

NEW CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE POLOVRAGI TABLET¹

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Abstract: *The bronze relief from Polovragi, today part of the collection of the National Military Museum, was discovered on the 7th terrace of Cetățuia archaeological site, being thus ascribed to the Geto-Dacian period. Recent physical-chemical analyses performed within ARCHAOMET project, together with the iconographical interpretation of both sides of the artifact, determined a reassessment of the relief.*

Key words: *physical-chemical analyses, iconography, Rider, lunula, kantharos, Christianity*

Cuvinte cheie: *analize fizico-chimice, iconografie, Cavaler, lunula, kantharos, creștinism*

Among the items exhibited at the National Military Museum², there is an interesting bronze tablet discovered at Polovragi, Gorj County. As the label shows, it is the oldest representation of the Thracian Rider on Romanian territory. Nevertheless, recent physical-chemical analyses performed within ARCHAOMET project³, together with the iconographical analyses, have raised new possibilities regarding the origin and meaning of the above-mentioned relief.

The archaeological context of the artifact is rather uncertain; its finder presented it in an article that summarizes the archaeological investigations from Polovragi during 1969-1973, and reprised in August-September 1976, mentioning that the relief is an older find. The only detail regarding the context is the fact that it was discovered on the 7th northern terrace of Cetățuia, in a stratum dated to the second level of inhabitation of the Geto-Dacian site, level attributed to the second half of the 1st century B.C. or the first half of the 1st century A.D.⁴. In another paper that considers the problems of Dacian-Roman iconography it is mentioned that the relief from Polovragi “appeared at - 20 cm”, but it is also said that this is “the depth of the inhabitation level”⁵ from Polovragi. Furthermore, the conservation certificate from the National Military Museum mentions only that the relief was found during the archaeological investigations conducted at Polovragi in 1970.

The bronze item (97 × 64 × 4 mm; 212.4 g) has iconographical elements on both sides. On the obverse (Fig. 1), with only one register, there is a scene depicting a rider turned to the

¹ The paper was presented for the first time at the Second ARCHAOMET International Symposium – “Ancient and Medieval Metalworks. Archaeology-Numismatics-Nuclear Analyses”, Bucharest, 6th-7th May 2007.

² We would like to express our appreciation to the Director of the National Military Museum, Colonel Vasile Popa, who kindly gave us access to the relief.

³ ROMARCHAOMET is a project initiated by the *Horia Hulubei* National Institute of Physics and Nuclear Engineering, coordinated by dr. B. Constantinescu; the Romanian National History Museum is a partner in this project.

⁴ Marinescu 1977, 32. We should keep in mind the fact that an object found in the layer is not dated. An artefact inherits the context chronology only if the context is *closed*. This is not the case.

⁵ Țeposu-Marinescu 1983, 77.

left. He is dressed in a tunic, long pants, a wavering mantle, while his head is covered with a Phrygian bonnet. The personage is unarmed. His horse is depicted walking, with its right front leg in the air. Two male figures flank the horseman. They wear Roman costumes wrapped around their body, being bareheaded. Each of them has the right hand raised as if saluting the rider.

The reverse of the relief (Fig. 2), also with only one register, pictures a *lunula* inscribing a *kantharos* flanked by two peacocks facing the vessel. The model for the *lunula* is represented by a pendant, as suggested by the attachment ring from the upper end.

The interest for this artifact was stirred in the ARCHAEMET project, coordinated by dr. B. Constantinescu from the National Institute for Physics, and having the Romanian National History Museum as partner. Within this research project, the bronze tablet was submitted to elemental investigation, which revealed that the alloy was made of 86.5% Cu, 7.5% Sn, 5% Pb, 0.3% Fe, with traces of antimony and silver. This composition, with no traces of zinc, indicates that this alloy was intended from the very beginning for this tablet, and was not obtained through re-melting. Moreover, the elemental structure highlights the fact that the alloy was prepared for a cast artifact, and not for a hammered one. It also indicates a quality bronze, specific to valuable pieces. Although the analyses performed within this project, focused especially on Roman artifacts, the composition of the discussed item was a surprise, because this alloy was similar to previously analyzed valuable Roman imperial items, such as an *aquila* – military *insigne* from Capidava (late 3rd? century AD⁶) and a *kantharos*' handle from Gornea – Banat (4th century AD)⁷. Such composition was relatively rare as compared to the abundance of cheaper brass (copper and zinc alloy) objects. The similarity with artifacts dated to the 3rd-4th centuries A.D., together with the results of the analyses that suggest it was an alloy prepared for cast artifacts – an unusual situation for Geto-Dacian items – determined us to reconsider the Polovragi relief and its iconographical features.

