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Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan,
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Edited by

Philip Freeman, Julian Bennett,
Zbigniew T. Fiema and Birgitta Hoffmann

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Decorated lead sarcophagi in Moesia Superior

Snežana Golubović

Recent archaeological excavations conducted in the province of Moesia Superior are yielding large amounts of information for a preciser picture of burial practices there in Roman times. Most of the information is coming from the necropolis of Viminacium. In the course of 20 years of systematic research, more than 13,000 graves have been excavated. Compared with other burial modes in Moesia Superior, the lead funerary sarcophagi are proportionally rare. A few more lead sarcophagi, but still chance finds, are known from the rest of Moesia Superior. However, at this stage of research it is still impossible to find out if this form of funeral was a privilege limited to certain social classes. Besides extremely richly decorated examples found in memorial buildings, there are a lot of sarcophagi without any decoration that were placed in simple pits. In the majority of cases these contain the remains of children.

The central Balkans were abundant with supplies of lead, so the raw material was easy obtainable. It is interesting that decorated lead sarcophagi are found in the west principally in Britain where supplies of lead were plentiful, in Gaul and in Roman Germany, and, above all, in the east, in Syria and Palestine, where the lead must have been imported. However, this form of art flourished prolifically in Syria and Palestine than elsewhere in the Roman world. The presence of orientals at Viminacium is confirmed by the discovery of three inscriptions there.

A lead ossuary found at Slatina and samples from Smederevo and Nis have evident Christian features (as christograms) and are dated from the late C3rd to the late C4th. Although the greatest number of lead sarcophagi, especially ornamented ones, derive from Viminacium, obvious Christian characteristics are not present at those found during long-term systematic excavations there. However, it is well-known from other sources that Viminacium was a bishop's residence in the C4th. The identity of two of Viminacium's bishops, Amantinus and Cyriacus, has been confirmed. The reason for such a situation could be that at Viminacium the solar theology, expressed through Mithraism, had a priority unlike in other centres like Singidunum and Nais where the supreme god Jupiter was a dominant one.

As in the eastern areas, the lead sarcophagi are almost exclusively rectangular with the ends of equal length with the ornamentation, on a small scale and very repetitive which includes geometrical and linear ornaments. All the motifs employed for the decoration of the lead sarcophagi have in fact a place in the standard iconographic repertory of Roman funerary art, as for instance, Medusa-heads. There are also numerous rosettes, garlands, leaf-sprays and symbols of the fruitful afterlife.

Most of the applied ornaments on lead sarcophagi are analogous to those from Syria. The territory of Viminacium, inhabited by numerous veterans and with extraordinary traffic communications for trade between the east and west, represented an ideal ground for the merchants and craftsmen - Syrians, Greeks and Italians who represented the main initiators and innovators of various crafts.

Archaeological excavations and protection work in the territory of Moesia Superior has revealed a number of cemeteries of the Roman period as the base for establishing a typology of burial practices (Jovanović 1984: 10). Compared to other burial rites, those in lead sarcophagi are proportionally rare. The most numerous are the coffins found in the necropolis of Viminacium which has been systematically explored for more than 20 years. From other parts of Moesia Superior there are a few lead coffins found mostly during rescue excavations. Besides very rich decorated ones found in tombs, there are many lead coffins without any decoration, put in a simple grave pit. In most the cases, children were buried children in lead sarcophagi.

Historical sources refer to lead mines and the trade in antiquity. In the Roman period lead was transported all over the ancient world (Boulakia 1972: 143). The mines in Britain had been worked before the Roman conquest. Spanish mines too had been worked for a very long time. Its exceptionally low melting point (327⁰ C) made possible the extraction of lead from its ore by a rather simple metallurgical operation which enabled the wide-spread use of the metal (Boulakia 1972: 139).

Lead served for manufacturing coffins in various parts of the Roman empire mainly from the mid-C2nd to the early C4th AD. Workshops or, perhaps itinerant artisans, served a well-to-do middle class that could afford more than simple wooden coffins, and yet did not aspire to

sarcophagi of local stone or imported marble. It is interesting that decorated lead sarcophagi are found in the west principally in Britain where supplies of lead were plentiful, in Gaul and in Roman Germany, but above all, in the east, in Syria and Palestine, where the lead must have been imported. However, this form of art became the most valued in Syria and Palestine than anywhere else in the Roman world. The use of this particular funeral mode could be explained by the considerable deposits of lead in Asia Minor or, perhaps, by the special tendency for using the metal by the Near Eastern population (Bertin 1974: 44).

The territory of central Balkan had abundant lead supplies, so the raw material was easy obtainable. Continuous archaeological research has obtained much data about early mining in the region of Moesia Superior. During excavations at Municipium DD near the village of Sočanica (Fig. 1) a few metal objects have been found on the periphery of antique settlement. Up until 1920, two or three rectangular structures considered as buildings for melting ore, cut in to caves, were discernable. O. Davies, having found traces of water channels, pointed to structures being involved in the smelting of lead ore. Simultaneously, he recognized the remains of a melting kiln that was built, according to him, of stone and plastered with clay (Čerškov 1970: 55). The abundance of and easily obtained lead supplies is obvious from the detailed metal-genetic map made for the so-called Ridensko-Krepoljinska

district in which was founded the camp and town of Viminacium.

