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VOTIVE MONUMENTS IN SERBIA DEDICATED TO THE CULT OF THE NYMPHS (INCLUDING FOREST DEITIES AND SILVANUS)

ABSTRACT

Three votive monuments dedicated to nymphs, in Bunjaci (Kuršumlijska Banja), Orhanje (Kačanik) and Viminacium, have been discovered in the territory of Serbia, and there is also a report about a monument from Vranjska Banja. All of these monuments are solely epigraphic, and, so far, a relief monument or sculpture with a nymph is not known of in the territory of Serbia. Two votive monuments (from Viminacium and Podujevo) dedicated to the "forest deities" can be added to this group. There is an opinion that on the monument from Ulpiana, with a dedication to Silvanus and another deity, Silvana, who can be associated with the nymphs, was also honoured. There is an assumption that sanctuaries of the nymph cult in Viminacium, Vrnjačka Banja and Vranjska Banja possibly existed.

KEYWORDS: NYMPHS, SERBIA, VOTIVE MONUMENTS, KURŠUMLIJSKA BANJA, KAČANIK, VIMINACIUM, PODUJEVO, VRNJAČKA BANJA, VRANJSKA BANJA.

The theme of this paper is votive monuments dedicated to the cult of the nymphs, discovered in the territory of today's Serbia (Fig. 1). Their number is not great, but we assume that the nymphs were often honoured in areas of untouched nature, where the testimonies of the cult are not preserved, or have a form that we cannot precisely identify.

All known monuments of the nymph's cult from Serbia are solely epigraphic. So far, no reliefs or sculptures have been discovered that would reflect how the population in the Antiquity period in Serbian territory represented the nymphs (we have no reason to consider that on this type of monument, the nymphs would have been presented differently than the well-known iconographic representation in neighbouring provinces).

On the votive monuments, which were unambiguously raised in their honour, the nymphs were honoured independently. We believe that we can

recognise them as well, as a part of the cult community of "forest deities", while the inscription on the monument from Ulpiana is not definite proof of the nymph's cult connection with the god Silvanus, which is undisputed in religious practice.

According to mythology, nymphs are most often referred to as Zeus' daughters (sometimes referred to as daughters of Oceanus, Uranus or certain river gods - Aegina, for example), eternally beautiful and young, living in untouched nature, in forests, mountains, fields, caves or near springs and rivers. In older myths they are immortal, but later it was believed that they were mortal, but that they could live for a very long time, for thousands of years.

Nymphs are deities of nature, closely related to water and vegetation. They help flowers blossom and fruits ripen, take care of pastures, help shepherds, and also take care of human youth. They provide people with bees and honey. They

also possess the power of healing and prophecy (they also have their own oracles), and it was believed that they were able to give eternal life to their chosen favoured ones. They created and preserved healing springs, for which they were especially honoured in spas throughout the Empire, particularly in the Roman period. Myths said

that the nymphs taught people about a plant-based diet, with which they eradicated cannibalism.

The nymphs' names differ according to their dwelling. The most commonly mentioned are Naiads, who own springs and spend their lives on river banks and lake shores. Mountain nymphs are called Oreiades, and forest nymphs are Dryades, Hama-