On one hand, the scene with the rider and the two personages flanking him has been considered the model for the first representations of the Thracian Rider on Romanian territory⁸; on the other hand, the representation on the obverse of the Polovragi tablet has also been regarded as the prototype of the Danubian Riders representations, “symbolizing a Dacian deity, whose iconography has not yet been crystallized”⁹.

Due to the fact that the relief appeared in the archaeological stratum dated to the 1st century B.C. or in the first half of the 1st century A.D, although we are not provided with the exact context¹⁰, the discoverer of the bronze relief from Polovragi dated the piece as such. In order to better understand the iconography and chronology of the bronze relief, we will take into consideration the iconography of several artifacts dated to the 2nd century B.C.-1st century A.D.

⁶ Information kindly provided by dr. I.C. Oprîș; 92% Cu; 4% Sn; 3% Pb; 0.05 Fe; Polovragi alloy is better.

⁷ Information kindly offered by Prof. dr. Al. Barnea; alloy with 83% Cu; 8% Sn; 7% Pb; 0.1% Fe but also 0.05% Zn; that is better than Polovragi, but Gornea alloy is not new. All measurements were performed by dr. B. Constantinescu.

⁸ Miclea, Florescu 1980, nr.197.

⁹ Țeposu-Marinescu 1983, 80. See also Vasinca-Hadiji 2006, 256.

¹⁰ Marinescu 1977, 32.

The first items under discussion come from Lupu treasure¹¹, discovered east of Lupu village (Cergău, Alba county), and dated to the 2nd-1st centuries B.C. The two silver *phalerae* depict two equestrian personages (Fig. 3, 4), both of them turned to left with their right hand raised. They are both armed with a shield. The figures are schematically represented, as the anatomical details are only suggested. In order to represent the hair of the rider, the author used horizontal lines, a similar procedure also used in the case of the horse's tail and mane. In the case of the character on the first *phalera* (Fig. 3), the raised hand is disproportionate compared to the entire body, while the left hand is not even shown. Moreover, the same unbalanced proportions appear in the case of the head when compared to the body. Regarding the character on the second *phalera* (Fig. 4), the artist used the same schematic technique to represent him, without paying attention to anatomical details (the legs seem too short compared to the upper part of the body).

The second artifact is a ceramic fragment discovered at Răcătău (Bacău County) and dated to the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D.¹². The rider on this fragment is depicted from the front, having his horse turned towards left. His clothing cannot be distinguished, as the artist only traced some vertical lines on the whole body of the rider. Nevertheless, it is possible to observe that the rider wore pants (Fig. 5). He is also armed, wearing a Scythian type sword. The anatomical details of both the rider and the horse are disproportioned in this representation, too. Thus, the head of the equestrian character is too big compared to his body. The same observation applies to both his hands, in this case the schematization being clearer (the hands are mere vertical lines, the right hand is even ending abruptly, without a representation of the palm). The same uneven proportions may be observed when comparing the horse and its rider and even when comparing the anatomical structure of the horse – his front legs are too short compared to the back ones. The entire representation is dominated by schematism and unwieldiness.

The last artifact under discussion, placed within the same chronological frame, is the *phalera* discovered at Surcea, Covasna County (dated to the 1st century B.C.)¹³ (Fig. 6). On this artifact, the rider is represented turned to the right, clad in armor, bareheaded and armed with a sword. An eagle is represented in the upper part of the *phalera*, while beneath the horse the artist represented an animal, maybe a wolf (dog?). As in the case of the above mentioned representations, this one is also dominated by disproportion between different parts of the rider (e.g., his head is too big) or between the equestrian and the animals around him (the eagle appears too large compared with the rider and the horse)¹⁴.

