

SYMBOL AS KEY TO THE QUESTION OF ROMAN WOMAN'S AFTERLIFE

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The former Roman city and military fort Viminacium lies near the modern villages of Stari Kostolac and Drmno, at the left Mlava bank, some 15 km to the east from Požarevac in East Serbia (Fig. 1). Viminacium was the capital of the Roman province Upper Moesia (*Moesia Superior*) and an important military stronghold at the northern border of the Empire. The legion *VII Claudia Pia Fidelis* was stationed here. During the reign of the emperor Hadrian, this city gained a status of a *municipium* and during the reign of Gordian III, in 239, it became a *colonia*.

As a result of archaeological research in Viminacium, some 14.000 Roman graves were discovered. (Fig. 2) They date into the period from 1st to the middle of 5th century A.D. With such a large amount of discovered graves, this city offers an excellent starting point for studying symbols in female graves of the periods discussed.

One of the best-known Roman customs – funeral with grave-goods, was practiced for centuries. The deposited grave-goods represented a message with which the afterlife began. In female burials, objects which indicated culture, ethnic origin or social status, soon received a unique symbolic function. In such a way, grave-goods turned into symbols of woman's existence before death, actually symbols of her future existence in the afterlife. The whole repertoire of "female" objects indicated woman's role in the society, intimate experience regarding reality or belief in what her life was dedicated to. In such a way, these objects-symbols can often be connected to popular cults, usually also of female deities, like Venus, Magna Mater or Isis.

Although in many graves there were grave-goods that indicate different cults, Venus cult was encountered the most. Objects connected to Venus include items with decoration of rosettes, pigeons, dolphins, Erotes, Tritons or shells. They can be seen on many different objects, like small pottery figurines or images on oil-lamps or funerary stelles. In some cases, gravestones were even made in shapes of shells. Among small finds, there are mirrors, brooches and other items.

Examples named here originate from two different Viminacium cemeteries, Brest and Više grobalja, both being parts of the southern necropolis. They include a cremation grave G₁-15, which was excavated at the "Brest" necropolis and graves G-83¹, G₁-303², G-418³, G-436⁴, G-539⁵ from the site "Više grobalja".

The most interesting is the example of the cremation grave G₁-15 (Fig. 3). It belongs to the grave type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II, that were quite common on all of the Viminacium cemeteries. Such graves consist of a bigger pit (upper level) and a smaller one (lower level), which was dug in the middle of the upper pit and, according to its dimensions, correspond to the

¹ Zotović, Jordović 1990, p. 61, T. XIX and XX.

² Korać, Golubović 2009, p. 48–50.

³ Korać, Golubović 2009, p. 352.

⁴ Korać, Golubović 2009, p. 361.

⁵ Korać, Golubović 2009, p. 431.

actual grave pit.⁶ The lower level of the Brest grave was paved with bricks and the whole construction was covered with a gable-roof. This kind of construction shows parallels with some Late Antique grave constructions. Another feature of the Mala Kopašnica-Sase II graves are burned sides, result of a ritual purification of the burial place with fire. Generally, such graves date between the 1st and the 3rd century⁷.

In this grave, almost fifty grave-goods were unearthed, among them a pottery water-clock (Fig. 4), a spindle and pieces of mother-of-pearl. When used as grave-goods, water-clocks, needles and spindles symbolize the unconditional acceptance of destiny and death.⁸ On the other hand, mother-of-pearl represents a special aspect of the goddess Venus (*Venus Funeraria*), connected with marital harmony, even in afterlife⁹. As grave-goods, shells and mother-of-pearls are often combined with dice, for example at the Viminacium cemetery named "Više grobalja"¹⁰. During the Roman period, it was believed that dice showing sixes represent the highest horizon of happiness and in such a way, a person would reach the final goal, i. e. reach the goddess Venus herself¹¹.

All of these graves date in the first half of 2nd century, i. e. the period of Hadrian's reign or the beginning of the Antonine era¹².

The best analogy for the Brest grave is a grave from Topusko in modern Croatia¹³. It was discovered in 1976 and the finds are now deposited at the Archaeological museum in Zagreb. The grave itself was a cremation covered with a stone plate¹⁴. It was a well-equipped grave, with six oil-lamps, three miniature jugs, three jugs, a beaker, two censers, four unguentaria made of green glass¹⁵ and seven items made of amber, a spindle and dice as grave-goods¹⁶.

The images presented on the amber objects include a figure of Eros and also food, like fish and grapes. The figure of naked Eros can be understood as the symbol of seasons, in this case autumn¹⁷. Eros appears here as Venus' son and in this grave, he represents a part of her cult¹⁸.

The same can be said for shells, which, ever since prehistory, represent female attributes or symbols and therefore, they were often deposited as grave-goods. Sometimes, they are actual shells, but sometimes also shell-shaped objects made of amber, stone or pottery¹⁹.

The story of this grave would remain incomplete without the symbol of the three Parcae. It is most of all a spindle, which was made of amber²⁰. Even though spindles can be understood as objects of every-day usage²¹, it is quite possible that they can be brought in connection with deities of the Underworld, actually with one of the three Parcae, the oldest one of them, "Clotho".

⁶ Jovanović 1984, p. 103.

⁷ Jovanović 1984, p. 105.

⁸ Jovanović 2007, p. 148.

⁹ Jovanović 2000, p. 11–19.

¹⁰ Zotović, Jordović 1990, graves G-83, G-85, G-216, G-251, G₁-30, G₁-81, G₁-118, G₁-245; Korać, Golubović 2009, graves G₁-303, G₁-320, G₁-345, G₁-363, G₁-415, G₁-416, G₁-454, G₁-461 and G-279, G-350, G-361, G-379, G-400, G-405, G-418, G-436, G-439, G-440, G-474, G-490, G-513, G-517, G-522, G-536, G-539, G-541).

¹¹ Jovanović 2007, 148.

¹² Bjelajac 1991, p. 80.

¹³ Šarić 1979–80.

¹⁴ Šarić 1979–80, p. 127–129, Fig. 1–5.

¹⁵ Šarić 1979–80, Pl. III–VII.

¹⁶ Šarić 1979–80, p. 150, Pl. I–II.

¹⁷ Šarić 1979–80, p. 134.

¹⁸ Šarić 1979–80, Pl. I, 1.

¹⁹ Šarić 1979–80, Pl. II, 4.

²⁰ Šarić 1979–80, Pl. II, 1–3.

²¹ Šarić 1979–80, p. 135.

Finally, there were dice and buttons made of amber²², which complete the story and ensure the way to goddess Venus of the here buried woman.

The grave is dated into the 2nd century.

A parallel to the graves named above are graves from the Gomilice cemetery, near the village of Guberevac (Stojnik county). At this site, 361 graves were excavated, all of Mala Kopašnica – Sase type and dated from the 1st to the 3rd century²³.