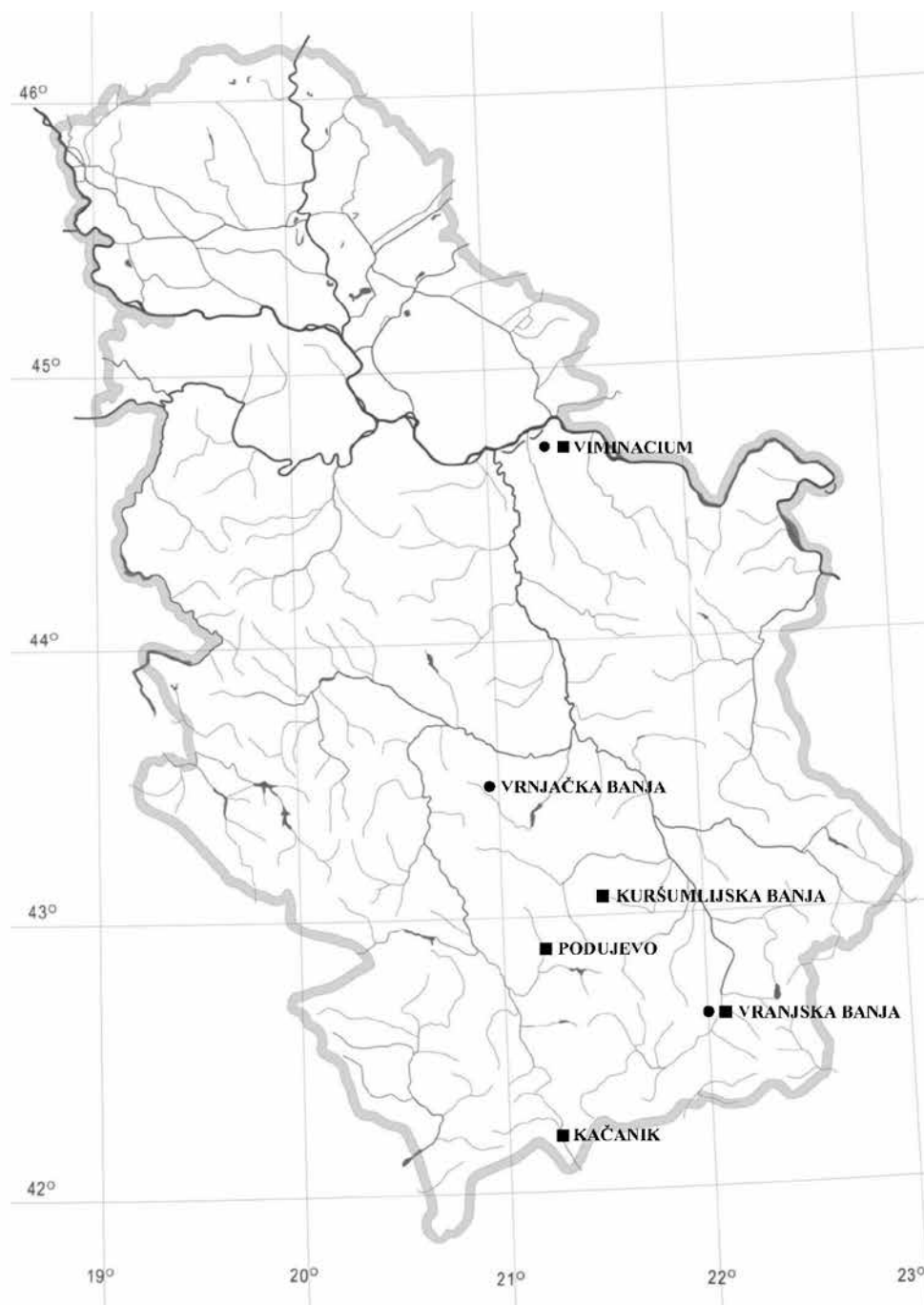


Fig. 1 Map of monuments dedicated to the cult of the nymphs and the “forest deities” – ■ votive monument ● possible sanctuary (drawing: Nataša Miladinović).

dryades and Meliai (the *nymphs* of the *ash tree*, considered the oldest). The *nymphs* of groves (Alseids) were also mentioned, as well as the nymphs of certain areas and places (Nysiades, Dodonides).

The cult of the nymphs most often had a personal nature and was generally limited to Naiads. They were primarily honoured by shepherds, peasants, fishermen and hunters. Nymphs were honoured in nature, near springs and inside caves. Flowers, wreaths, honey and milk, and occasionally domestic animals (hens, lambs or goat kids) were sacrificed to Naiads.

On Greek painted vases from the Archaic period, the nymphs are shown without any special characteristics, as an entourage of certain deities or nurses of little Dionysus. Reliefs from the Hellenistic period show three nymphs dancing to the music of Pan or Apollo. In the Hellenistic and Roman period, sculptures of nymphs are frequent, placed near springs or drinking fountains. Nymphs are presented according to the model of Aphrodite, but regularly with a shell or a bowl in their hands. They are often presented in a lying position, with bare breasts, leaning against an overturned bowl from which water is poured.

The nymph cult was markedly developed with the Romans, who especially honoured the nymphs of water and springs, such as Juturna. They associated the name "nymph" with *lymph*, which is a Latin poetic term for water. Throughout the Roman Empire, special honour was given to numerous local nymphs (Срејовић, Цермановић-Кузмановић 1992: 184-185, 289-290; Освалт: 167, 237-238).