Considering the above mentioned items with depictions of riders, representative for the art of the 1st century B.C. – 1st century A.D., we stress that they indicate several common features for this period, namely the geometric elements, such as lines and dots, used for revealing certain features (the body of the personage, the hair, the clothing) or just for filling

¹¹ Glodariu, Moga 1994, 42.

¹² Căpitanu 1976, 66.

¹³ Popescu 1971, 27.

¹⁴ We mention here the helmet discovered at Ciumești, Satu Mare (Zirra 1967), of about the “right” proportion. We should note here that the “Dacian” representations under analysis are of Sarmatian or Celtic character, or at least some of them. They could hardly make a “Dacian” tradition based on the later *Thracian Rider*. The message conveyed by the iconographical elements on the *Thracian Rider* reliefs has Balkan connections.

the empty spaces, technique often used on the items dated in this period¹⁵, the disproportion between different parts of the body, or between the rider and the animal, or even between different animals (as in the case of the *phalera* from Surcea), and as well the schematization technique used for revealing anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements¹⁶. Another fact that relates these representations is the depiction of the riders as warriors, all three of them being armed. Even though the message they convey is still not clear enough, it is possible that they depict a mythical figure, pictured in different hypostases, such as hunting or warfare¹⁷. Therefore, it seems that all these features generate a system of representation in which the relief from Polovragi does not find its place. The rider on the obverse of the Polovragi tablet is depicted in a realistic manner, the entire scene being subordinated to the idea of movement. He is clad in tunic, pants and has a wavering mantle. His head is covered with a Phrygian cap, unlike the riders from the above mentioned items, which are bareheaded. Moreover, the equestrian personage on the bronze relief is represented unarmed. The two personages who flank him, facing him, wear a Roman costume and are bareheaded. Both of them have the right hand raised, as if saluting the rider. Analyzing this scene from the stylistic point of view and comparing it to the above mentioned artifacts dated to the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D., there are several elements that should be taken into consideration. Thus, on the relief from Polovragi, the anatomical features of both human and animal characters are depicted more accurately. Although the piece is unfinished, as it is suggested by the missing *ovae*-frame in the upper and left sides, the artist represented certain elements in detail, such as the horse's mouth and its hoofs, the folds of the rider's mantle or of the flanking personages' clothing. All these features, together with the fact that the flanking personages are dressed in Roman costume, betray a different style compared to the artifacts from Lupu, Răcățiu or Surcea. Nevertheless, admitting these undeniable different stylistic elements which place the bronze relief in a different time (and place?), the identity of the equestrian personage or a possible date for the manufacture of the piece is still a challenge: the rider on the Polovragi tablet has been identified with a Dacian deity, whose iconography has not yet been established, regarded as the prototype of the Danubian Rider¹⁸; on the other hand, he has been considered the oldest representation of the Thracian Rider¹⁹.

The iconography of the so-called Thracian Rider²⁰ (a deity whose origins or main functions still remain unknown for the investigators) depicts a rider, turned to the right (seldom to the left), his horse walking, galloping, or standing still. The representations on these monuments have been classified in three main types²¹: A) the horseman facing a woman, an altar, and a snake-entwined tree, his horse walking or standing still (Fig. 7); B) the horseman galloping and attacking a boar; C) the horseman returning from hunt (Fig. 8).

¹⁵ Marinescu 1986-1987, 104.

¹⁶ Berciu 1969, 187.

¹⁷ Babeş 1977, 347-348.

¹⁸ Țeposu-Marinescu 1983, 81.

¹⁹ Miclea, Florescu 1980, nr.197.

²⁰ The name of this deity is still unknown, thus the denomination "Thracian Rider" refers to its representation and area where most of the monuments appeared, namely more than 2000 reliefs from at least 350 localities in Thrace, its neighbouring territories, and other places characterized by Thracian presence, cf. Dimitrova 2002, 210.