Of importance for this study is grave nr. 139, since in it, three terracottas were discovered, further on three jugs, an oil-lamp, a mirror, a balsamarium, a bone-spatula, dice and pearls, bronze jewelry, a fragmented box and a coin²⁴. One of the terracottas bears a representation of a pregnant female deity sitting on a throne²⁵, another one a bird²⁶ and the third one a fig²⁷. Here again, a clishee is noticeable, consisting of a Venus figurine, a dove and food.

Similar to this one is grave 242, in which there were two jugs, a beaker, two balsamaria, a small pot and a statuette of Venus²⁸. Venus is naked, in her stretched right hand she most likely holds an apple or a mirror²⁹. In her left hand, there is a cloak, falling down to her foot. The most important detail is her hair-style, with three braids and a bun at the back of her head. Since such hair-styles were typical for the empresses of the Antonine dynasty, this grave is therefore dated into the second half of the 2nd century³⁰.

The symbols of Venus, like her statuettes and items in the shape of a dove and a fig, indicate the existence of the *Venus Funeraria cult* in this area. This goddess was a soul guardian for early deceased girls and young women. She also took care of their souls and of a new establishment of the disturbed harmony.

As already mentioned, water-clocks, needles and spindles used as grave-goods, symbolize the unconditional acceptance of destiny and death³¹. They can be brought in connection with the three Parcae, who spin the thread of life and also determine how long the thread shall be. As the sign of the life already past, there is a water-clock. All of this indicates that these grave-goods were dedicated to the evil goddesses of faith.

On the other hand, there are grave-goods which directly point to the goddess Venus, like statuettes made of pottery or bronze. Some other items, like rosettes, doves, dolphins, Erotes, Tritons, shells and mother-of-pearl, indirectly point to Venus. Shell-shaped tombstones often represent a baldichine, which offers protection to the early deceased girls and young women. In graves in which there is no statuette of the goddess, shells incorporate a substitution and therefore represent a *pars pro toto*. Mother-of-pearl represents a special aspect of the goddess Venus (*Venus Funeraria*), connected with marital harmony, even in afterlife³².

It is common for all of the presented graves that they were graves of early deceased girls and young women, whose natural harmony was therefore disturbed. In such a sacral constitution, the presence of the goddess aimed towards wishful happiness and joy of life.

²² Šarić 1979–80, Pl. II, 5–7.

²³ Glumac 2005, p. 361.

²⁴ Glumac 2005, p. 362–364, Fig. 1.

²⁵ Glumac 2005, p. 363, Fig. 2.

²⁶ Glumac 2005, p. 364, Fig. 3.

²⁷ Glumac 2005, p. 365, Fig. 4.

²⁸ Glumac 2005, p. 364–367, Fig. 6.

²⁹ Glumac 2005, p. 366, Fig. 7.

³⁰ Glumac 2005, p. 368.

³¹ Jovanović 2007, p. 148.

³² Jovanović 2000, p. 11–19.

Pure souls of the early deceased return to the ancient realm of Venus and find joy under her protection, in the realm of pure love and eternal beauty. This interpretation indicates some kind of optimism, in which souls are incorporated into universal power of life, therefore reaching always-renewable imperishability and eternity. This aspect of Venus is closely related to Persephone's return from the Underworld. It seems that exactly this is essence of the meaning of *Venus Funeraria*: the ones, whose life was interrupted too early, became "virgin brides of Hades", but their return was made possible. A grave-good in the shape of a Venus-statuettes, with its votive and sepulchral character, should persuade the goddess to show the deceased "the way of Persephone", thus also making a new spring possible. In other words, harmony disturbed by death returns through Venus.

Finally, there is a question about the ethno-cultural and social status of the carriers of this cult. One can think of local, autochthonous population, and point out to a local cult which was incorporated into the cult of *Venus Funeraria* through an *interpretatio Romana*. Still, all of the graves were discovered in an urban, Romanized area and even grave-goods point to a wealthy social status. This is why there is an interpretation that young girls and women from Romanized families were buried in such graves. The period from which most of the graves originate is 1st to the 3rd century.

From the 4th century onwards, on tombstones, similar to the private portrait in free sculpture, real portraits are rare. The most common pictures are stylized human figures on which, instead of heads or faces, clothes and various, always very expensive jewelry, are presented, especially when it comes to images of women. Clothes, jewelry or objects in the hands of a deceased woman are shown more precisely than details of her face. Apart from usual connotations, most frequently in such schematic pictures, they indicate her gender.

Searching for a private portrait of a Late Antique woman demands funerary context. These intimate tomb paintings from the territory of modern Serbia, which at the time as they were made were only known to their painters and their customers, include the difference between the woman to which the tomb was dedicated, her as the mistress of the tomb, and the woman as a servant who was included in the funeral procession.

Pagan tombs of the 4th century from the territory of modern Serbia and the neighboring area show that the paintings within them were dedicated to the deceased, often depicted on the western tomb walls. The iconographic repertoire is common to almost all of the discovered tombs, including motives and scenes which would ascertain transfer into the world of the blessed and victory over death of the deceased. One of the most common scenes within such a complex context of trespassing from the world of the living into the world of the dead is an offering scene in which there are often men and women servants, carrying gifts to the masters of the tombs.

Woman shown as a mistress of a tomb was usually painted along with her husband. Therefore, individual female portraits in provincial painting, especially at the territory of the middle Balkans, are extremely rare. One of these exceptional examples is preserved in the so-called "Pagan tomb" from Viminacium, marked as G-2624³³. Skeleton remains of two deceased persons indicate a man who was some 60 years old and a woman, actually a girl, who was about 20 years old and whose bones were fragmented and dislocated. Anthropological analysis³⁴ matched with the iconography of the depicted deceased – in other words, the osteological material was

³³ Korać 2007, 69–101. The tomb was discovered on 26th of June 1983, at the late Antique level of Viminacium cemeteries, at the site "Pećine". It belongs to the tombs with trapezoidal cross-section and orientated west-east. The tomb construction was made of bricks and it dates into the period of Constantius II. There were no grave goods in this tomb; Anđelković, Nikolić, Rogić 2012, p. 61–62.

³⁴ Mikić 2008, p. 37–45.

brought in connection with a young woman. She was painted on the western frontal tomb wall, indicating with a nets painted on her head, that it was a young unmarried girl³⁵. Further on, the analysis showed an illness on her femur almost leading to immobility, but matching with her portrait which showed her only down to her waist.