At this point we can also ask the question regarding Silvanus' female companion Silvana, which is an epigraphic notion, though she is not mentioned in any ancient source (Deurcey 1992: 42-48). We will quote the opinion of Lj. Perinić, according to which it is certain that Silvana is a nymph, but with reservations that epigraphic and iconographic data do not provide sufficient data to conclude which kind of nymph she belongs to (Perinić 2016: 7). This opinion will be extended with the view that Silvana represents a common

name for a nymph who was, at a certain point in time, associated with Silvanus, most probably as the protector of a particular place where a votive monument was dedicated (Васиљевић 2008: 158). If this opinion proves correct, it would indicate that nymphs could also be named by the deity with whom they were worshiped together within a sanctuary or a holy place.

Three votive monuments dedicated to nymphs, (in Bunjaci (Kuršumlijska Banja), in Orhanje (Kačanik) and in Viminacium), have been discovered in the territory of Serbia. All of these monuments are solely epigraphic, so, until now, a relief monument or sculpture with a nymph representation is not known in the territory of Serbia.

F. Kanitz also recorded the existence of a votive monument from Vranjska Banja, dedicated to the spa nymph, but about which he did not provide details. The literature also mentions the assumption that in Vrnjačka Banja, Viminacium and Vranjska Banja there could have been sanctuaries dedicated to the nymphs. It is possible that on two votive monuments (Viminacium and Podujevo), as a part of a group dedication to the "forest deities," the nymphs were also honoured. We will also mention an altar from Ulpiana where, according to some opinions, together with the god Silvanus, Silvana, his female companion who can be identified with nymphs, was also honoured.

There were probably a far greater number of sacred places where nymphs were honoured. These sacred places could be found in forest glades, along rivers, by healing springs... At the sanctuaries in nature, wooden statues or vows may have been dedicated to nymphs who were honoured individually or together with related deities, as protectors of nature and of healing springs (Silvanus and Diana).

We consider it necessary to mention, taking into account the topic of this work, that one structure from the Mediana complex, due to the existence of a fountain and motifs, has sometimes been defined as a Nymphaeum in the literature (Дрча 2006: 23). Bearing in mind much more accept-

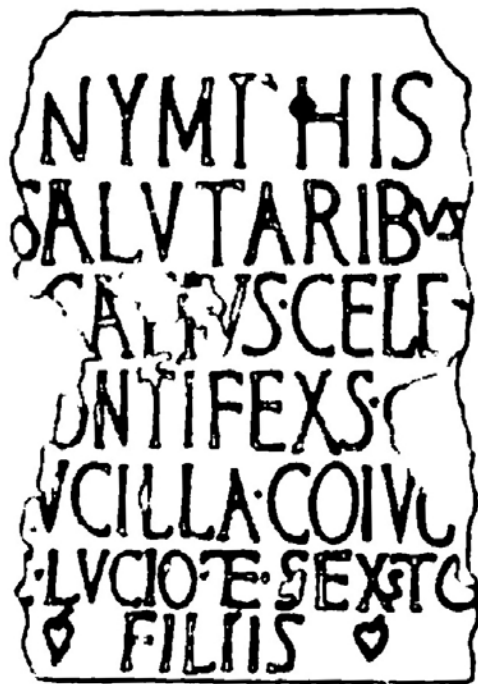


Fig. 2 Inscription from the votive monument from Kuršumlijska Banja dedicated to the nymphs, (according to: Вулић, Премерштајн 1900, 25).

able interpretations of the purpose of this structure (Vasić 2006: 69-75), it will not be specially treated in this text, nor will it be associated with the cult of the nymphs, although the nymphs could have been honoured, in some other way, as the protectors of the healing springs in Mediana and Niška Banja.

In the following section we will discuss the importance of votive monuments for our topic.

During construction work on the bath in Kuršumlijska Banja, at the end of the 19th century, Roman bricks and walls, as well as a silver *denarius* of Philip the Arab were found (Ризнић 1884: 83). A votive monument dedicated to nymphs was also discovered in the immediate vicinity (Fig. 2).

This is a monument that was found in 1884 at the Bunjaci village cemetery, not far from Kuršumlijska Banja, where it was initially erected, according to the well-grounded opinion of M. Riznić (Ibid., 82-83). The monument was transferred to the National Museum in Belgrade in 1889, and was noticed in its lapidarium by Premerstein and Vulić in 1900 (Premerstein, Vulić 1900:

127). Today it is located in Pećine in the Lower Town of Kalemegdan Fortress, in Belgrade.

It is a votive monument dedicated to the healing nymphs, protectors of warm springs. The dedicant is Catus Celer, most likely a pontifex of Ulpiana, together with his wife and sons.

