶.

Certain artefacts with their very iconography suggest the idea of an afterlife and for many of them would be possible to claim they point out to belief in afterlife. Coins are sometimes put in grave as a gift to Charon (fig. 3), or as an object that protects against evil. Footwear, food and beverages, clothing and other grave goods were put to ensure the spirits of the deceased while they reside in the grave, or on the way to or in the afterlife. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to determine when and how these processes are becoming typical traditional and fashionable part of funerary customs, rather than directly expressing genuine belief of buried. The use of lead coffins may indicate a desire to preserve the body after death, although this is not a necessary indication of the desire of belief in an afterlife. Therefore artefacts made of lead (lead

³ Barber, Bowsher 2000, p. 310.

⁴ von Hesberg 1998, p. 27.

⁵ von Hesberg 1998, p. 28.

⁶ Barber, Bowsher 2000, p. 325.

sarcophagi were in fashion in the third and fourth century AD) has been given to the mystical properties, and hence their use in the context of the religious and funeral. But they could also be a protection from dreadful forces while a meeting with death.

Certain number of huge burnt nails found in tombs and at sacrificial areas next to and above them indicates their possible apotropaic character in the cult of the dead. Undoubtedly the nails tied the deceased to his grave and that way enabling to the living the safe return to homes and staying protected in them. Confirmation of this conclusion is found in burial rites. In several cases, the feet of deceased were nailed to the bottom of a wooden coffin or the bottom of the tomb. From the same reason to some of them the legs were tied in ankles (fig. 4). Likely to have the same symbolic meaning some nails were found in the graves of the cremated person.

Iron nails, found in almost every cremated Roman grave, are of great importance for studying the way of burying. They can come from wooden coffins, in which the deceased were put before cremations or from stretchers, on which the deceased bodies were brought, or they represent remains of the stake construction itself.

The hypothesis that nails come from wooden trunks found in early Roman barrow burials, in which still glowing remains from the *ustrina* were placed, is contradictory by facts that in a large number of graves only single nails of big dimensions were found. At the necropolis of ancient Duklja, iron nails were found in stone and glass urns, which indicate their cultic role. Cultic placing of nails in early Christian graves surely indicates overtaking older traditions, which become reflected even until the end of the Middle Ages and remained preserved until modern times⁷

The recumbent figure of stone lions we are meeting at the sacrificial areas next to the graves. They were probably forming the part of the gravestones. Lion, painted on the grave or as part of a tombstone, was at the same time the protection of burial sites and a symbol of devouring death. In Etruria their figures were placed at the tomb where they had the role of guardian. Motif of a lion expanded by the legions of the Danube region further into Germany and Gaul⁸. Stone lion figures as overhead feature is found above the grave of the deceased cremated in the necropolis of Singidunum⁹. Perhaps the stone sculptures of lions could be connected to the cult of Mithras, the free standing sculptures of lions were being found in Mithraeums, and at the area of Viminacium so far were found Mithraic votive monuments with inscriptions mentioning soldiers of legion VII Claudia¹⁰.

General fear that Mani (*Manes*) can walk out of the tomb and influence to the living can be assumed on the basis of specific measures that have been implemented to avoid this: sarcophagi, built tombs, etc. These measures were above all necessary in the case of violent death or a young person. These graves could be of particularly rich inventory just because of these measures, and opposite to the presumption that the children had a completely different status of adults in society.

The fact that Roman legislators often issued notification that it is necessary to pay respect to the dead and to preserve intact graves, from early Republican times to proclamations of some of the last Emperors of Rome only point out that, in spite of beliefs of the holiness of the

⁷ Baum, Srejović 1959, p. 23.

⁸ Alcock 1980, p. 55.

⁹ Simić 1988, p. 125–128, fig. 3.

¹⁰ Zotović 2003, p. 87–95; from the territory of Viminacium originates 15 stone sculptures of lions. They were made as a stand-alone sculpture, or part of the composition. Precise dating was not possible owing to damages of the sculpture because of weather. They were roughly dated into a period from the middle of the second century to the end of the third AD.

deceased and of their unattainability, disturbing graves was a common thing. High degree of disordered graves was observed not only at the Viminacium necropolis, but also on many other big urban cemeteries and it could only be explained with beliefs that deceased only temporarily dwell in their graves¹¹.