The "Pagan tomb" is among the rare ones in which, on the western frontal wall, a portrait of a deceased remained preserved, still representing her as a single, unmarried person (not as a couple) (Fig. 5). She was shown in a frontal, festive position, wearing a heavy dark blue, draped *stola*, decorated with golden threads and brooches, thus indicating a dignified position of a *matrona*³⁶. The luxury of her dress is even more underlined with a kind of a "golden collar", decorated with elliptic and square ornaments, certainly representing precious stones, gems and other kinds of jewelry, also known from a later depiction of Empress Theodora from the San Vitale church³⁷. The deceased's left arm is placed under the dress, the right one is bent in the elbow, covered with drapery, leaving visible only the hand in which there is a small bottle made of white glass³⁸. Within Late Antique levels of the Viminacium cemeteries, such bottles were discovered as grave goods either in pagan or Christian tombs³⁹, indicating that their images possess long tradition both in pagan and in Christian art, but also a specific symbolic meaning. These bottles resemble *balsamaria*⁴⁰, used in woman's everyday life, but possessing another connotation as grave goods⁴¹. Since in offering scenes, in the servant's hands there are often parts of woman's beauty sets⁴², it is possible that one is here dealing with a balsamarium which should indicate a grave good for the mistress which she took from her servants in order to remain beautiful also in the afterlife.

The deceased (Fig. 6) is wearing expensive jewelry, golden square-shaped ear-rings, with blue stones. Ear-rings of such shape were discovered at the Viminacium cemeteries as grave goods. Square ear-rings with rubies were discovered in sarcophagus number 5 with a mummified deceased. According to archaeologists, they indicated her status, but they also possessed a magical-symbolic function⁴³. This is why also here one should consider protective-magical or symbolic meaning of these ear-rings. Considering that the most common blue stone is saphyr, also known as heavenly stone, connected also to all of the symbolics of azurite, it is no wonder that exactly in such a context it was depicted on the ears of the deceased shown in the moment of apotheosis. Just like all of the blue-coloured stones, it is also of importance that in the East, saphyr was regarded as a powerful charm against evil spells⁴⁴.

Around the neck of the deceased there is a necklace of seven pearls. These pearls, just the same as any other decoration on the deceased, confirm her high social status⁴⁵. In

³⁵ Korać 2007, p. 104.

³⁶ Kunst 2005, p. 129.

³⁷ Laver 1967, p. 120.

³⁸ Korać 2007, p. 120. Nowadays, it is very difficult to spot this bottle on the fresco. Only contours are visible, but still there are more details about it in. Đurić 1985, p. 11.

³⁹ Zotović 1980, p. 340.

⁴⁰ Anderson-Stojanović 1987, p. 105–106. *Balsamarium* or *unguentarium* is a bottle made of pottery or glass, used for keeping liquids (wine, water, oil, honey, perfume) used in everyday toilette or for sacrifices in sanctuaries.

⁴¹ Zotović, Jordović, 1990, p. 327–336. Although Viminacium is the city with the largest number of excavated inhumations and cremations, study of these vessels is still incomplete and not reliable when it comes to questions of usage in funerary rituals.

⁴² Danov, Ivanov 1980, p. 105–121. Such an example is found in Silistra, where servants from the procession bring mirrors and clothes to the deceased.

⁴³ Спасић-Ђурић 2004, p. 72.

⁴⁴ Gerbran, Ševalije 2004, p. 801–802.

⁴⁵ Kunst 2005, p. 137–138. Already from the end of Republic, pearls were available for Roman women, still being rare and therefore very expensive, so only high-ranked women were able to afford them.

the magical-cultic meaning, mother-of-pearl is a lunar symbol connected to water and woman, as an important symbol of creative female. Its funerary role is also important, because when placed in a grave, it regenerates the dead and includes him/her into a perfect cyclic cosmic rhythm which, the same as lunation, resembles birth, life, death and a new birth⁴⁶.

According to all of the facts named above, the image of a woman buried in the tomb G-2624, has its parallels in the best examples of the 4th century art. Its appearance, fashion and jewelry can be compared to empresses and women of the highest status. All of this indicates that a lady of high status was buried here, depicted in the manner of the time. The portrait is depicted *en face*, view facing right. Portrait, being of great importance in funerary art, is much more common on steles and sarcophagi, but according to the Late Antique tradition, it incorporates the symbolic meaning of deceased's apotheosis. In the concept of the depicted repertoire, the ultimate importance was given to the apotheosis of the deceased, which is indicated with other scenes, motifs and symbols.

Other motifs depicted on tomb walls also indicate apotheosis. To the left and right from the head of the deceased there are semi-circular garlands decorated with ribbons, as a composition connected to garlands above peacocks on the northern and southern walls, emphasising the idea of immortality. Ever since Hellenism, they belong to common funerary motifs, also decorating urns and sarcophagi. They were made of stringed leaves, flowers, petals, branches or fruits, often decorated with ribbons⁴⁷.

Between the garlands and above the head of the deceased, there is a symbolic puzzling blue rectangular field. In the iconographical interpretation of M. Korać, it is either an architectural motif or a nimbus⁴⁸. Nimbus does not indicate only saints, but also persons of high status and sacral persons⁴⁹. The shape of the nimbus itself – rectangular or square, according to Pitagorean learning, is a symbol of perfection, it represents earthly world, human life and soul. Its function is to emphasise dignity of depicted persons. As less perfect than a circle, which symbolizes heaven, a square symbol is connected to earth, therefore indicating a person of profane rank. This kind of nimbus, blue and square, is typical for the Orient, i.e. Syria and Egypt⁵⁰. If painter's intention was indeed to represent a nimbus above the head of the deceased, it was surely incorporating her high social rank and importance⁵¹.

Opposite to the deceased, on the eastern wall, a young man is depicted (Fig. 7), surely as servant or offerer. Although typical for the funerary art of Late Antique pagan tombs of the 4th century, the offering scene is here reduced to just one person – a young man. He holds an oval, blue plate in his hands, on which there are ritual breads – *panis corona*. Bread represents spiritual and corporal strength, actually visible and manifested life. Symbolics of bread are much more complex if they are connected to wine in cantharoi in front of the peacocks on the lateral walls. In this case, there was a symbiosis of wine as divine extasy and bread as visible manifestation of a spirit which dies and resurrects. Wine, as a male symbol, complements bread which, as a female symbol, expresses fertility and birth⁵².

⁴⁶ Gerbran, Ševalije 2004, p. 65–67.

⁴⁷ Apart from this one, they were also painted in the tomb G-160 from Viminacium, as well as in the tombs from Brestovik and Beška. Pogiћ, Anđelković 2011, p. 98.

⁴⁸ Korać, 2007, p. 115–117.

⁴⁹ Gerbran, Ševalije 2004, p. 607.

⁵⁰ Đurić 1985, p. 156.

⁵¹ In function of dignity, nimbs are encountered on ceiling portraits in Trier, if we accept the hypothesis that these are portraits of the royal family. In: Lavin 1967, 99–113.

⁵² Korać 2007, p. 96.