There is general opinion that lead sarcophagi fabricated in the west came under a Syrian influence. They are not found only in Europe but in North Africa too, especially regions rich with lead ores. Recent archaeological excavations combined with historical sources (Bertin 1974: 44) emphasise the extent internments in lead coffins all over the Roman empire. However to claim that all decoration applied to them was as a result of Near Eastern influences is too general.

Beograd (*Singidunum*) (Fig. 1/1)

In Singidunum exploration has found five lead coffins at different locations throughout the city. Any attempt at undertaking systematic archaeological excavations is impossible as we are dealing with a Roman cemetery in the territory of modern Belgrade-city. However, it can be expected that the discovery of new examples of lead coffins from different sites in town will be unavoidable as a consequence of future building work. (Kondić 1960: 29; Todorović, Kondić, & Birtašević 1956: 80; Saria 1924-1925: 160)

Slatina (Fig. 1/2)

Though it is not precisely a lead sarcophagus, the very interesting find of a lead urn (Fig. 2) in the village Slatina on the slopes of the Kosmaj mountain, has to be emphasized for further analyses (Pop-Lazić, Jovanović, & Mrkobrad 1992: 135). Half of an already completed lead sarcophagus was used to manufacture the urn. Its dimensions are remarkable (diameter 0.6m and height 0.45m). This implies the possibility of it having been used as a ossuary with two or three urns. The urn is ornamented with linear, geometrical decorations. On its narrower side, framed by the vertical zones of crosshatched cast decoration, are two intersecting cable lines at the intersection of which is a star with arrows at the ends. On the other side is a radial ornament combined with floral details and cable lines (Pop-Lazić, Jovanović & Mrkobrad 1992: 136).

The influence of the eastern cultural region is indirectly suggested by the radial-solar motifs and rosettes connected with the cult of Jupiter Heliopolitanus. However, in this case the part of the coffin used as an ossuary contained the remains of a cremated person; this is contrary to oriental burial rites which tended to practice inhumation. Therefore, it is considered that persons buried in this sacrificial object originated, ethnically, from Dalmatia. This is particularly so as the inhabitants of this province are epigraphically confirmed in the territory of mountain Kosmaj (Pop-Lazić, Jovanović & Mrkobrad: 1992: 138). The decoration, as applied on the example from Slatina, is quite similar to those on a lead tank from Oxborough which could be indicative of the widespread use of ornamental patterns at this time (Frere, Hassall & Tomlin

1986: 403, Pl. xxixA).

Smederevo (*Vincea*) (Fig. 1/3)

Of considerable importance is the accidental discovery of a grave with an encased lead sarcophagus at the site of Čirilovac (Fig. 3; Cunjak & Marković-Nikolić 1997: 39). The lid is very richly decorated. At the central part is a deltoid space framing a cross. The deltoid is composed into the hasta of the Christ monogram in relief made by using the motif of fir tree branches and covering the entire surface. The iconographic scheme is enriched by three Dioynius masks - two at the upper part of the lid and one at the central part. In addition, on the lid was incised an inscription relating to the person buried in the coffin. The inscription was incised along the edge and is considerably damaged, but it is possible to reconstruct it: Aureli(ac) S(alleliae) F(iliae), C(arissimac). After epigraphic and anthropologic analysis we can say that the burial was that of a 14 year old girl from high-birth who suddenly died and was buried in a sarcophagus originally intended for an adult (Cunjak & Marković-Nikolić 1997: 40).

Considering all iconographical analysis of the decoration and the inventory of the grave (fragmented golden necklace, pins with head in the shape of cantharos and silver ring) it could be concluded that the coffin was made at the end of the C3rd or in the first decades of the C4th. Also, the obvious Christian symbol proves the significance of Christianity at this territory (Cunjak & Marković-Nikolić 1997: 43).

Niš (*Naissus*) (Fig. 1/4)

During archaeological research in antique Naissus (Petrović 1976: 86, 87), a Christian sarcophagus was found during rescue excavations in the late antique cemetery associated with a basilica and martyrium which are dated to the C5th. This early Christian sarcophagus, now in the Museum of Niš, was found in the southern part of the basilica's narthex. On the lid the cross, with three busts, is modelled at the ends of a longer shank, while only one figure in a long garment is presented on the shorter shanks. The shorter sides of the coffin bears three busts (Fig. 4). By the comparison with the ingot found at Feldioara this coffin is dated to the later half of the C4th, with the three busts representing Gratian I, Valentinian II and Theodosius I (Nikolajević 1989: 2447; Buschhausen & Buschhausen 1991: 52).

