

## Finds in the Late Iron Age tradition from the Roman graves of Viminacium

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**Abstract.** *The former Roman city and the legionary fort Viminacium lie under the fields of the modern villages of Stari Kostolac and Drmno, at the right Mlava bank, some 15 km to the north of Požarevac in Eastern Serbia. Viminacium was the capital of the Roman province of Upper Moesia (Moesia Superior) and also an important military stronghold at the northern border of the empire. During pre-Roman times, this area was inhabited by a mixed population, consisting of Celts and of a native Illyrian ethnic group, called by a common name of Scordisci. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Dacians also inhabited this area. Until now, among numerous Viminacium graves (some 14,000), nineteen graves were specified as carriers of either Celtic-Scordiscian or Dacian Late Iron Age tradition. This number is surely bigger but by now, only about a thousand graves were published. “S”-profiled bowls were considered main features of graves with a Celtic-Scordiscian tradition, while Dacian pots were considered main features of graves with a Dacian Late Iron Age tradition. The paper deals with the finds themselves, but also with possible gender determinations of the deceased buried in these graves and with their social and economic status within the Roman society of Viminacium.*

**Rezumat.** *Autoarele analizează descoperirile din mormintele de epocă romană de la Viminacium, capitala Moesiei Superior și important castru militar în același timp. Acest lucru este important în vederea observării persistenței unor tradiții pre-romane în fabricarea materialelor, având în vedere faptul că zona fusese locuită de scordisci și daci înaintea cuceririi romane. Totodată, se urmărește determinarea sexului defuncților din aceste morminte, precum și statutul lor economic și social în cadrul societății romane din Viminacium.*

**Keywords:** Viminacium, grave-goods, “S”-profiled bowls, Late Iron Age tradition.

The former Roman city and the military camp Viminacium lie under the fields of the modern villages of Stari Kostolac and Drmno, at the right Mlava bank, some 15 km to the north of Požarevac in Eastern Serbia. Viminacium was the capital of the Roman province of Upper Moesia (*Moesia Superior*) and also an important military stronghold at the northern border of the empire. The legion *VII Claudia Pia Fidelis* was stationed there. During Hadrian's

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reign, the city was given the status of a *municipium* and at the time of Gordian III, more precisely in 239, the status of a *colonia*.

During pre-Roman times, this area was inhabited by a mixed population, consisting of Celts and of a native Illyrian ethnic group, called by a common name of Scordisci. Some fifty graves, excavated at the cemetery of "Pećine" and in the surrounding area, give testimony about that.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Dacians also inhabited this area, which had their native land just at the opposite Danube bank and further away in the inland. During pre-Roman times, but also during the Roman era, apart from contacts in battles, there were also trading contacts with the population at the right (southern) Danube bank.<sup>4</sup>

During the archaeological excavations conducted so far at Viminacium, some 14.000 graves from the Roman period were discovered. They all date into the period from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. By now, the cemeteries to the south (Pećine, Više grobalja) and to the east (Pirivoj) from the city and the military camp were excavated (Figure 1). Among the numerous grave-goods from the graves mentioned above, there are some of them, which indicate a pre-Roman origin or at least a pre-Roman tradition. The most indicative objects in