In the first century B.C. regulations on cremation and the distance of cemeteries from the city were established primarily for practical reasons (D. Cassius LVI, 31, 1). By law only free citizens could be cremated while it was not permitted to convicts and slaves. However, control regulations on cremation significantly weaken by the end of the first century and then under the influence of oriental beliefs inhumation increasingly replaces cremation. The transition, of course, was not simultaneous in the same degree in all parts of the Roman Empire. Such a general picture confirmed the situation at Viminacium necropolis where both rituals, cremation and inhumation, were in use at the same period.

Naturally, different procedures applied in the funeral ritual depend on many factors, such as the wealthy status of the deceased, his class or social status, occupation, cultural background, religious beliefs or philosophical beliefs, fashion, or the existing legislation. It is impossible to explore the spiritual culture of a certain age, if we restrict ourselves only to the material. Specifically, examining a ritual on the basis of material evidence does not mean that these traces indisputably speak about authentic belief¹². We could never be sure from where derive rituals. Some may have reached from the eastern or western Roman provinces, while others occur as a mixture of new ideas, and different symbols, but also the existing indigenous practices. By the analysis of burial customs is not possible still to obtain clear evidence to distinguish indigenous burial practices from those applied by newcomers. In fact, to assume the connection of certain aspects of funeral practices of certain ethnic or cultural groups means to ignore the variability and adaptability of human society.

The only information that may safely be obtained by comparing the funerary rituals from roman cemetery of Viminacium with those who were established in other cemeteries from the Roman period, from the territory of Upper and Lower Moesia, Pannonia is that they are typical of urban Roman necropolis and probably present a combination of indigenous and Roman practices.

The gravestone, parts of clothing, jewellery, and inscriptions, to a lesser extent funeral customs and personal belongings, give opportunity the least in general terms, to try to determine the ethnic relations in the Roman period. For example, setting headstones was a typical Roman custom which was quickly accepted, although still retaining the characteristics of indigenous ways of life and customs in the various ceremonies. Celtic and Illyrian names are known to us precisely because they occur in Latin inscriptions¹³.

In some cases, and the type of cremation graves Mala Kopašnica – Sase, the libation pipes were found. In one case was used the lead pipe and in the others were used ceramic pipes plumbing on one another so that their openings were well above the earth's surface. Judging by the finding of fish bones in the pipes they were used not only for liquids. In the cemeteries of the Roman period amphoras as the grave goods but which content were used during funerals with the narrow necks rising above ground served not only for the libation but also as a grave marks¹⁴. After all, when it comes to cemeteries of Viminacium we can only assume the existence of grave markers since none were found *in situ*. In some cases, group of stones (green schist) near grave

¹¹ Barber, Bowsher 2000, p. 323.

¹² Barber, Bowsher 2000, p. 309.

¹³ Topál 2000 p. 197.

¹⁴ Hope 2001, p. 3; the case at cemetery of *Isola Sacra*.

indicates tombstone, but it cannot be claimed with certainty. However, the existence of the graves with libation pipes may indicate the possible appearance of at least part of the necropolis.

It is believed that the custom of placing the recipient of libations to the grave originating from northern Africa to Europe to spread due lively trade links¹⁵. In any case, there is a clear evidence of the belief in the afterlife as it involves a regular supply of food and drinks of the deceased. Cycle of funeral feasts points to traditional belief in the immortality of the soul, and suggests a belief in eternal life no matter how large these contradictory ideas. The dying body liberates the soul, and yet feeding dead bodies indicates that the spirit is still trapped in the mortal form. It should be borne in mind that there are traditions long after the circumstances and mechanisms that have influenced on their establishment disappeared and a “new” environments have been developed new motives that explain them. Moreover, people tend to lean towards from fear to the practice whose neglect would be dangerous because it could lead to retaliation of powerful and vengeful spirit of a deceased¹⁶.

So, some grave goods could be explained as indicators of pagan beliefs. For example, a number of coins deposited in the tomb may indicate a general belief on the journey to the underworld. Also taking shoes (many hobnails are evidence found in the graves) indicates a belief that the way the deceased must pass through passing from one life to another. In general, many other grave goods can be interpreted as a way of equipment of its kind. Unfortunately, cases where a definite deity associated with burial are very rare – one example is Venus Pudica found in a grave with the construction that symbolizes rebirth and is associated with fertility cult.