The Roman empire created exploitation centres in the southern regions of Moesia Superior which were particularly rich in lead ore. One such centre was established in the Ibar region, at the confluence of the Sočanica River into Ibar – Municipium DD (Čerškov 1970, 80). At the end of the C19th the river exposed a group of 50 sarcophagi (Fig. 1/5). The original records suggest that all of them were sealed with lead, suggesting that there were no traces of robbery. Therefore they must have contained well preserved skeletons and inventories of

grave goods. Unfortunately, not one of those sarcophagi survives today. There is one lead sarcophagus of obscure origin in the National Museum of Belgrade. It has been said that it could be from the site of Ulpiana. (dimensions: length 1.9m, width 0.57m, height 0.5m). Only the longer lateral sides are decorated with ornamentation, with so called "des baguettes de perles et de pirouettes". This motif is very common, not only on Near Eastern sarcophagi but also in the western parts of the Roman empire. In fact, the variations of the motif are so numerous that researchers from France consider it is possible to distinguish different workshops in Gallia (Santrot & Frugier 1982: 285). The wide circulation of the motif is confirmed also by the fragments of lead coffin from the Roman cemetery at Brigantium (Konrad 1997: 31).

Kostolac (Viminacium) (Fig. 1/6)

The largest collection of data has been obtained from the cemetery at Viminacium following the systematic archaeological excavation of 13,000 graves. In the course of 500 years, the cemetery served the military camp and *canabae*, encompassing a chronological span between C1st and C4th (Jovanović 1985: 13-18). All the lead coffins were found in the locality Pećine (Fig. 5). It has been during the last 20 years of excavation that most of the lead coffin burials have come to light. From 13 excavated, 7 are ornamented.

Grave 228 (Fig. 6, 7): The coffin was found at a depth of 1m. Unfortunately, the coffin is lost and the measurements are from the documentation: length 1.15m, width 0.33m, height 0.24m. The orientation of the grave pit in which the coffin was laid was north-south. The lid was originally fastened to the coffin by the usual lead tongues at the end of the coffin, passing through a slit in the lid and folded over. The long sides and the base were fashioned from a single sheet of lead. The lid was deformed in its central part under the soil pressure. The ornamentation consisted of intersecting cable lines, forming two joined triangles in the middle of the lid. The well preserved skeleton of a child, together with fragments of linen material and leather shoes were found in this coffin.

Grave 339 (Fig. 8, 9): The coffin was found at a depth of 1.3m. The length of its lid was 0.8m, width 0.28m. The length of the coffin was 0.8m, 0.24m wide and 0.2m high. The grave orientation was west-east. The lid was originally fastened to the coffin by the usual lead tongues at the end of the coffin, passing through a slit in the lid and folded over. The long sides and the base were fashioned from a single sheet of lead. The lid is a little deformed in its central part. The bottom of the coffin is in quite bad repair. Also, holes made with a metal stick - the work of a treasure hunter - are visible on the lid. The pattern consists of intersecting cables dividing the entire surface, including the lid, into triangles and lozenges. The poorly preserved skeleton of a child about 12 months old was found in the coffin. Discernible were traces of bronze on the facial bones which point to a bronze coin put in the mouth

following the usual custom (Zotović 2000: 11). The inventory of grave goods consists of two golden earrings, fragments of a paste pearl and a bronze coin which dated this inhumation to the end of the C2nd or first half of the C3rd (Marcus Aurelius or Septimius Severus).

Grave 349 (Fig. 10, 11): The coffin was found at a depth of 1.25m. The length of the lid was 1.5m, its width 0.4m and its height 0.07m. The length of the coffin was 1.45m, 0.35m wide and 0.25m high. The grave was orientated east-west. The lid, was originally fastened to the coffin by the usual lead tongues at the end of the coffin, passing through a slit in the lid and folded over. The long sides and the base were fashioned from a single sheet of lead. The pattern consists of intersecting cables dividing the entire surface of the lid, into triangles, rectangles and trapeziums. The well preserved skeleton of a child about 5 years old was found in this coffin. The usual bronze coin put into child's mouth could be Constans II (337-361) or Valentinian I (364-371) and so dates this inhumation to the mid-C4th. The other goods consisted of three bone pins, bone sawing pins, two golden earrings, an unidentified wooden object and a bone gambling cube.

Grave 1221 (Fig. 12): In the 1982 season, an exceptionally damaged lid of a lead sarcophagus was found. It occurred during construction work of the TE Drmno thermo-energy plant. The length of the coffin was 1.5m, by 0.38m by 0.29m. The grave orientation was north-west - south-east. Horizontally laid ceramic tiles covered the coffin. The cover was destroyed during the construction of the plant. Under the coffin, the floor consisted of six horizontally laid bricks. The remains of the deceased were not found. The grave was plundered when the lid was broken. Still the decoration is quite remarkable. The upper compartment contains a representation of Mars Ultor standing to the right. The figure of Mars is in the frame in the four corners of the upper compartments. His right arm is raised. The spear usually held by this arm is missing. In the space between the emblems is a rosette while the sides and lid are ornamented with angels in relief. A representation of Mars Ultor is well-known from a lead sarcophagus from Jerusalem (Rahmani 1988a: 49). Representations of Mars like these are frequently encountered, for instance, on gems and on C2nd and C3rd coins, from both the Roman mint and the city mints in Palestine, and from early C3rd altars like Altar of Faustianus found at Carnuntum dated to 219 (Obermayr 1967: 197-198), helmets (Garbsch 1978: 73) and other objects connected with the Roman army. In the case of the Viminacium sarcophagus, the figures of Mars in the corners are made with wooden stamps pressed to form the decoration.