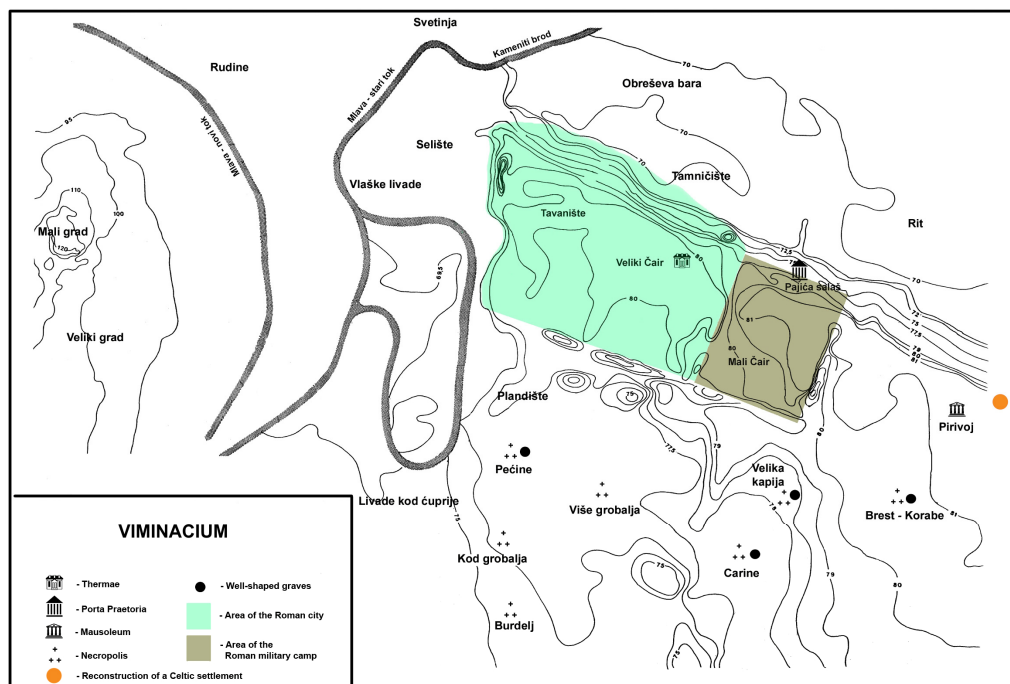


Figure 1. General plan of Viminacium (Field documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

<sup>3</sup> JOVANOVIĆ 1985, 13-17; JACANOVIĆ 1988, 7-17; SPASIĆ 1992, 5-27; SPASIĆ 1997, 33-45.

<sup>4</sup> POPOVIĆ 1989/90; POPOVIĆ, SLADIĆ 1997.

this way are pottery finds, like the grey or the red "S"-profiled bowls, which indicate a Celtic, actually a Scordiscian tradition. Further on, many pottery vessels were discovered, which reflect Dacian tradition (pots and bowls).

In this paper, according to grave-goods, an attempt shall be made to determine the gender and social status of the deceased buried in such graves. Since so far there were no anthropological studies for the site of Viminacium, the whole here presented study is based on the accompanying grave-goods, which could eventually give indications of the gender.

Thus, some of the methodological frameworks known from gender studies will be of great importance in order not only to determine the deceased sex-biologically, but also gender in wider sense, in terms of social norms and cultural anthropology. In order to trace this path, authors will try to make comparative study and define objects associated with, at the first place, woman's everyday life. These items were deposited along with the deceased and this tradition was very long, but later continued by painting items associated with women within the decoration of fresco painted tombs.<sup>5</sup>

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The "S"-profiled bowls (Table 1, Figure 2/A) were considered the main features of graves with a Celtic-Scordiscian tradition.<sup>6</sup> Eight graves were discovered in which such bowls were deposited as grave-goods. All of these graves were discovered at the "Više grobalja" necropolis, which dates back into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Five of the graves belong to skeletal burials (G) and three to cremations (G<sub>i</sub>). Even though all of the bowls belong to the same pottery type, it can easily be noticed that the bowls from skeletal burials are burned grey and the ones from cremations either red or yellowish-brown. Only in one of the graves (G-1065), an "S"-profiled bowl was the only grave-good.

In all of the other graves, there were also some other grave-goods. Among the most common ones were oil-lamps (in graves G-931, G-1790, G-1879, G-2176, G<sub>i</sub>-1572, G<sub>i</sub>-1624) and coins (in graves G-931, G-1879, G<sub>i</sub>-1572). In all of the graves there were also other pottery vessels, like bowls (G-931, G-1790, G<sub>i</sub>-1624, G-1790, G<sub>i</sub>-1572), pots made of white caoline clay (G-1790), pots (G-1790, G-2176, G<sub>i</sub>-1572, G<sub>i</sub>-1624), *oinochoes* (G-1879), beakers (G<sub>i</sub>-1362) or plates (G<sub>i</sub>-1624). Oil-lamps and coins, as well as pottery vessels, belong to gender non-specific grave-goods. Their presence was of no importance for this study.