On the northern and southern lateral walls there are depictions of peacocks (Figs. 8 and 9) shown in profile, both facing the west, i.e. the deceased. Peacocks are a very frequent motif in Late Antiquity and also in Christian art. Although indicating Dionysus cult or attributes of Iuno, they usually symbolize gardens of Eden and indicate apotheosis and immortality, so important in funerary iconography. It is therefore no wonder that they are almost inevitable in tomb fresco paintings⁵³. In front of each of the peacocks in this tomb, there is a cantharos filled with wine, thus emphasising the idea of immortality.

Regarding the floral motifs, they are reduced to depictions of big red or blue flowers with four petals, indicating again their apothropaic function, since they are here helping the deceased and, along with other symbols, they ascertain triumph. Heart-shaped ivy leaves support the idea of eternal life of the deceased, since they are always green⁵⁴.

Even though the western wall is most often dedicated to the image of the deceased, this is still not obligatory. Further on, frescos are sometimes in such a bad condition or so stylized, that it is difficult to identify figures as male or female. Therefore, this is usually made according to analogies or according to what is already known. One of such examples are the paintings from the Brestovik tomb⁵⁵ near Smederevo (Fig. 10), from which frescos are mostly fragmented and in a very poor condition. Some of the motifs are easily recognized⁵⁶, while according to Valtrović, on the western wall, there were human figures depicted: "...in the niche which was framed red all around and painted white and light yellow, besides other red and blue pieces, a red piece is noticeable, decorated with a row of white mother-of-pearls. ... If the paintings remained preserved, we would have found out details of the tomb's owner and when it was built."⁵⁷. According to this, it is possible that tomb's owners were depicted here, or some of the servants from the procession, depicted in the usual "offering scene" i.e. bringing gifts to the deceased for the afterlife. Pearls upon red textile mentioned by Valtrović, could have been jewelry of wealthy mistresses on their funerary portraits or a usual gift brought to the mistress by her servant.

Also poorly preserved, linearly drawn frescoes from the tomb I in Čalma near Sremska Mitrovica⁵⁸, do not offer much interpretation space (Fig. 11). On the southern wall, there is a bust of a young man, while on the eastern one, there is an image of a young woman with a cloak. On the northern wall, with some difficulty, one can see another male bust. Even though earlier, both of the busts were interpreted as images of the deceased and the female figure as a servant, the one carrying offerings during the procession⁵⁹, a recent new interpretation of these paintings⁶⁰, reveals a woman depicted on the eastern wall, wearing a festive blue dress (*dalmatica*) with red clavuses (*clavi*), as a deceased, who is pictured in front of the gates of Eden, waiting to enter. On the opposite, western wall, as a linear drawing, there is a fence surrounding a landscape, incorporated in presentations of irregular blue flowers and green rings⁶¹. The bust of a

⁵³ More about peacock as motive and symbol in Late Antique and early Christian art in: Anđelković, Rogić, Nikolić 2010, p. 231–248.

⁵⁴ More about vegetative motives in tomb paintings in: Роговић, Анђелковић 2011, p. 85–104.

⁵⁵ The tomb is dated into the 3rd century by Valtrović and in the 4th century by Stričević. Валтровић, 1906, p. 128–138; Stričević 1956–1957, p. 411–413.

⁵⁶ Frescos in the lower zone imitate pavement of different stone plates, the ceiling resembles cassette-ceilings, while motives within the tombs belong to the tradition of zoomorphic (ducks and fish) and floral motives. Милошевић 1993, p. 280. About floral motives in the tomb in: Роговић, Анђелковић 2011, p. 86–87.

⁵⁷ Валтровић 1906, p. 134–135.

⁵⁸ Đorđević 2007, p. 32–33; Milošević 1971, p. 3–13; Milošević 1973, p. 85–94.

⁵⁹ Đurić 1985, p. 169–171.

⁶⁰ Popović 2011, p. 241–243.

⁶¹ The fact that the western wall remained without the image of the deceased is probably caused with its irregular shape. A similar fence motive is depicted in the Devnya tomb. Pillinger, Popova, Zimmermann 1999, Abb. 21.
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young man on the southern wall would be a herme upon the fence of Eden, surrounded with garlands. Although barely recognizable, the same scene is depicted on the northern wall.

In the following tombs, women are represented as deceased and as couples, along with their husbands, also in procession of servants in the offering scenes.

On the western wall of the Beška tomb (Fig. 12), there is a deceased couple. Although damaged, a female face can be recognized, precisely modelled, while her hair was braided, tied at the top of her head⁶² or with a turban-shaped hat⁶³. The deceased is dressed in a long yellowish festive dress (*dalmatica*), with dark blue clavuses and a white pala over her shoulders. Her hands are raised on her chest, she holds a white lily in her right hand and a small bluish vase in her left. One of the interpretations is that this depicted woman was not buried here, since it is known that only one man was buried in the Beška tomb, therefore presuming that the lily, symbol of youth, can be brought in connection with an early death of a spouse and not of the woman who is holding it⁶⁴. Above the heads of the deceased there are garlands, next to their feet there are baskets. Garlands as wreaths of funerary portraits here also bear the usual meaning of apotheosis, while the baskets (*modius*, *kalthos*) represent ancient signs of fertility and prosperity. Along with clothes in which the deceased are depicted, these elements should also indicate their high social status of wealthy people.

On the southern wall, in the first zone divided into metopes, there is a procession of young men and women bringing offerings (Fig. 13): baskets with fruits, beakers with wine, jugs and grapes. A woman from this procession is depicted frontally (Figs. 14 and 15), carrying a plate with rhomboidal breads (cakes) on it. She wears a red *dalmatica* with dark, wide clavuses. These are the persons connected to the earthly life of the deceased and they are represented in the first zone, corresponding to the same level with marble imitation on the northern wall. (Fig. 16) This is the earthly surrounding of the deceased, contrary to the heavenly one – suggested with motives above. Opposite to the deceased, on the eastern wall, there are three female figures, with halos and certain attributes, most likely the three Parcae, as mythological creatures who would introduced the deceased into the afterlife. (Fig. 17) A multitude of well-known ancient motives contains geometric shapes, spiral and floral, among which the best known are grapevine, grapes eaten by birds, peacocks, with the well-known symbolics of afterlife and Eden⁶⁵. Faced with the mystery of death and this insecure journey with no return, an unknown pagan from Beška tried to express his hopes in the afterlife through images and symbols; depicted within garlands of triumph over death and with a basket of fertility, securing resurrection and plentitude, he awaits an eternal banquet with gifts and offerings of his servants. His earthly space, shown with a procession, is a microcosmos not of this life, but of the afterlife. Heaven, the place in which this afterlife shall take place, is shown with peacocks and pigeons with grapes and the wine of re-birth, renovation and eternity⁶⁶.