Grave 3337: During the 1983 campaign, another lead sarcophagus was found during construction work and by that work had become quite damaged. The length of the lid was 1.6m by 0.7m by 0.08m. The coffin is 1.85m x 0.6m x 0.35m. The grave orientation was north-west - south-east. The northern, narrower, side of the lid and coffin was destroyed. The sides and base were fashioned from a single

sheet of lead. The pattern consists of intersecting cables dividing the entire surface of the lid into rhomboids. The lid was broken and deformed in its central part under the soil pressure. The southern end was flanked by one brick and at the northern side by two bricks. The remains of three deceased people were found. One was a mature person with a fragmented skull, and an outstretched right arm. The left arm was twisted at the elbow and the legs crossed at the ankles (the length of the skeleton was 1.55m). Another person was younger, again with a fragmented skull and the rest of the body badly preserved (length – 0.85m). The bones of a third deceased person was laid on its back, (length – 0.85m), and was that of a young person.

Grave 3640: During the 1984 campaign, a lead sarcophagus was found during building work that damaged it. The length of the coffin is 0.77m, by 0.3m wide and 0.2m high. The thickness of the lead was 0.4cms. The grave orientation was north-west - south-east. Inside the coffin were found the dislocated bones of a child. The lateral side of the coffin was ornamented with two diagonal cable lines intersected by a vertical one.

Tomb (Grave 3971 - D): During archaeological excavation in 1985, a tomb with a stone sarcophagus were found (Fig. 5/10). Five burials were recorded. The tomb has been conserved and is now on display (Fig. 13). The entrance into the tomb was on the west side. The tomb was rectangular, vaulted, built of bricks and with walls damage during grave robbing. The walls were painted with red, black, blue and green ochre applied in geometrical and floral motifs. The tomb is west-east oriented. Of the five burials, three were in stone sarcophagi, one in the lead one and the last one placed into a simple pit dug into the soil.

G-3971 Grave D: Length of coffin 1.55m, width 0.4m and height 0.35m. This lead sarcophagus was found placed into a masonry burial chamber and containing an exceptional relief on its lid (Fig. 14). The relief is divided into three spaces by the ornamentation (geometrical pattern - lemniskata), applied with a stamp (Fig. 15). Beyond these decorative elements are animal heads - most probably bears. On the edges is a well-known motif consisting of angles, often seen as decoration on other sarcophagi from Viminacium. The central zone is decorated with eight-shanked star with arrows at the ends of the shanks. Two terminated zones are decorated with Medusa heads framed with angels in relief. As in a previous example, the lid was badly damaged during the robbery. The sides of the coffin are also decorated with the same ornamentation, comprising a complicated geometrical motif (lemniskata), Medusa heads and bear heads. Medusa heads are a very common motif not only on lead sarcophagi but for stone-graves too, as on a cavalry stela at Norique for *legio VIII Augusta* (Cumont 1966: 228). Similar masks representing satyrs or gorgons are common on lead coffins. Medusa masks especially are considered to be a motif coming from the Hellenistic period (Mouterde 1929: 248). With respect to the iconographic scheme, the Medusa head applied to

the sarcophagi from Viminacium had considered apotropaic purposes (Cumont 1966: 339). The multi-shanked star with arrows at the end of shanks is also a rather common ornament found on lead sarcophagi at various parts of Roman empire – in the Gauls, Dalmatia and Pannonia (Cochet 1982: 140; Duval, Jeremić & Marin 2000: 498). The precise significance of this symbol is still obscure, so it is not possible to connect it with the particular religious appertenance of the deceased (Cochet 1978: 228). In the western part of the coffin fragmented and dislocated bones were found. The deceased had been dressed in a linen dress made of purple brocade shot with golden threads of which remains were still visible after the unearthing of the coffin. This confirms that it was a burial of a person from high-class society. Related to the position of the graves and tomb, a certain order of burials and the building of the tomb could be established. In the first instance there was a lead sarcophagus, then two stone sarcophagi, after which followed the building and flooring of the tomb, then the burial of the fourth stone sarcophagus and finally, a burial placed in a simple grave pit.

Chance find: Particularly interesting is a piece of lead coffin given to the National Museum at Požarevac as a gift (Fig. 16, 17). The piece was found at the site of Selište – in the territory of Viminacium. Geometrical ornaments and figural images decorate the fragment - motifs of Europa and the bull and the Three Graces. Europe are common on gravestones (Klemenc 1961: 41, Pl. 35). As a specific sepulchral motif, the famous group of the Three Graces, may symbolize, just like the Muses in funerary contexts, culture and the arts as the road to immortality. This motif has been also found on a few marble pieces (Toynbee 1982: 277). The same motif is presented on the side of a lead coffin in the Museum at Beirut (Chebab 1935: 52, Pl. 27). However, it is also interesting that the Three Graces were applied as a decorative element on a bronze mirror found in one of the Viminacium cemeteries Više Grobalja (Spasić 2000).