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<sup>5</sup> About the connection between gravegoods and motifs painted within the tomb decoration, associated with women see: TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ, ANĐELKOVIĆ GRAŠAR 2013, 65-84.

<sup>6</sup> These graves were discussed in a separate study dealing with pottery types. TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ 2008a, 195-197.

<sup>7</sup> The dating is based on numismatic finds discovered in these graves. The numismatic analysis was performed by M. Vojvoda (Arsenijević).

Table 1. Celtic-Scordiscian elements from the necropolis "Više grobalja".

CELTIC- SCORDISCIAN ELEMENTS					
Necropolis "Više grobalja"					
Grave number		Celtic-Scordiscian grave-goods	Typical female grave-goods	Typical male grave-goods	Gender non-specific grave-goods
Skeletal burials	G-931	"S"-profiled grey bowl	turquoise Balsamarium	/	bowl, bronze coin, CASSI oil-lamp
	G-1065	"S"-profiled grey bowl	/	/	/
	G-1790	"S"-profiled grey bowl	/	/	three bowls, Firma oil-lamp, two pots
	G-1879	"S"-profiled grey bowl	/	/	FAOR oil-lamp, three oinochoas, bronze coin
	G-2176	"S"-profiled grey bowl	/	/	Oil-lamp, pot
Cremations	G <sub>I</sub> -1362	"S"-profiled ochre bowl	Ankle-fibula, Knee-brooch, bronze plate with an applica	/	beaker, bronze finger-ring
	G <sub>I</sub> -1572	"S"-profiled red bowl	/	/	VETI oil-lamp, oil-lamp, two bowls, bronze coin, urn (pot)
	G <sub>I</sub> -1624	"S"-profiled red bowl	/	/	three plates, oil-lamp, bowl, pot

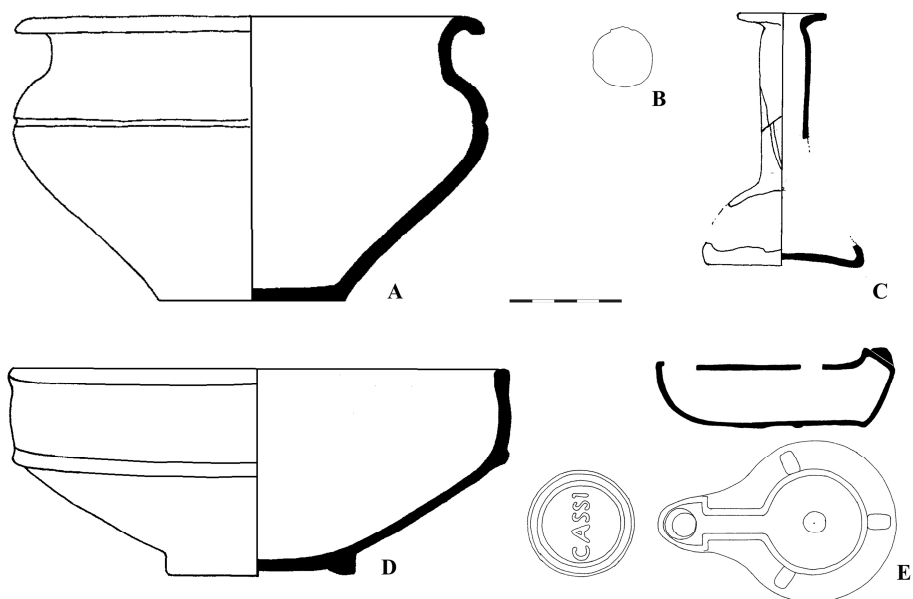


Figure 2. Grave-goods from the skeletal burial G-931 from "Više grobalja";  
(Field documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