The text of the inscription reads as follows:

Nymphis
Salutaribus
[.] Catus Cele[r]
pontifexs (?) [2-3]
[L]ucilla coiug(e)
[et] Lucio et Sexto (!) filiis.
(Premerstein, Vulić 1900,:127).

The monument is made of grey tuff, 80 cm high, 41 cm wide and 37 cm thick. The inscription field has dimensions of 47 x 37 cm. N. Vulić and A. von Premerstein are of the opinion that the monument was created at the beginning of the 3rd century, and that the dedication to the nymphs, *Salutares*, clearly indicates that thermal springs were used even in Roman times, as it expresses gratitude to the nymphs for being cured by the healing waters. Also, the author states that the dedicant of the monument, at the time of its construction, was a pontifex in Ulpiana (Вулић, Премерштајн 1900: 25).

A. Jovanović provides a slightly different dating of the monument and links it with the time of the reign of Gordian III and considers that it should be dated into the period of the second quarter of the 3rd century (Јовановић 2003: 36).

From the beginning it was thought that the dedicant may have been connected with Lucius Catus Celer, who made the honorary base for the Emperor Gordian III in Timacum Minus in 242 AD on behalf of the II Dardanian cohort, however that connection has remained hypothetical for a long time. His high rank in the province (governor of the province?) and his presence in the ore-bearing Timok region could easily be explained by the mining operations that he performed at the imperial domain in Timacum Minus. The discovery of a milestone from the area of Ad Fines, found on the doorstep



Fig. 3 Votive monument from Viminacium dedicated to the nymphs, (according to: Ferjančić, S., Korać, M. and Ričl, M. 2017, 238, fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Inscription from the votive monument from Viminacium dedicated to the nymphs, (according to: Ferjančić, S., Korać, M. and Ričl, M. 2017, 238, fig. 5).

of the Church of St. Nicholas in Kuršumlija, serves as confirmation that the same person is in question. On the inscription there is an identical name, *L. Cattius Celer*, with the associated title, *legatus Augusti propraetore* (Петровић, В. 2007: 92- 93).

The question of the career development and the places of residence of Lucius Cadius Celer, undeniably a significant person in his time, remains open.

A votive monument dedicated to the nymphs was also found at the Orhanje site in Kačanik. The monument was discovered in 1900. The dimensions of the altar are: height 58 cm, width 14 cm, thickness 34 cm. The font height varies between 3-5 cm.

The text of the inscription reads as follows:

Nym[phis]

L. Tito[vius...]

Pro [...]

v(otum) s(olvit) [l(ibens) m(erito)]

(Šašel, A. i Šašel, J. 1986: 59).

From the inscription we can conclude that L. Titovius dedicated the monument, thus fulfilling

his vow.

So far, two votive monuments that are important for our topic have been found in Viminacium. One monument is undoubtedly devoted to the nymphs, while in the other case, nymphs are probably honoured within the group consecration to the “forest deities.”

The first votive monument, dated to the 2nd century, was discovered in 2013 between the Viminacium amphitheatre and the northern city rampart (Fig. 3). Researchers believe that, given the fact that a number of figurines of baked earth and oil lamps were found near the monument, it is possible that there was a sanctuary at this location (Nikolić *et al.* 2014: 50).

The monument is made of limestone. It is extended at its base and profiled at the top. On the front side, on the profiled part, the remains of an acroterion and triangular decoration are visible. A pit for libation was at the top. The dimensions of the monument are: height 58.5-59 cm, width 26.5 cm (39.8 cm at the base and profiled part) and thickness 25 cm (30.5) on the left and 23.5 cm (29.5) on the right. The height of the letters on the inscription varies between 2-3.5 cm.

The text of the inscription reads (Fig. 4):

Nymphas |

Aug(ustas) (!) P. An() |

MARCELEO |

v(eteranus ?) AT leg(ionis) VII Cl(audiae)

v(otum) s(olvit)

DEABVSSILV
ESTRIS·AÆIL
LEV·S·EX·V
OTOL·POS·.

Fig. 5 Inscription from the votive monument from Viminacium dedicated to the “forest deities,” (according to: Вулић 1905: 83).

(Ferjančić, Korać and Ricić 2017: 237).