The sarcophagus itself symbolizes, just as the urn, the house of the deceased - the temple. From both scenes, the Graces and Europa, applied on the piece from Viminacium, the iconography is apparent. The architectural background confirms such a comprehension (Froning 1990: 530). Among the motifs which include the symbols of eternity from the iconography of the Bacchus cult or the Psyche myth, are also those known as apotropaic as it is Gorgona, sphynx or lion rather than mythological motifs as Minerva or Victoria and, at the end, geometrical or floral ornamentation that have a certain significance in the subordination of the context (Bertin 1974: 48).

Most of the Viminacium coffins bear designs characteristic of Jerusalem workshops - diagonally crossed cable lines forming lozenges and triangles (Rahmani 1988a: 47). However there is one rare but nearer exemplar, found at the necropolis of ancient Scupi. The sides and upper were protected with stone slabs. The lid is richly decorated with

a geometrical motif that is often employed on sarcophagi at Viminacium. What is very interesting is that inside the coffin were found the remains of a cremation together with a luxurious inventory: confirmation of a deceased person of high social status (Korakevik 1977: 165). The division of the lid surface into five rectangular fields is typical of coffins in southern France (Goudineau 1979: 554).

As is well known, decorated marble and stone sarcophagi were meant to be admired and meditated on by the passer-by. Many of them bear inscriptions that were intended to be read. Conversely, decorated lead sarcophagi very rare carry texts. One exception is an example from Smederevo with an additional incised text. Moreover, many of them were hidden away from sight - as the examples from Viminacium demonstrate - encased in an outer coffin made of bricks. In other parts of the Roman empire they were lowered into rock-cut cavities into the floors of tombs and covered over with slabs of stone as in the case of burial at Syria and Palestine (Rahmani 1976: 77-78) or concealed beneath the earthen mound of a tumulus (Toynbee 1982: 275).

A considerable number of Viminacium's inhabitants were veterans of *legio VII Claudia* with their families. Colonists from Italy and other Roman provinces made the majority, at least, among those rich members of society who could afford gravestones. Colonists from Syria too must have made a considerable community at Viminacium. Until now, epigraphically there are confirmed just three persons from Komagena, from the district of Doliha (the villages Hairomut, Sige, Jadanata) (Mirković 1968: 69; Mirković 1986: 59, 175, 176). Therefore, parallel cremation and inhumations within the large civil and military centres such as Viminacium may be explained by the presence of orientals, who, on their part, and according to their proto-Christian beliefs, had never accepted the Roman custom of cremation. Most of the applied ornaments on the lead sarcophagi are analogues to those of Syrian examples. The territory of Viminacium, inhabited by numerous veterans and with extraordinary traffic communications for trade transit between the east and west, presented an ideal ground for merchants and craftsmen - Syrians, Greeks and Italians who represented the main initiators and beginners of various crafts.

Until now archaeologically it was thought that lead was used for manufacturing coffins in various parts of Roman empire, from a period from the mid-C2nd to the early C4th. The great majority came from the east where the main centres for their production were Tyre, Sidon and Beirut on the Lebanese coast, and Ascalon, Caesarea and Jerusalem in modern Israel (Rahmani 1987: 145-147). However, in the past few years the number of excavated lead coffins in the western parts has increased. This has made possible a more comprehensive understanding of the use of lead sarcophagi.

Essentially all the motifs employed for the decoration of lead sarcophagi, both in the east and west and including

those found in the territory of Moesia Superior, have in fact, a place in the standard iconographic repertoire of Roman period funerary art. Although there are many analogies, particularly with sarcophagi from Syria and since the orientals are epigraphically confirmed, the patterns and decorative motifs used for lead coffins at Viminacium are more likely the product of local artisans. They could comprise some imported patterns as the expression of a widely accepted fashion. Chronologically, lead coffins cover the span from the late C2nd to the late C4th without the usual symbols to point at Christianity, except the one allegedly found in the territory of Viminacium. It was recorded by N. Vulić as a chance find, but without recording the precise place of discovery. Each of the narrower sides was decorated with a vertical branch, while the lateral sides figure three crosses each. Unfortunately, the coffin does not survive today and the description is known only from literature. The grave could be dated from C4th to the C6th (Vulić 1909: 133; Zotović 1995: 343).

The percentage of burials in lead coffins is proportionally low at Viminacium necropolis which confirms the special status of the persons interred in them. At the necropolis of Tournai, sarcophagi decorated with scenes from the Dionysius' cult and one more found earlier, made up only 1% of all excavated graves. (Brulet 1996: 304).