²¹ Kazarow 1938, 36.

Comparing the relief from Polovragi with the monuments of the Thracian Rider, several elements clearly point out that there is no connection between these two representations; the costume is the first element we will discuss. The Polovragi rider is dressed in a tunic, long pants and a wavering mantle. His head is covered with a Phrygian bonnet. Even though the wavering mantle might be a connection element between the Polovragi personage and the Thracian Rider, the element that strongly differentiates them is the fact that the latter appears bareheaded on the monuments. Another element that separates the two discussed reliefs is the direction in which the horse is represented: on the Polovragi tablet, the horse is represented towards left, while on the monuments of the Thracian Rider, the horse is usually depicted towards right. Depending on the type of monuments (A, B, C), there are several iconographical symbols that appear on the monuments of the Thracian Rider: the altar with the entwined-tree serpent, the dog beneath the horse or the woman that faces the Rider. None of these elements are depicted on the relief from Polovragi.

Another hypothesis for the identification of the rider on the discussed bronze tablet has been its association with the prototype of the Danubian Riders representations, namely the single rider type. Regarding this theory, there are several elements that are encountered in both representations (such as the costume of the Rider, or the presence of the acolytes that salute him), but, at the same time, essential iconographical elements that define the representation of the Danubian Riders are missing, namely the presence of the personage below the horses hooves and the presence of the female deity (Fig. 9). Thereby, the elements necessary for the identification of the rider on the Polovragi tablet with the prototype of the Thracian Rider or of the Danubian Riders are missing.

Little attention has been paid to the reverse of the bronze relief, as the entire theoretical discussion revolved around the obverse scene. Nonetheless, the message conveyed by the representation of the *lunula* inscribing a *kantharos* flanked by two peacocks seems to offer a possible answer regarding this enigmatic artifact²².

The model of the *lunula* represented on the reverse of the bronze relief from Polovragi is represented as a pendant, as suggested by the attachment ring from the upper end. The *lunula*-pendant is ordinary from Orient, being usually worn on a necklace as an amulet (*apotropaion*). In the Roman Imperial period, the *lunula*-pendant was commonly worn by women and children, as a charm to ensure them a good healthy life²³.

The *lunula* shape represented on the reverse of the Polovragi relief is a frequent object among early Roman items, discovered in Roman milieu, but not only there²⁴. In order to better understand the evolution of this type of pendants, the necropolis from Târşoru Vechi offers a fair general view.

In the Sarmatian necropolis from Târşoru Vechi, in the grave noted as M.84, a *lunula*-pendant was found, and according to its context of discovery, was dated to the 3rd century A.D.²⁵ (Fig. 10). Unlike the pendant pictured on the Polovragi relief, this one has its endings strongly curved inwards. Furthermore, in the same necropolis, only this time in three graves

²² We are indebted to Al. Barnea, who was the first to suggest that the reverse of the Polovragi tablet could have a Christian key.

²³ Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2003, 25.

²⁴ We were kindly offered this information by dr. Liana Oța, to whom we would like to thank.

²⁵ Diaconu 1965, 28.

ascribed to Sântana de Mureș-Cerneahov culture²⁶, we mention the discovery of three *lunula*-shaped pendants, with a somewhat different design (Fig. 11)²⁷. Thus, the latter three pendants follow a different model, which presents two joining crescents at the interior part of the pendant. Nevertheless, this type of adornment, dated to the 4th century A.D., indicates the existence of two features which are also characteristic for the Polovragi *lunula*, namely the endings which are less inflected, and the design of the attachment ring, which presents several (usually two or three) incised lines. According to the above presented characteristics, we may consider the type of *lunula*-pendant represented on the bronze relief to be situated, from the stylistic point of view, somewhere between the Sarmatic *lunula* pendant (3rd century) and the pendants ascribed to Sântana de Mureș-Cerneahov culture (mid 4th century). Moreover, this dating of the Polovragi *lunula* is also highlighted by the evolution of the *lunulae* type item, as the typology from Fig. 12 clearly suggests²⁸.