The inscription notes that the nymphs were honoured with the epithet *Augustae*. The dedicant of the monument was P. An. MARCELEO (possibly *Marcello* or *Mercellio*), a member of the VII Claudius legion, probably a veteran. The authors consider that, on the basis of the analysed text of the inscription, it is possible that the dedicant was of Greek origin, and that he probably, along with the altar, also dedicated one or more statues or statuettes to the nymphs (Ibid.).

This reasonable assumption additionally supports, as already stated, the possibility that there was a sanctuary in this place, devoted to the nymphs.

The second monument from Viminacium originates from the Čair site. The dimensions of the monument are: height 39 cm, width 30 cm, thickness 30 cm. The height of the letters of the inscription is 2.7 cm. The monument has since been lost.

The text of the inscription reads (Fig. 5):

Deabus Silv
estris (!) Achil
leus ex v
oto l(ibens) p(osuit)

The “forest deities” to whom the monument was dedicated were not specifically mentioned. N. Vulić directly connects the monument to the cult of *Silvanus Silvester* (Вулић 1905: 82-83).

We will accept Vulić’s opinion, with the addition that the monument was probably devoted to *Silvanus* in a cult union with the nymphs, and



Fig. 6 Votive monument from Ulpiana dedicated to *Silvanus* and to one other deity (*Silvana?*), (according to: Петровић П. 1975: Т. V, fig. 14).

perhaps also devoted to *Diana*.

A votive monument dedicated to the “forest deities” also originates from Podujevo. The dimensions of the monument are: height 70 cm, width 70 cm, thickness 50 cm.

The text of the inscription reads:

Deabus S(ilvestribus) |
Virgines (!) |
Gaudens Li |
vi(a) s(ervus) p(ro) s(alute) |
p(ecunia) s(ua)
(Вулић 1934: 53).

The epithet in the first row could also be read as *S(alutaribus)*. We will accept the solution *S(ilvestribus)*, proposed by A. Šašel and J. Šašel (Šašel A. i Šašel J. 1986: 54), assuming, as in the case of the Viminacium monument, that the votive monument was devoted to the “forest deities,” i.e., to *Silvanus* and members of his cult community (probably nymphs and *Diana*), which makes it significant for our topic.

A marble votive monument, dedicated to Silvanus and to one other deity (or deities), was discovered in Ulpiana. The upper part of the monument is broken off horizontally (Fig. 6). The dimensions of the altar are: height 50 cm, width 24 cm, thickness 18 cm.

The text of the inscription reads:

---]

et Silvano

Sac(rum) M. Aur(elius) Silvester

dec(urio) q(uin)q(ennalis) v(otum) s(olvit)

M. Maximo et

Aeliano co(n)s(ulibus)

(Петровић, П. 1975: 132).

Based on the names of the consuls, the inscription is precisely dated to 223 AD. The votive monument was dedicated by M. Aurelius Silvester, Decurion of Ulpiana.

E. Čerškov states that the altar is dedicated to Silvana and Silvanus (Čerškov 1969: 66–67). We cannot take this presumption without reservations because the altar could be dedicated to some other deity besides Silvana. For this reason, the altar of Ulpiana is mentioned in the text, as an opportunity that should not be ignored, taking into account the aforementioned assumption of Silvana as a nymph. However, it is not included in the geographical map that shows the distribution of other votive monuments dedicated to the nymphs and “forest deities.”

Renowned travel writer, F. Kanitz, wrote that “one Roman marble stone with inscriptions was dedicated to the spa nymph, including parts of pillars with cannellure and other construction fragments” (Каниц 1989: 263). Unfortunately, we do not know the destiny of this monument dedicated to the nymph, nor details related to the appearance of the monument or its inscription. It is worth noting that the remains of buildings and votive monuments were discovered in Vranjska Banka, indicating the possibility of an ancient sanctuary dedicated to the iatric deities with an iatric character, which might have included an altar dedicated to the spa nymph (Васиљевић 2014: 161).

The possibility of there being a sanctuary de-

voted to the nymphs was also presumed in Vrnjačka Banja. Among the numerous sites registered within this spa settlement, the Roman spring is the most interesting for our topic. Beside it, at a depth of 2.40 m, the remains of a rectangular swimming pool built of wooden beams and measuring 4.50 x 2.40 m were found in 1924 (Сариа 1925: 199-200; Гарашанин, Д. и Гарашанин, М. 1950: 208).