There are different explanations of the reasons for decorating coffins at all, for the choice of the elements of decoration and their possible significance of eventual beneficial influence on the deceased. Even when observing most modest lead coffins, it could be maintained that quite common ornaments should be understood as symbols. The application of deity representations, their symbols or partial Dionysiac scenes had the main assignment to protect deceased from evil. Quite simple motif, very often at the sarcophagi in Moesia Superior, such as cables applied all around the coffin, might have been intended to protect the deceased. It had to be designated that the period when the lead coffins were most in use belongs to one of decline in the stature of the pagan gods and belief in their power. Also, the artisan often applied ready-made patterns. It is likely that artisans collected motifs in their own pattern-books (application of patterns culled from metal work, *sigillata* ware, lamps, gems, sarcophagi and architectural decoration), choosing those which they found suitable to a funerary context. Accordingly, they would often change, add or alter the motifs while the clients, choosing ready-made coffins or desirable motifs from the pattern-book, would be inspired by common religious and vague superstitious notions frequent in their society. The same ornamental panel containing a vine scroll with bunches of grapes alternating vine leaves from the Christian lead coffin from Caesarea, was applied to non-Christian lead coffins. It is approval of the different clients order to the same artisan (Rahmani 1988b: 248) as well as not to disregard the wish to impress family and friends at the burial ceremony when the sarcophagus was laid open for a while. Thus enhanced their social standing in the

community. The other assumption is that rich decoration, ornamental motifs on sides or lids of lead sarcophagi, have been designed only and strictly to please the dead, whose souls, while located in paradise, were yet believed to inhabit, in some sense, or at least to visit from time to time, the places where their bodies reposed (Toynbee 1982: 275). There has to be a complement very strong and universal psychological impulses expended for the benefit of the dead, originating from a complex of feelings of guilt, love and fear concerning the deceased, just as from vague ideas that such prodigal might in certain way endow joy, consolation and safety to the deceased. Beyond that, much of the decoration might have been used or chosen without too much reflection, predominantly because it pleased the eye (Rahmani 1987: 146). Only with the christogram we have the symbol of values expressed in contemporary Christian writing, intended to protect from all evil, to assure help and to express faith.

Lead osuaria found at Slatina and coffins from Smederevo and Niš have obvious Christian symbols (eg. monograms) and are dated to the end of the C3rd to the end of the C4th. Although those from Viminacium derived the most of lead coffins, especially decorated coffins, there are no Christians symbols on them. All the specimens cover the chronological span from the mid-C2nd to the mid-C4th. However, it is well-known from historical sources that Viminacium was a bishop's residence in the C4th. Two of Viminacium's bishops, Amantinus and Cyriacus, have been confirmed (Mirković 1968: 72). The reasons for such a situation could be explained by the fact that in Viminacium, the solar theology, expressed through Mithraism, had a priority unlike in other centres such as Singidunum and Nais where the supreme god Jupiter was the dominant deity. Mithraism, supported by the state, was a strong bulwark in the struggle against Christianity for a long time (Zotović 1995: 346).

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Fig. 1. 1-6 Sites with lead sarcophagi in the territory of Moesia Superior (after M. Mirković, *Istorija srpskog naroda I* (1981):73.



Fig. 2. Lead ossuary from Slatina (after Pop-Lazić, Jovanović & Mrkobrad (1992): 137, fig. 2.

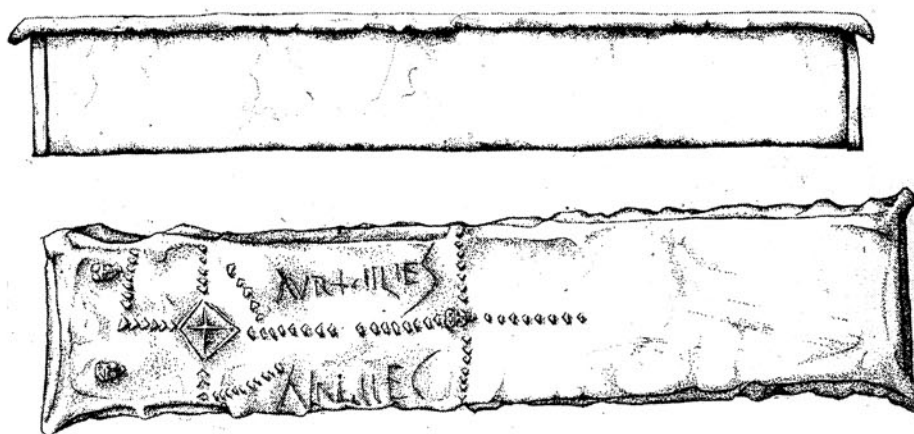


Fig. 3. Lead sarcophagus from Smederevo.

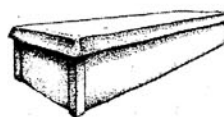


Fig. 4 The busts at the shorter side of a lead coffin from Naissus.