Protector against evil forces, the amulet accompanied the deceased in the grave²⁹, as to offer safety throughout the journey in the afterlife. The funerary character of the bronze tablet is emphasized by the fact that it encloses a representation which itself has a funerary meaning, namely the *kantharos* flanked by two peacocks.

The *kantharos* is a cup used to hold wine, possibly for drinking or for ritual use or offerings. This vessel seems to be the attribute of *Dionysos*, the god of growth³⁰, whose ritual implies death and rebirth, and thus the vessel appears on monuments that depict the god or narrate his myth³¹. Moreover, the *kantharos* is often represented on funerary monuments, especially in the banquet scene, symbolizing the libation the deceased make to the gods³². Furthermore, the *kantharos* is the symbol of *aqua vitae*³³, which is why it sometimes appears on monuments substituted by the Tree of life.

The peacock symbolizes resurrection and the cycle of the seasons³⁴, being associated with supreme rulers and the heavenly king due to its dazzling colors. Pliny mentions that the peacock loses its feather in winter, only to regain them in spring³⁵, and this is why, by its colorful tail, he represents the entire year. It is also the attribute of goddess *Iunona*, who embodies the apotheosis of the empresses³⁶, just like the eagle accompanies the emperor. Both birds are associated with imperial triumph³⁷. It also stands as the symbol of renewal,

²⁶ Diaconu 1965, 96.

²⁷ Of the three *lunulae*, we refer only to the one that was best preserved. Nevertheless, we mention that they are similar from the stylistic point of view.

²⁸ We considered only *lunula* type objects dated between the 2nd-6th centuries A.D., which are relevant for this discussion.

²⁹ We also mention the discovery of *lunula*-pendant in a grave dated at the end of the 3rd century A.D., from the northern necropolis of Romula, investigated in 2006. The grave belongs to a 10-12 year old girl; cf. CAA 2006, M. Negru.

³⁰ Storey, Allan 2005, 27.

³¹ Covacef 2005-2006, 163-164.

³² Hooper 1961, 19-26.

³³ Florescu, Dacicoviciu, Rosu 1980, s.v. *cantharos*.

³⁴ Vertemont 2000, s.v. Păun.

³⁵ Pliniu 10.22.

³⁶ Turcan 2002.

³⁷ Herrin 2006, 1.

resurrection and immortality³⁸. Furthermore, the peacock adorned ancient funerary monuments, suggesting the gardens of paradise in which the dead could rest³⁹.

The theme of the *kantharos* flanked by two peacocks is frequent on funerary monuments, such as the *aedicula* discovered at Micia⁴⁰, or the fronton of a funerary monument, part of Aiud Museum's collection, where the birds, represented on the hands of the vessel, turn their beaks to the inside of the bowl⁴¹. Furthermore, the same representation appears on the upper part of a funerary *stela* from the collection of Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa Archaeological Museum⁴², but also on a series of small mirrors, discovered at *Sucidava*, probably bearing a ritual character, too⁴³ (Fig. 13 and Fig. 13b with detail).

The presence of the peacocks together with the *kantharos* or the palm tree (as well the symbol of the Tree of Life) also appears on early Christian monuments, such as a funerary *stela* from Trier, dated to the end of the 4th century A.D.⁴⁴ (Fig. 14), or on the painted walls of the grave from *Tomis*⁴⁵. Likewise, this theme is present on later Christian monuments, as the *stela* from the 6th century A.D., for Rignedrudis⁴⁶ (Fig. 15), where the *kantharos* was replaced by the palm tree flanked by two peacocks, the entire scene being framed by a *lunula*⁴⁷. This representation on a funerary monument is illustrative for the meaning of the entire scene of the *lunula* inscribing a *kantharos* (palm tree) flanked by peacocks – it conveys the message of resurrection and eternal life.

A close analogy for the peacocks facing a *kantharos* is to be found in a tomb from Durostorum. If the proposed chronology covers all the 4th century and the monument is considered to be one of the latest products “of the classical period of the pagan art”⁴⁸, the monument seems closely related to the painted tomb from *Tomis*, and should be dated the same, before the end of Licinius' rule.