The offering ceremony and festive dresses in the funerary procession symbolize both master's and mistress's image during Late Antiquity. In the Balcan tombs, development of the offering scene (procession) goes from the scene with one figure to these with a larger number of persons involved, as well as to different kinds of offerings (food, clothes or other kinds of gifts).

In Silistra (*Durostorum*)⁶⁷, on lateral walls of the tomb there are servants who bring offerings to the deceased, mirrors, dresses, trousers and a censer. (Fig. 18) On both sides of the entrance

⁶² Đurić 1985a, p. 5–18.

⁶³ Маријански – Манојловић 1987, p. 17–32.

⁶⁴ Đurić 1985a, p. 5–18.

⁶⁵ Đorđević 2007, p. 70–80; Маријански – Манојловић 1987, p. 17–32.

⁶⁶ Đurić 1985a, p. 5–18.

⁶⁷ Димитров, Чичикова 1986; Danov, Ivanov 1980, p. 105–121. Offering scenes are found also in earlier periods, on frescos on the ceiling from the Cazanluk tomb, dated into the period of the 5th–4th century BC. In the broader
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there are images of candle-holders and on the opposite side there is an image of a married couple as a focus of the whole composition, decoration and its meaning. (Fig. 19) They are here depicted not only as masters of the servants, but also as masters of the whole universe consisting of people around them. Above them, in a lunette, there are images of peacocks and a cantharos between them, with the usual meaning of the world of the blessed, actually Eden. The ceiling is divided into a netz of circular, square and rectangular fields, filled with birds – pheasants and pigeons, different floral motifs – palm-trees, grapevine and hunting scenes⁶⁸.

In the Plovdiv tomb (*Philipopolis*)⁶⁹, there are young men and women depicted, servants holding and bringing different offerings to the deceased, depicted as a lying couple in the right, bigger field of the western wall. It is of special importance that the deceased are of similar size as the servants. This is just contrary to the Beška tomb, in which the deceased and his wife are almost double the size of the servants, same as it is with the deceased and the servant from the “Pagan tomb” of Viminacium.

Regarding the fact that the tomb paintings in Constanca (*Tomis*) were reconstructed, it is difficult to judge special features of the deceased and the servants from the procession⁷⁰.

Due to the chrysmon scene, but also due to the offering scene, the Thessaloniki tomb of Eustorgios combines pagan and Christian traditions of well-known motifs of Eden. Aurelia Procla, “the mother of all”, as she is named in the inscription, is depicted on the lateral wall, brings the wine, thus serving her masters⁷¹.

Apart from the numerous procession in the Silistra tomb, the most numerous one is the one depicted in Osenovo, with four figures of soldiers on one side and four figures of servants who bring offerings on the other lateral side. Apart from Christian symbols – chrismons, even the deceased bears features of Christian iconography, since she is depicted as an adorant, next to her husband, on the frontal wall. The procession and the offerings are depicted in the context of space within villa-like architecture, shown with a young servant-girl carrying a beaker with wine. The iconography of the offering-procession is not limited only with space (microcosmos); its universal meaning is also emphasized with two hemispheres on the ceiling, with personifications of the sun and the moon (macrocosmos)⁷².

Offering scene also remained preserved in the Viminacium “Tomb with Cupids”, marked as G 160, although the paintings of the western frontal wall did not remain preserved. According to the other depicted motives and parallels, it can be presumed that the deceased was depicted there⁷³.

Lateral sides, the northern and the southern wall of the “Tomb with Cupids” have the same order of depicted fields. In longitudinal rectangular fields, next to the western tomb wall, there are standing figures of servants in an “offering” scene. The gesture of the woman-servant is

frieze there is a procession of horse-keepers with horses, musicians, young men and women, offering gifts to a Thracian married couple, depicted in the middle of this scene. In: Danov, Ivanov 1980, p. 75–103.

⁶⁸ Димитров, Чичикова 1986.

⁶⁹ Овчаров, Ваклинова 1978, p. 26–27.

⁷⁰ Đurić 1985, p. 168–169.

⁷¹ Đurić 1985, p. 167–168.

⁷² Đurić 1985, p. 165–167.

⁷³ Edges of decorative frames remained preserved, spiral-floral red element on the ochre background, while in the upper, smaller trapezoidal field of the western wall there was an inscription, according to M. Korać. The inscription is damaged, it was possible to recognize only a few letters. In the first line, there are only two short letters, not legible. In the other row, there are letters TROP. In the third one, there are TIA.N. On the spot where these letters were written, it is very difficult to see their traces. In fresco painted tombs, inscriptions are very rare. Since this one was at the western wall, if it remained preserved, it would have indicated more details about the owners of the tomb. In: Korać 2007, p. 125–141.

directed towards the western wall. She is dressed in a long blue dress, a white cloak put over her arm, black closed shoes (*calceus*) are on her feet, worn on festive occasions both by men and women. The shoes reach her ankles, they are opened on the sides and in the middle, there is a piece of textile facing upwards⁷⁴. In her hands she carries a white oval plate, on which there are yellow circular items surrounded with red contours. These could be ritual breads *panis corona*, of circular shape, also encountered on the plate of the servant bringing offerings from the Viminacium "Pagan tomb" (G 2624)⁷⁵. Such breads are gifts to the deceased. They mark the beginning of a new cycle, in this case a transfer into the new life⁷⁶. The girl-servant from "The tomb with Cupids" iconographically resembles the servant depicted on the frontal, western wall, to the left from the deceased married couple from the Silistra tomb, carrying a patera and a jug in her hands.

The usual motives of Eden are painted within framed fields of the southern and the northern wall: peacocks, birds next to cantharoi and grapevine. On the eastern wall, there is a scene with Cupids, which gave the name to the whole tomb. Their presence could indicate the cult to which the deceased belonged – of *Venus Funeraria* or related to the peacocks and grapevine – of Dionysus. In each case, they should be understood as leaders of the deceased into the eternal afterlife.

* * *

One of the best-known Roman customs – funeral with grave-goods, was practiced for centuries. Apart from usual connotations, it also represented a message with which the afterlife began. In female burials, what indicated culture, ethnic origin or social status, soon received a unique symbolic function. In such a way, grave-goods turned into symbols of woman's existence before death, actually symbols of her future existence in the afterlife. The whole repertoire of "female" objects indicated woman's role in the society, intimate experience regarding reality or belief in what her life was dedicated to. In such a way, these objects-symbols can often be connected to popular cults, usually also of female deities, like Venus, Magna Mater or Isis.

It is interesting to observe how grave-goods later on integrated into painted motifs, filling iconographic repertoire of paradise within female tombs. In cases of female graves, usual repertoire of apotheosis of the decedent was supplemented with typical "female motifs-symbols", which tended to define her not only within social and cultural sense, but also in the gender sense.