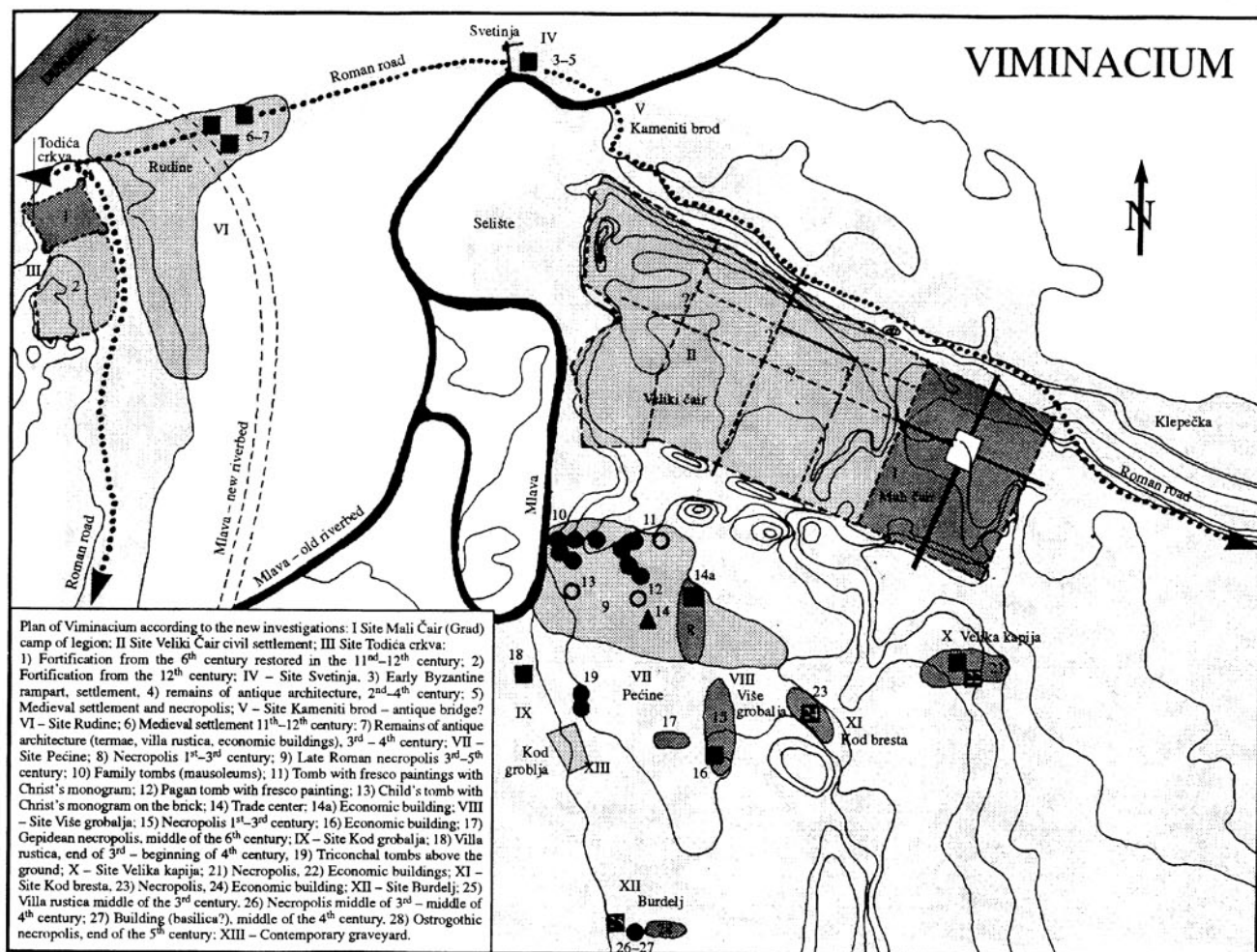


Fig. 5. Plan of Viminacium (after G. Milošević, New data on the topography of Viminacium. In *Acta of a conference Roman and Late Roman City* (Veliko Trnovo, July 2000): fig. 4 (in press).

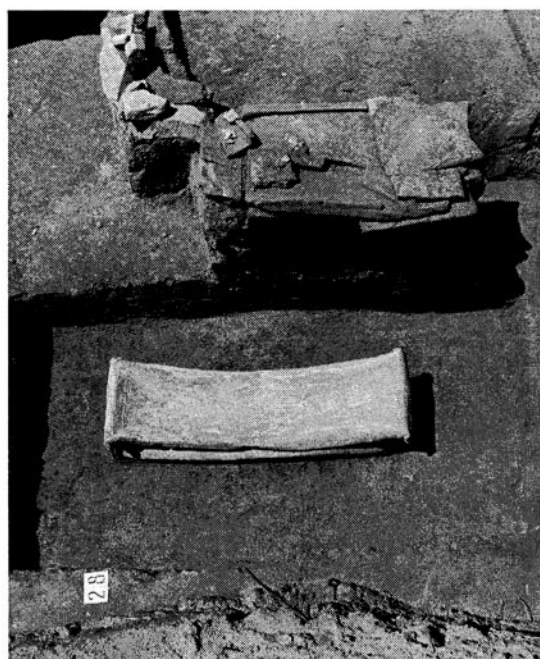


Fig. 6. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 228).



Fig. 7. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 228).



Fig. 8. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 339).



Fig. 9. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 339).



Fig. 10. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 349).



Fig. 11. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 349).

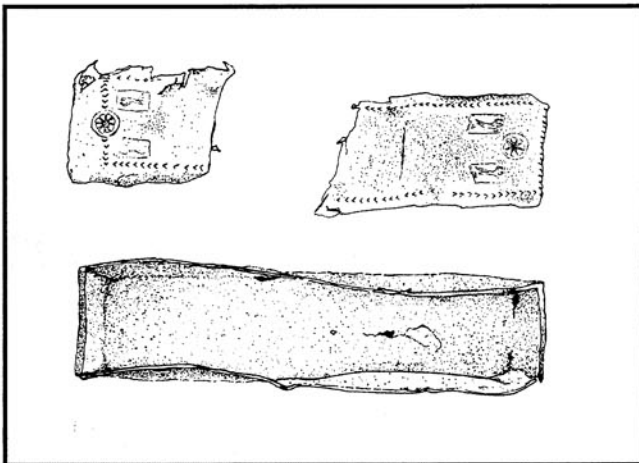


Fig. 12. Lead coffin from Viminacium (Grave 1221).