Among grave-goods from the skeletal burial G-931 (Figure 2), there was a blue-coloured *balsamarium* with a low, conical vessel (RUŽIĆ 1994, type III/8c, 31, T. XX/2, 5). *Balsamaria* were mostly made of glass and used as containers for medical or cosmetic creams and similar substances. If one presumes that in the *balsamarium* from the grave G-931 there was a cosmetic substance, this grave can be considered as a female one. Use of these vessels in funerary practices is known from later periods too, not only as grave goods but also painted in hands of the deceased lady from the “Pagan tomb”.<sup>8</sup> Bottles of this type were found as grave goods of both pagans and Christians in the late antique level of Viminacium cemeteries<sup>9</sup> and according to their shapes they could represent a *balsamarium*<sup>10</sup> which had a long tradition of use in woman’s everyday life. It is usually painted in offering scenes and it could be a part of mistress’s toilette<sup>11</sup> thus here within the tomb, it suggests funerary gift for mistress that she received from her servants. *Balsamarium* or *unguentarium* is the bottle made of glass or pottery, and it was used for keeping liquids (wine, water, oils, honey or perfumes) in everyday use or for rituals within religious sanctuaries.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the “S”-profiled bowl from the cremation G<sub>1</sub>-1362, there were also a pottery beaker and a bronze ring<sup>13</sup>, a bronze application with a male head and two fibulas (an ankle- and a knee-fibula). Neither for the ankle-fibula<sup>14</sup> nor for the knee-fibula<sup>15</sup> were there parallels in literature. There were also no data about their wearing art, which could eventually give further gender information. Due to small dimensions of knee-fibulas (3–4 cm long), the authors of this paper tended to determine them as parts of a female costume and further on, to determine the whole grave as a female one. In addition, the ankle-fibula from this grave belongs to the examples with a broad tin bow, which are considered to be the reminiscences of the so-called *Aucissa* fibulas<sup>16</sup> also indicating Late Iron Age tradition.

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<sup>8</sup> ANĐELKOVIĆ GRAŠAR, TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ 2015, 17-19.

<sup>9</sup> ZOTOVIĆ 1986, 340.

<sup>10</sup> ANDERSON-STOJANOVIĆ 1987, 105-106.

<sup>11</sup> DUNBABIN 2003, 462.

<sup>12</sup> ANDERSON-STOJANOVIĆ 1987, 105-106.

<sup>13</sup> Finger-rings were worn by men, women and children. MARTIN-KILCHER, MARTIN-KILCHER 1992, 23.

<sup>14</sup> PETKOVIĆ 2010, type 9/C, 54-56, Pl. VII, 3-5; BOJOVIĆ 1983, type 3, 22-23, Pl. III, 19-23; KOŠČEVIĆ 1980, 14, Pl. II, 9, 11; REDŽIĆ 2007, 15.

<sup>15</sup> PETKOVIĆ 2010, type 18/D, 127-129, 132, Pl. XXIV, 1-3; BOJOVIĆ 1983, type 21, 55-58, Pl. XXII, 207-209; KOŠČEVIĆ 1980, 27-28, Pl. XXIII, 183-184; REDŽIĆ 2007, 33.

<sup>16</sup> BOJOVIĆ 1983, 22.

Dacian pots were considered main features of graves with a Dacian tradition (Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> Dacian pots are coarse, mostly cylindrical or bi-conical in shape and burned brownish-red or grey, with a more or less upturned rim and a flat bottom. They were mostly not wheel-thrown, sometimes only finished on a potter's wheel.