In order to better understand the origin and chronology of the bronze relief from Polovragi, all the above mentioned elements must be taken into consideration. The item's discovery context provides precarious details, therefore the only means to resolve the riddle of the Polovragi bronze tablet remains the iconographical investigation. From the stylistic point of view, the riding personage represented on the obverse of the relief does not fit among the items manufactured during the 2nd century B.C.-1st century A.D, which use more geometrical motives and pay less attention to proportion and details, unlike the style of the Polovragi relief, which shows a more accurate style, with ampler forms and a special attention for details. The two

³⁸ Miron 2008, 289.

³⁹ Herrin 2006, 1.

⁴⁰ Floca 1968, 118.

⁴¹ Floca 1968, 118.

⁴² Floca 1967, 56.

⁴³ Tudor 1968, 112-115; Barnea 1979, 262.

⁴⁴ Wiczorek *et alii* 1997, 864.

⁴⁵ Lungu 2000, 136-139 with figs. 14-17; Miron 2008, 288. The chronology proposed by Miron (the beginning of the 4th century), and the „crypto-Christian” attribute for the monument are both important.

⁴⁶ Wiczorek *et alii* 1997, 740.

⁴⁷ We reproduced a drawing after the original artefact, because the quality of the original image was rather poor.

⁴⁸ Atanasov 2007, 451, adding “...and preparing ideologically and intellectually the stylistics and the expressions of the official early Christian art of panting”; for the peacocks, see also fig. 5.

personages that flank the rider on the bronze artifact are clad in Roman costume, a *pallium*, which is a significant chronological detail, since this kind of aperture is not present on any other Geto-Dacian items. This type of costume appears on Roman funerary monuments from Tomis, Apulum, Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa and Micia⁴⁹, thus suggesting the funerary character of the entire relief. Furthermore, the theme of the hero depicted on the obverse of the relief is a frequent motive represented on both funerary and votive monuments. The fact that the equestrian personage was illustrated without any significant attribute, so that we couldn't identify him with any deity, recommends a late date for the piece's manufacturing, the scene being thus already familiar, and, therefore, other elements for its identification being unnecessary.

In this context, the reverse of the relief represents the key of the artifact. Taken one by one, each of the elements represented on this side have a funerary character, being present on both pagan and early Christian monuments. The crypto-Christian character of this tablet is emphasized by the fact that the obverse represents a thematic degeneration of a cult which probably altered its meaning in the era, while the reverse side, the hidden one, pictures symbols familiar to pagan antiquity, but with a remarkable recurrence in the early Christian milieu, as a revalorization of the idea of resurrection, of eternal life. Their presence on the hidden side of the relief reveals a duplicity which would make sense only several decades before the year 324⁵⁰, when the persecutions were still intensely pursued. Sometime after that moment, the relief reached northward Danube, where it could convey the original message, since the persecutions had only just started.

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⁴⁹ Florescu, Daicovicu, Roșu 1980, s.v. *pallium*

⁵⁰ Zugravu 1996, 167.

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Fig. 1. The obverse of the Polovragi relief