The pool was filled with warm mineral water from a special spring that was precisely carved in a vertical rock in the form of a small well. In the immediate surroundings of the spring, 200 Roman coins were found, which belong to the coinages from Augustus to Valentinian. In the pool itself, 60 Roman coins dated from the end of the 1st to the second half of the 4th century, one ring, and one key were discovered (Боровић Димић 2001: 166). N. Crnobrnja suggests that the money got into the pool as an act of gratitude to the divinity of the spring or to the nymphs, for successful healing (Црнобрња 1987: 67-69).

Despite the lack of direct evidence, we believe that in the area of the healing springs in Vrnjačka Banja, the cult of the nymphs could have been honoured.

From the previous text we can conclude that in the territory of today’s Serbia, in the ancient period, the cult of the nymphs was honoured, which is evidenced by the votive monuments, while the possibility of the existence of a sanctuary is also implied. On known monuments, the nymphs have the epithets *Salutaris*, *Augustae* and, within the cult group of “forest deities,” *Silvestres* and *Virgines*. Dedicants, whose occupation is mentioned on the inscriptions, are a priest (also a Legatus) (Bunjaci) and a soldier (Viminacium), and we also mention the duumvir who dedicated the votive monument from Ulpiana.

Based on this data, it can be concluded that the votive monuments dedicated to the nymphs were mostly raised by members of the higher classes, although it was certain that the wider population also showed a strong affinity to the cult of these deities. We refer again to the thesis stated

in the introductory part of this text that the largest number of sanctuaries associated with the cult of the nymphs were located in natural surroundings, where modest monuments were dedicated to them, made of materials that did not withstand the ravages of time (wood) or were hardly recognisable altars (untreated stone without inscription or relief). It is possible that the nymph sanctuaries, honoured in untouched nature, also retained some of their splendour and religious appeal in the epochs that followed the dusk of the ancient world.

* * *

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REZIME

VOTIVNI SPOMENICI POSVEĆENI KULTU NIMFI (UKLJUČUJUĆI „ŠUMSKA BOŽANSTVA“ I SILVANU) U SRBIJI

KLJUČNE REČI: NIMFE, SRBIJA, VOTIVNI SPOMENICI, KURŠUMLIJSKA BANJA, KAČANIK, VIMINACIJUM, PODUJEVO, VRNJAČKA BANJA, VRANJSKA BANJA.

Na teritoriji Srbije otkrivena su tri votivna spomenika posvećena nimfama (Bunjaci (Kuršumlijska Banja), Orhanje (Kačanik) i Viminacijum). Svi navedeni spomenici su isključivo epigrafski, tako da, za sada, u Srbiji nije poznat reljefni spomenik, niti skulptura, koji prikazuje nimfe. Zabeležen je i podatak o postojanju votiv-

nog spomenika u Vranjskoj Banji.

Ovom korpusu pridodajemo i dva votivna spomenika (Viminacijum i Podujevo) posvećena „šumskim božanstvima“, u okviru kojih su, najverovatnije, poštovane i nimfe. Postoji mišljenje da je na spomeniku iz Ulpijane, posvećenom Silvanu i još jednom božanstvu (oštećen je deo natpisa sa imenom drugog božanstva), poštovana i Silvana, čiji kult možemo povezati sa nimfama.

Kao pretpostavka se iznosi mogućnost postojanja svetilišta kulta nimfi u Viminacijumu, Vrnjačkoj Banji i Vranjskoj Banji.

Nimfe, na poznatim spomenicima, nose epitete Salutare, Augustae i, u okviru kultne zajednice „šumskih božanstava“, Silvestres i Virgines. Dedicanti, čije zanimanje je navedeno na natpisima, su sveštenik (i legat) (Bunjaci) i vojnik, verovatno veteran (Viminacijum), a pomenućemo i duomvira koji je posvetio votivni spomenik iz Ulpijane.

Na osnovu ovih podataka može se izvesti zaključak da su votivne spomenike posvećene nimfama, u najvećoj meri, podizali pripadnici viših staleža, iako je kult ovih mitskih bića izvesno bio prijemčiv i širim slojevima stanovništva. Verovatno se najveći broj svetilišta kulta nimfi nalazio u prirodi, gde su im posvećivani skromni spomenici od materijala koji nije izdržao zub vremena (drvo) ili teško prepoznatljivi žrtvenici (neobrađeni kamen bez natpisa ili reljefa). Moguće je da su svetilišta nimfi, poštovana u nedirutoj prirodi, zadržala deo svoga sjaja i religijske privlačnosti i u epohama koje su usledile nakon sutona antičkog sveta.