Also, there are some cases that show how complex could be explanation about religion of deceased if following grave goods. At site Kod Koraba in the grave with two levels of a quite big dimensions (3 × 2 m) was found, besides usual inventory such as jar and needle with the head in the shape of a bird (eagle or hawk), a lead container decorated with the ornament in the shape of cross (reliquary?). Around the container were found cremated bones and inside just a few and quite small.

And, if there is a ring with christogram? The grave (G 212 – site Pirivoj) oriented W-E with the construction of tiles was found at a depth of 0.9 m (fig. 5). The bones of deceased were poorly preserved and just partially: upper right arm bone, bones of the right half of the torso, both femurs and a fragment of the left tibia. Along the bones of left leg was found the glass bottle, and fragmented glass vessel – *unguentarium*, on the right side stone palettes and fragmented bronze ring. In the middle of the grave were found three bronze rings: one with not clear image on the head, the one with engraved figure of lion and the third with christogram. Also, beside them were found the silver ring with gemstone with engraved image of human figure, two bronze bracelets and bronze coin (mid-fourth century). In the western part of grave were found cylindrical silver box, two earrings in gold wire and necklace of glass beads. If we reconsider the other grave goods, the images on other rings could we be sure what were the believes of deceased?

At Viminacium necropolis there are some graves that are considered Christian. For example an early Christian grave, built of bricks, with a trapezoidal cross-section which interior was painted in the fresco technique. On the west wall was picture ed christogram¹⁷ within a wreath on a blue background. Few children's grave built of bricks laid in the form of coffins also has the bricks marked with a christogram inscribed. They all could be dated to the 4th century¹⁸.

¹⁵ Alcock 1980, p. 63. Libation pipes have been found in ancient cemeteries in Colchester, Caerleon and Chichester.

¹⁶ Alcock 1980, p. 64.

¹⁷ Korać 2000, p. 33.

¹⁸ Zotović 1995, p. 336–348.

After all, we should be aware of that the very act of burial is not undisputed indicator of religious beliefs, or the grave goods still point to a belief in an afterlife. If we look at these events in the modern world we can see that most of the societies have a certain funeral rites not because of religious beliefs but because the rite became part of the cultural tradition.

Figures

Fig. 1 – Cremation grave of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type with grave goods in the second level along with the remains of the pyre (site Nad Klepečkom, G1–89)

Fig. 2 – Cremation grave of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type with grave goods in the first and in the second level along with the remains of the pyre (site Kod Koraba, G1–80)

Fig. 3 – Inhumation grave – traces of bronze coin put in the mouth of deceased (site Kod Koraba – G–32)

Fig. 4 – Skeleton with the crossed ankles (site Pirivoj – G–253)

Fig. 5 – The grave with silver ring with christogram (site Pirivoj – G–212)

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GRAVE INVENTORY – A REFLECTION OF THE BELIEF OF THE DECEASED

(Abstract)

In this article following the example of graves with cremation and inhumation from the period I–IV century A.D. excavated at Viminacium is given the overview of graves goods in an effort to use them to explain religious beliefs of buried. As certain artifacts suggest the idea of an afterlife and for many of them would be possible to claim they point out to belief in afterlife. Coins sometimes put in grave as a gift to Charon, footwear, food and beverages, clothing and other grave goods put to ensure the spirits of the deceased while they reside in the grave, or on the way to or in the afterlife. The use of lead coffins may indicate a desire to preserve the body after death, although this is not a necessary indication of the desire of belief in an afterlife. Also certain number of huge burnt nails found in tombs and at sacrificial areas next to and above them indicates their possible apotropaic character in the cult of the dead. Undoubtedly any grave good has a special meaning, and the subject of our study is whether and to what extent it reflects the religious belief of the deceased.