Fig. 2. The reverse of the Polovragi Tablet





Fig. 3. *Phalera* from Lupu



Fig. 4. *Phalera* from Lupu



Fig. 5. Ceramic fragment from Răcătău



Fig. 6. *Phalera* from Surcea



Fig. 7. Relief of the Thracian Rider, Type A, Odessos



Fig. 8. Relief of the Thracian Rider, Type C, Unknown place of discovery



Fig. 9. Relief of the Danubian Riders, Almus

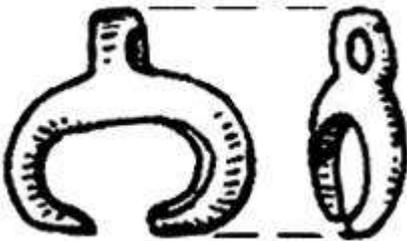


Fig. 10. Lunula discovered in the Sarmatic grave, Târgșoru Vechi

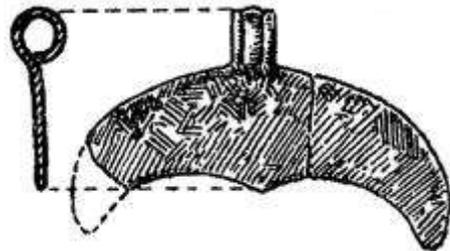
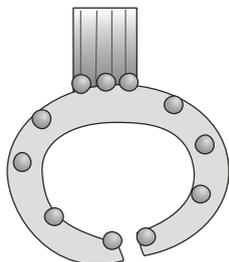
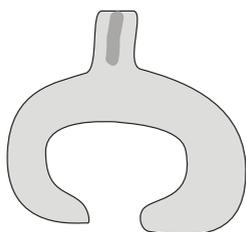


Fig. 11. Lunula ascribed to Sântana de Mureș-Cerneahov culture, Târgșoru Vechi



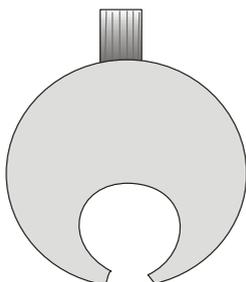
1
II c.

Ruseva 1991, cat.124, 2nd
century A.D.



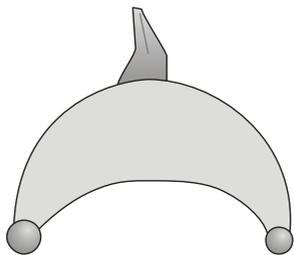
2
III c.

Diaconu 1965, 28, 3rd century A.D.



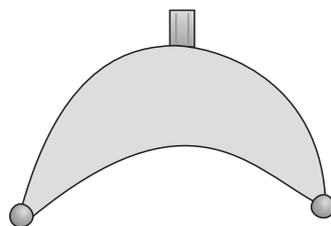
3
III c.

Ruseva 1991, cat.126, 3rd century
A.D.



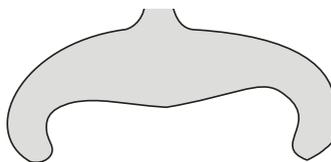
4
Limit
III-IV c.

www.ancienttouch.com, 3rd
century A.D.



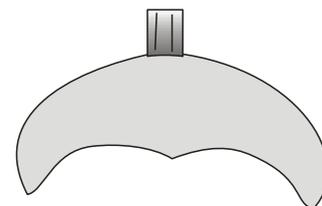
5
Limit
III-IV c.

Marinescu 1977, 32, 3rd-4th century
A.D.



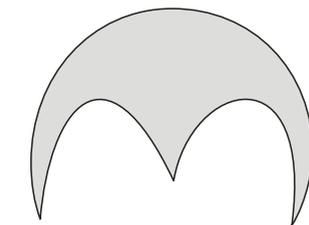
6
IV c.

Protase 1976, 67, 4th century A.D.



7
IV c.

Diaconu 1965, 96, 4th century A.D.



8
VI c.

Wieczorek *et alli* 1997, 740, 6^h
century A.D.

Fig. 12. The typology of the *lunula* type objects



Fig. 13. Lead mirror discovered at *Sucidava*, and detail



Fig. 14. Funerary *stela* for Arcadius, discovered at Trier

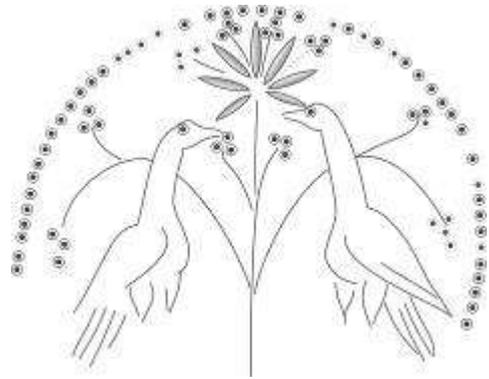


Fig. 15. Detail draw from the funerary *stela*, for Rignedrudis, dated in the 6th century A.D., representing the *lunula* inscribing the palm tree flanked by two peacocks