There were all together eleven graves in which such pots were discovered. One of the graves comes from the "Pećine" necropolis (Table 2) and the rest of them from the necropolis "Više grobalja" (Table 3). All of them date into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> Six of them belong to skeletal burials (G) and five of them to cremations (G<sub>1</sub>). In one of the skeletal burials (G-1135) and in two cremations (G<sub>1</sub>-989 and G<sub>1</sub>-1089), Dacian pots were deposited as grave-goods. In some of the cremations, such pots were used as urns. According to skeletal remains, three graves (G-540, G-1101 and G-1135) were determined as graves of infants.<sup>19</sup>

Just like in the graves with "S"-profiled bowls, further grave-goods were deposited in these graves as well. Here too, to the most frequent ones and for the Roman times in general to most common ones belong oil-lamps (in graves G-1544 and G<sub>1</sub>-688) and coins (in graves G-540, G-1544, G<sub>1</sub>-688). In five graves, there were also other pottery vessels, like bowls (G-1884), jugs (G-2931<sup>20</sup>, G-1884, G<sub>1</sub>-688) or beakers (G-2931). Just like previously mentioned, oil-lamps and coins, as well as pottery vessels, belong to gender non-specific grave-goods and their presence was of no importance for this study.

As already mentioned, among graves with Dacian pots, there were three burials of infants. In the first one (G-540), next to a brown-burned Dacian pot, there were also a bronze coin, shoe-nails and two golden ear-rings. According to the jewellery, this grave can be determined as a burial of a girl.

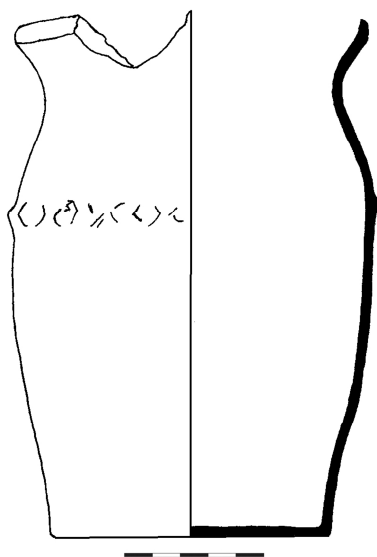


Figure 3. Dacian pot from "Više grobalja" (Field documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

<sup>17</sup> These graves were discussed in a separate study dealing with pottery types. TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ 2008-b, 215-224.

<sup>18</sup> TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ 2008-b, 218. The dating is based on numismatic finds discovered in these graves. The numismatic analysis was performed by M. Vojvoda (Arsenijević).

<sup>19</sup> Small children, up to approximately six years of age, were not cremated. This custom is of Italic origin. FASOLD 1992, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Grave G-2931 is the only one from the "Pećine" necropolis included in this study. All the other graves are from the necropolis "Više grobalja".

Table 2. Dacian elements from the necropolis "Pećine".

DACIAN ELEMENTS					
Necropolis "Pećine"					
Grave number		Dacian grave-good	Typical female grave-good	Typical male grave-good	Gender non-specific grave-good
Skeletal burial	G-2931	Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	/	/	jug, beaker

Table 3. Dacian elements from the necropolis "Više grobalja".

DACIAN ELEMENTS						
Necropolis "Više grobalja"						
Grave number			Dacian grave-good	Typical female grave-good	Typical male grave-good	Gender non-specific grave-good
Skeletal burial	Infant graves	G-540	Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	two golden ear-rings	/	bronze coin, shoe-nails
		G-1101	Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	seven shells	/	/
		G-1135	Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	/	/	/
	G-1544		Dacian pot (partly wheel-thrown)	/	/	oil-lamp, two bronze coins
	G-1884		Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	/	/	three jugs, bowl
Cremation	G <sub>1</sub> -688		Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	Pyxide of bronze tin	/	oil-lamp, bronze coin, three jugs
	G <sub>1</sub> -989		Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	/	/	/
	G <sub>1</sub> -1089		Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	/	/	/
	G <sub>1</sub> -1332		Dacian pot (partly wheel-thrown)	Bronze mirror, pincette, oil-lamp with a rosette	/	six pots, three jugs, censer, FORTIS oil-lamp, two oil-lamps, bowl, knife
	G <sub>1</sub> -1406		Dacian pot (not wheel-thrown)	Hinge-brooch	/	/