After Christianity was accepted, the images did not change much, only their meaning. The already well-known motifs were understood as different symbols, reflecting religious syncretism. Abandoning the rite of depositing grave-goods, Christianity introduced a new visual world of symbols, universal for the whole of the Roman Empire. Examples from the Balkan fresco painted tombs contribute to a clearer understanding of women and their role in the pagan and later on in the Christian visual culture.

* * *

In complex messages given in painted scenes by ancient painters, each motif gained meaning and value of a symbol within a story. A look at funerary images of women of Late Antiquity

⁷⁴ Boucher 2004, p. 125.

⁷⁵ Kopah 1991, p. 107–122.

⁷⁶ Gerbran, Ševalije 2004, p. 274.

makes it possible to read iconographical program and message through symbols. In schematic – illegible images, symbols like clothing, jewelry or objects of every-day use, make it possible to recognize a woman as such. These objects also indicate her social status, sometimes even her ethnicity, origin and age. *Dalmatica* and *pala*, for example, always represent grave mistresses as matrones. The same meaning is given to hair-styles, like hair netz on the head of the deceased from the “Pagan tomb” in Viminacium, testifying either about age or marital status of the depicted person. Of extreme importance for female images is given to jewelry, also indicating status and rank, but also bearing magic or protective function either of the whole piece or some of its parts, like mother-of-pearls or precious stones. Of course, in such cases, symbol interpreting should be multifold. Apart from being capable of telling something about the personality of the deceased, objects depicted next to the deceased or in her hands are often connected to a cultic or religious message. All of this obviously has its origin from the symbolic of grave-goods, deposited next to the deceased in Roman graves. In other goods, when there were no more grave-goods deposited as objects, they were depicted.

In funerary procession, servants bring offerings to the deceased for the afterlife. For both man and woman, with similar meaning and context, those can include bread, wine, jugs, grapes etc, while gifts like mirrors, dresses, cloaks, in other words, female items, indicate that they were meant for a woman, to make her further toilette possible. It is important to mention that such gifts are most often placed in women's hands and not in men's.

Symbols connected to apotheosis, immortality, dwelling in Eden, are the same for both spouses. They always include garlands, peacocks, floral motifs – all which should indicate new life in an eternal paradise is the same for both men and women. Still, the female deceased is characterized with symbols indicating who she was during her lifetime. Defined in such a way, in her gender, social, ethnic and religious sense, she is shaped iconographically for the beginning of her eternal afterlife.

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SYMBOL AS KEY TO THE QUESTION OF ROMAN WOMAN'S AFTERLIFE (Abstract)

One of the best-known Roman customs – funeral with grave-goods, was practiced for centuries. Apart from usual connotations, it was a message with which the afterlife began. Grave-goods turned into symbols of woman's existence before death, actually symbols of her future existence in the afterlife. In such a way, these objects-symbols can often be connected to popular cults, usually also of female deities, like Venus, Magna Mater or Isis. Later on, grave-goods became integrated into painted motifs, filling iconographic repertoire of paradise within female tombs. In cases of female graves, usual repertoire of apotheosis of the decedent was supplemented with typical "female motifs-symbols", which tended to define her not only within social and cultural sense, but also in the gender sense.

With almost 14.000 graves discovered so far, Viminacium, the Roman and late antique site in eastern Serbia, offers an excellent starting point for studying symbols in female graves of the periods discussed.

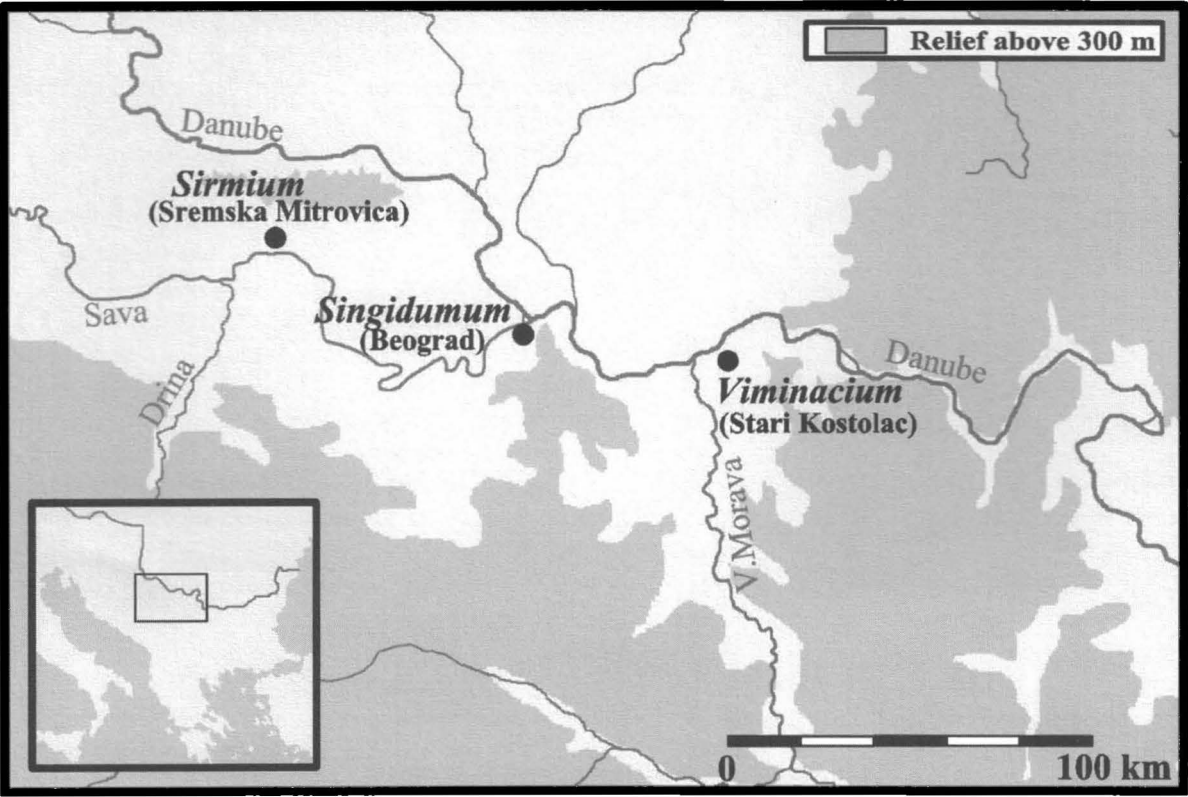


Fig. 1. Position of Viminacium to other well-known Roman sites.