Fig. 13. A tomb with stone sarcophagus from Viminacium.



Fig. 14. Lid with Medusa's heads.

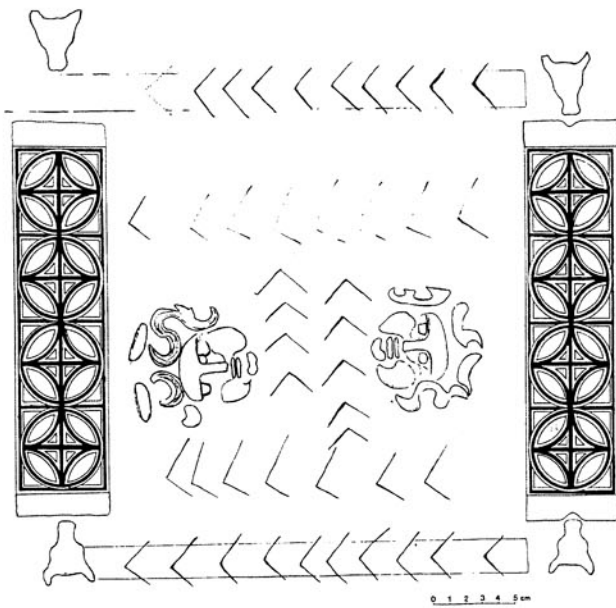


Fig. 15. Lid with Medusa's heads – detail.

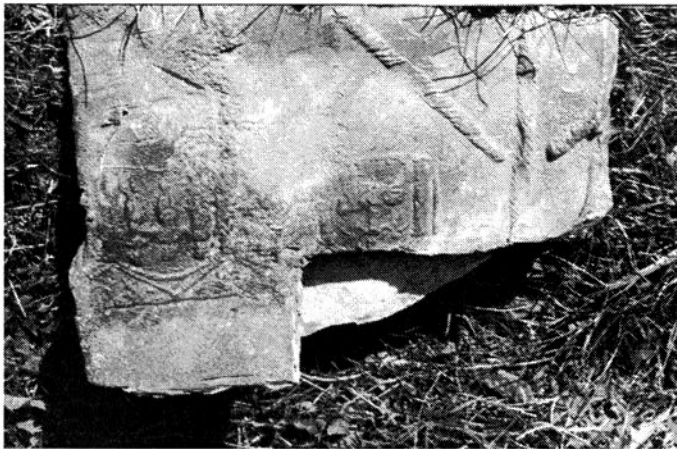


Fig. 16. Fragment with the Three Graces and Europe on the bull.

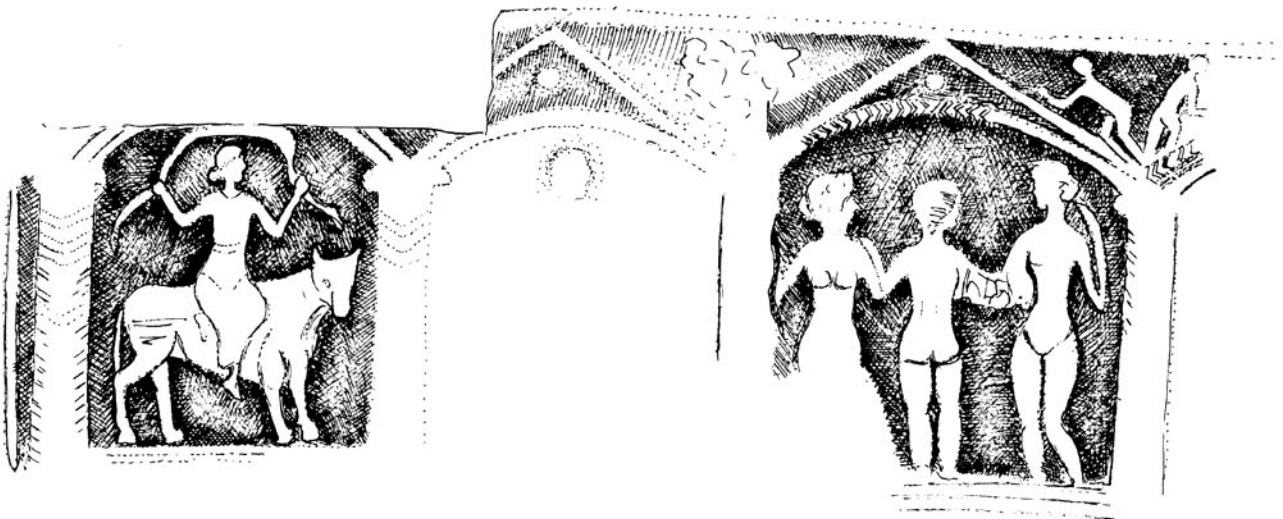


Fig. 17. Fragment with the Three Graces and Europe on the bull.