Apart from a grey Dacian pot, seven fragmented sea-shells were discovered in the grave G-1101. As grave-goods, sea-shells can be brought in connection with the goddess *Venus Funeraria*<sup>21</sup> and in this context they can be interpreted as indicators of a female burial (most likely of a young girl). One of the ways of worshiping the goddess Venus was through the form of the cult of *Venus Funerariae*. Worshiping of this cult is associated with young girls from Romanized families, who became virginal brides of Hades and whose thread of life was cut early. Therefore, it was believed that with protection and guiding of this goddess, their return would be possible.<sup>22</sup> Associated with this is another Roman practice when parents of early deceased girls ordered their idealized funerary portraits, which would represent them as women they would be if death did not take them away too soon.<sup>23</sup> Grave goods often suggest the presence of Venus attributes such as mirrors, apples, mother of pearls or anchor fibulas.<sup>24</sup> All of these attributes can be represented within the image of Venus cult, as well as rosettes, pigeons, dolphins, tritons, shells or cupids, like those depicted as a part of the fresco decoration within the "Tomb with Cupids" from Viminacium.<sup>25</sup>

With a coin, an oil-lamp and three jugs, the grave G<sub>1</sub>-688 belongs to typical Roman burials.<sup>26</sup> Still, next to a wheel-thrown Dacian pot, a pyxide made of bronze tin was also discovered in this grave. Such caskets were often used as containers for jewellery or different cosmetic tools (mirrors, tweezers and so on) and in this sense the presence of such an object could indicate a female burial.

Apart from a black, partly wheel-thrown Dacian pot, in the grave G<sub>1</sub>-1332 there were also other numerous grave-goods, like six other pots, four oil-lamps, three jugs, a censer, an iron bowl and an iron knife. On one of the oil-lamps there was a rosette, which, in its symbolic meaning, also can be brought in connection with *Venus Funeraria*.<sup>27</sup> A contribution to a hypothesis that one is here dealing with a female grave also belong finds of a bronze mirror and tweezers. Although being a floral motif, rosettes are associated with a solar character and cycle of birth and death, therefore important in the cult of death. They represent one of the most frequent motifs for decoration of oil lamp discs from the territory of Upper Moesia (375 examples are from cemeteries and 15 from other locations). At the territory of Moesia Superior, this indicates the dominant use of lamps with rosette motifs in sepulchral purposes. They are also rather well represented on funerary monuments. Mirrors are closely associated with woman's beautification and thus very important in the context of the afterlife, where as

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<sup>21</sup> JOVANOVIĆ 2000, 11, 12 and 15.

<sup>22</sup> JOVANOVIĆ 2000, 17-18.

<sup>23</sup> D'AMBRA 2009, 15-36.

<sup>24</sup> JOVANOVIĆ 2000, 11-19, TAPAVIČKI-ILIĆ, ANĐELKOVIĆ GRAŠAR 2013, 66-68.

<sup>25</sup> More about the iconography in: ANĐELKOVIĆ GRAŠAR *et al.* 2013, 73-100.

<sup>26</sup> FASOLD 1992, 16.

<sup>27</sup> JOVANOVIĆ 2000, 11, 12.



well as the other previously mentioned items can be associated with the cult of *Venus Funeraria*.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from a brown-burned Dacian pot, in the grave G<sub>1</sub>-1406 there was also a bronze ankle-fibula. The fibula was corroded and its precise typological determination was not possible. It could be considered a vague indication for a female burial.

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Until now, from among the numerous graves (some 14,000) from Viminacium, nineteen were specified as carriers of either Celtic-Scordiscian or Dacian Late Iron Age tradition. This number is surely larger, but by now, only about a thousand graves have been published<sup>29</sup> and the remaining thirteen thousand were not fully studied. "S"-profiled bowls were considered main features of graves with a Celtic-Scordiscian tradition, while Dacian pots were considered main features of graves with a Dacian Late Iron Age tradition.