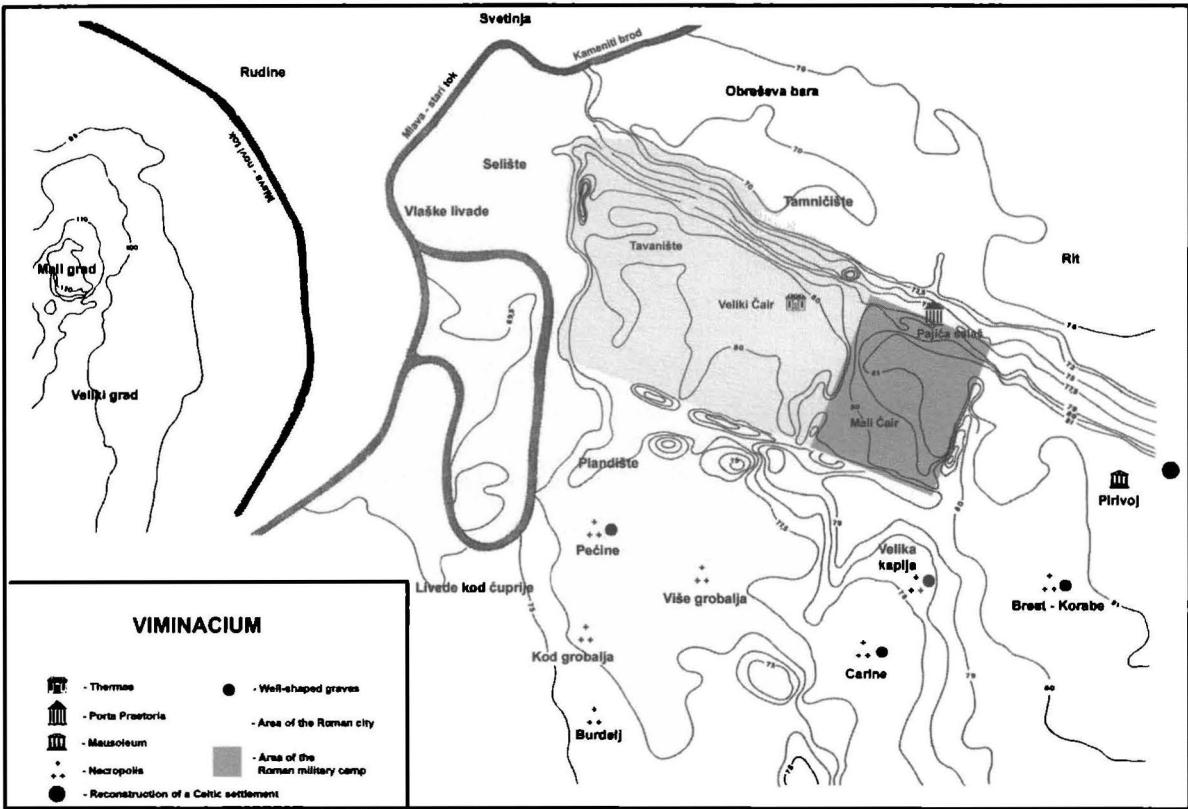


Fig. 2. Plan of Viminacium, legionary fort and the city.

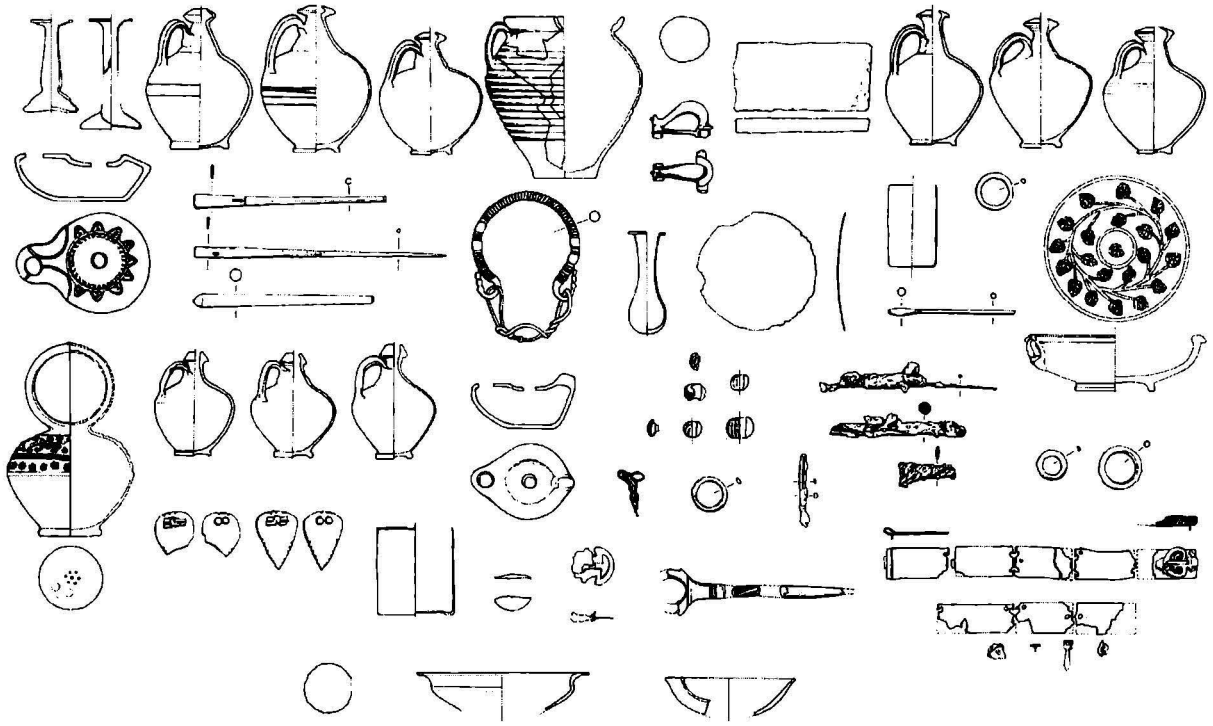


Fig. 3. Finds from cremation grave G₁-15, Brest necropolis.