Fig. 1 Cremation grave of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type with grave goods in the second level along with the remains of the pyre (site Nad Klepečkom, G1–89)



Fig. 2 Cremation grave of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type with grave goods in the first and in the second level along with the remains of the pyre (site Kod Koraba, G1–80)



Fig. 3 Skeleton with the crossed ankles (site Pirivoj – G-253)



Fig. 4 Skeleton with the crossed ankles (site Pirivoj – G-253)

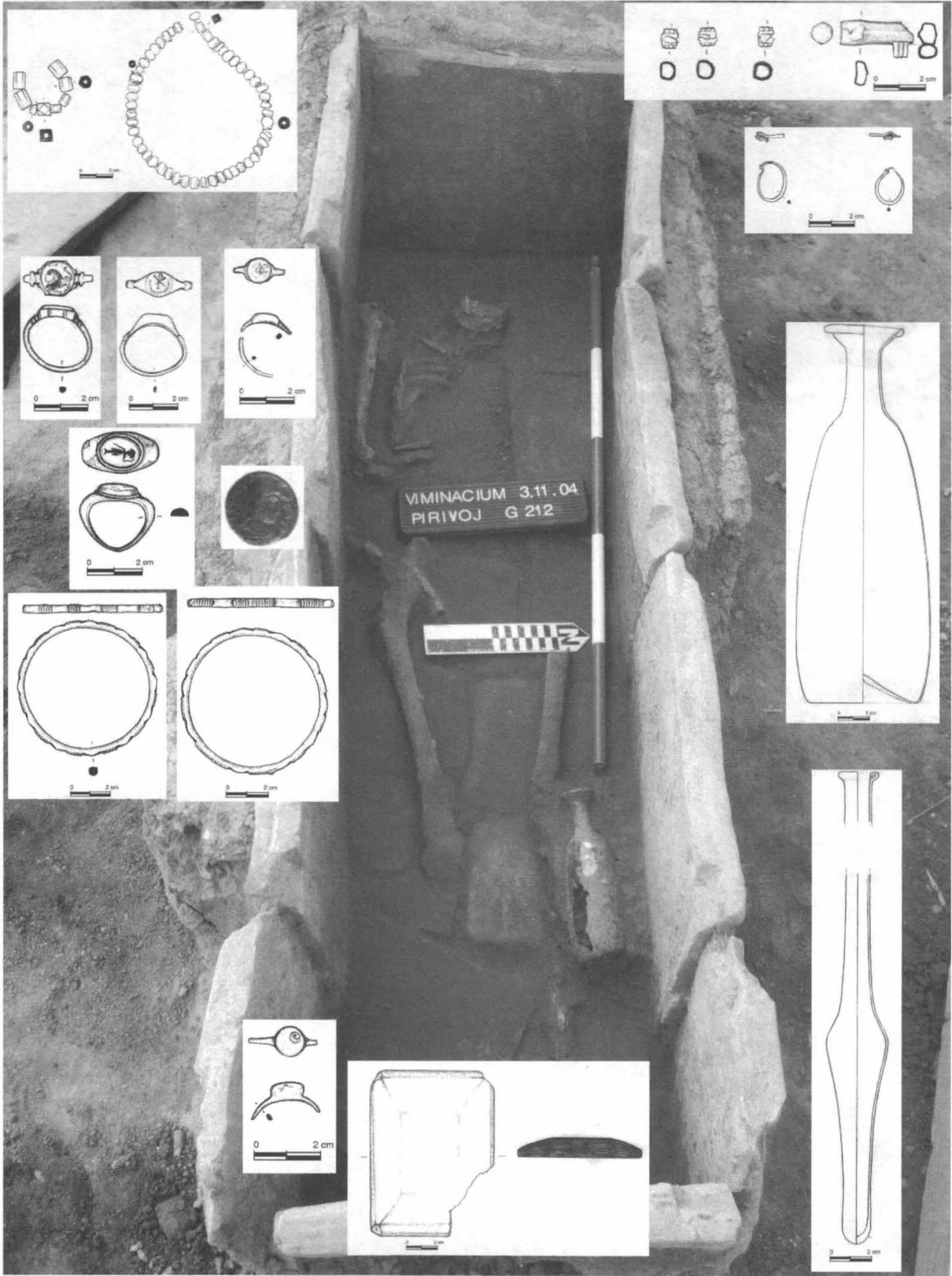


Fig. 5 The grave with silver ring with christogram (site Pirivoj – G-212)