During this study, it was very soon clear that the majority of grave-goods belonged to the gender non-specific ones. In most of the cases, next to cremated remains or a skeleton, there were only a number of non-specific pottery shards, eventually also coins or oil-lamps. It was not possible to determine the gender or age of deceased just according to these finds. Data about this could be obtained only according to gender specific grave-goods. This study shows that they did not belong to common grave-goods of Viminacium graves.

Out of the 19 graves analysed in this paper, in four (21.05%) there were, apart from pottery vessels, no other grave-goods. In eight graves (42.10%) there were gender non-specific finds. Therefore, in twelve graves it was not at all possible to determine the sex of the deceased. In seven graves (36.85%), there were grave-goods which could be determined as indicators of a female burial. In none of the graves there were typical male grave-goods.

Out of seven graves determined as female ones, only one belongs to Celtic-Scordiscian tradition (14.29%), and six (85.71%) to the Dacian tradition. The reason probably lies in the fact that all of these graves are from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, that is to say to a period in which the Celtic-Scordiscian tradition was slowly descending, while the Dacian one was still relatively vivid.

During Hadrian's reign, specifically in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the civilian settlement next to the Viminacium military camp became a *municipium*. This meant that all of the veterans and their families living there were made Roman citizens.<sup>30</sup> The graves determined belonging to females could have belonged to members (wives, sisters, daughters) of such families.

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<sup>28</sup> MILOVANOVIĆ, MITIĆ, KOSANOVIĆ 2016, 9-22.

<sup>29</sup> ZOTOVIĆ, JORDOVIĆ 1990; KORAĆ, GOLUBOVIĆ 2009.

<sup>30</sup> FERJANČIĆ 2002, 162.

The objects of cult, like oil-lamps or *balsamaria*, are typical for graves of Italic newcomers or strongly Romanised natives.<sup>31</sup> This is why here one could be dealing with members of such a social group.

Finally, people who were buried without any other grave-goods, or just with a very few of them, most likely belonged to the provincial inhabitants of *Moesia Superior*. Vessels indicating pre-Roman tradition can be brought in connection with marginal social groups. The lack of grave-goods or very few of them can indicate graves of poor people, actually people whose families could not afford grave-goods. It is even possible that such individuals were buried on the account of the community.

Grave goods associated with women, being numerous or rather fewer, indicate their gender in terms of beautification and fashion, two aspects of women's terrestrial life that are specific in all periods of time. Connections between a woman or girl's afterlife and cult of Venus Funeraria are multifold, as well as associations between their images or image types. Representations of women in fresco painted tombs, within the scene of mistress' toilette can be compared with the scene of Venus and Projecta's toilette on the Projecta-s casket,<sup>32</sup> while objects associated to woman's beautification can be decorated with figures of the goddesses Aphrodite or Venus.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this idea and ideal of the scene of beautification, naturally has its origin in grave goods strongly associated with women: *balsamaria*, various caskets or pyxides, mirrors, jewellery, etc. For Roman women, clothes, jewellery and cosmetics were some kind of female *insignia*, and they appreciated them as instruments through which they could express their social and economic status.<sup>34</sup>

Other items deposited as grave goods were not related to women specifically, such as jugs, bowls, goblets, pots, etc. They could have had the same function as those items painted in the offering scene dedicated to the deceased, suggesting funerary rites and resembling the household with servants in it.

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<sup>31</sup> The oldest grave inscriptions of veterans discovered at Viminacium date from the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. They testify that, already during the first decades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, veterans lived in the *canabae* and in the vicinity of the military camp. FERJANČIĆ 2002, 161.

<sup>32</sup> ELSNER 2003, 22–36.

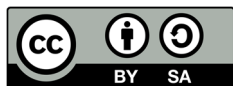
<sup>33</sup> WALKER 2003, 233–239, cat. 140, 148, 150.

<sup>34</sup> OLSON 2012, 96–112.

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