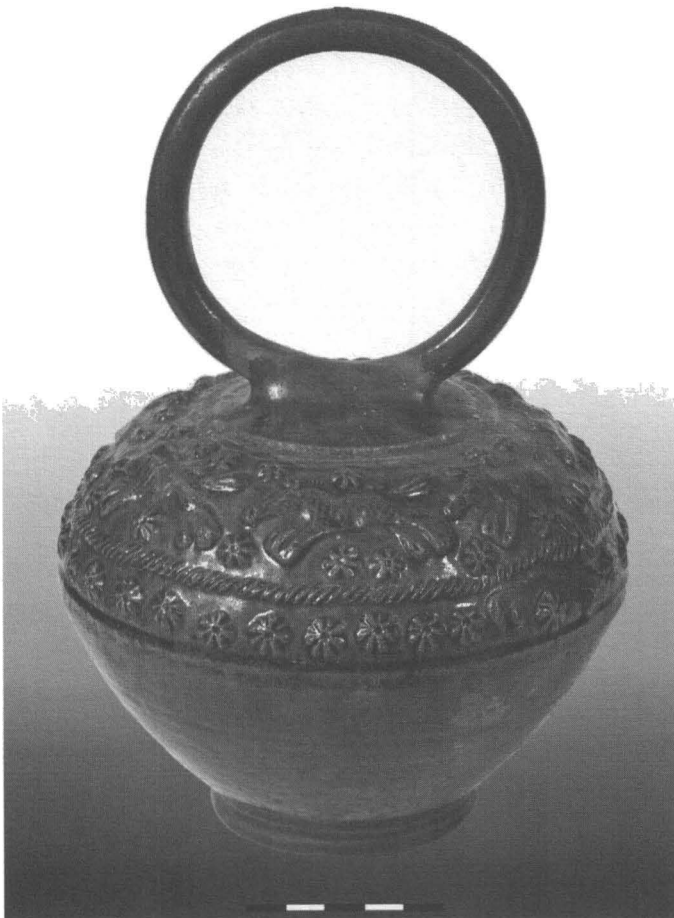


Fig. 4. Pottery water-clock from cremation grave G₁-15, Brest necropolis.



Fig. 5. Portrait of a young woman from the "Pagan tomb" in Viminacium.



Fig. 6. Portrait of a young woman from the "Pagan tomb" in Viminacium – detail.



Fig. 7. Depiction of a young man from the "Pagan tomb".

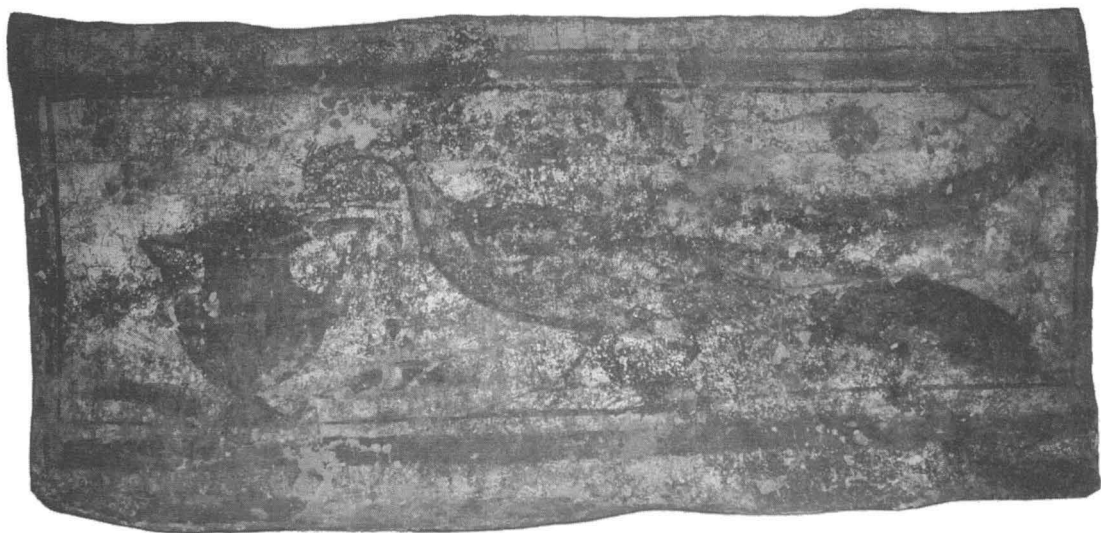


Fig. 8. Peacock from the "Pagan tomb" in Viminacium.



Fig. 9. Peacock from the "Pagan tomb" in Viminacium.



Fig. 10. Brestovik tomb near Smederevo in eastern Serbia.



Fig. 11. Tomb I in Čalma near Sremska Mitrovica.

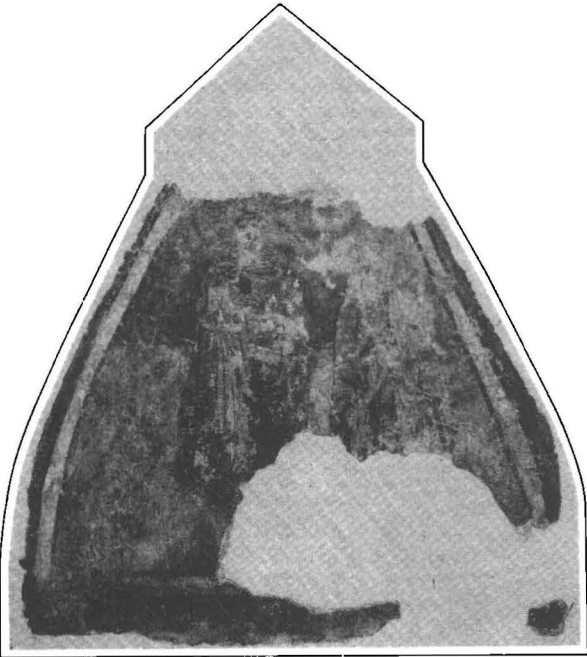


Fig. 12. Western wall of the Beška tomb near Smederevo.

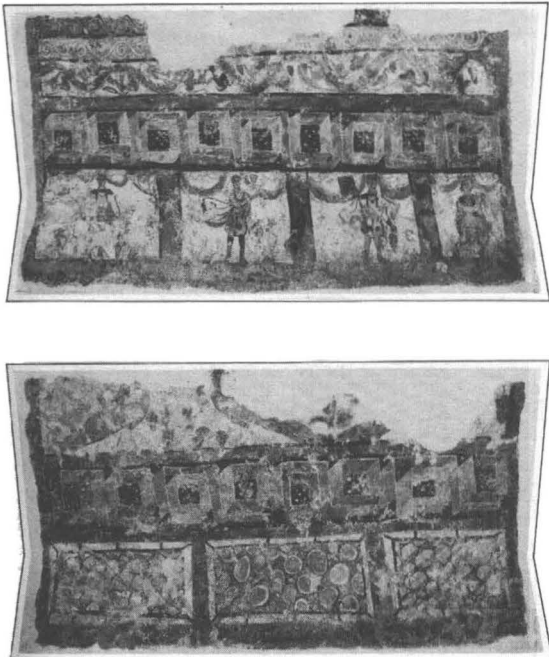


Fig. 13. Procession of young men and women from the Beška tomb.



Fig. 14. A depiction of a young woman from the Beška tomb.



Fig. 15. Young woman from the Beška tomb.



Fig. 16. Young men and women from the Beška tomb.



Fig. 17. Three female figures from the Beška tomb.



Fig. 18. Servants bringing offerings to the deceased in the Silistra tomb (*Durostorum*).



Fig. 19. Married couple from the Silistra tomb (*Durostorum*).