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Received: August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022  
Accepted: November 15<sup>th</sup> 2022  
Original research article  
UDC: 904: 738.8"652"(398)  
069.51:902/904"652"(497.11)  
[https://doi.org/10.18485/arhe\\_apn.2022.18.6](https://doi.org/10.18485/arhe_apn.2022.18.6)

## A CONTRIBUTION TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF ANTIQUE TERRACOTTA ICONOGRAPHY IN THE PROVINCE OF UPPER MOESIA

### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents three accidental terracotta finds assumed to originate from the Kruševac surroundings. There is one plate with a relief depiction, known only from the National Museum in Kruševac documentation, and two finds from the antique archaeological collection from the National Museum in Kruševac – the bust of a figure in high relief and the head of a female figurine. According to the iconography characteristics of these smaller dimension objects, we see the possibility of their cult nature. Thus, the depiction on the plate with a nude male figure with the spear and shield is identified as an artistic presentation of the god Mars. Taking into account the shorter coiffure with signs of stylisation on the bust mentioned above, we assume that it presents a male figure, but due to the poor preservation, it is impossible to identify it. Finally, thanks to a typical melon (melonen) coiffure and accessory on the top of the head resembling a high raised diadem or krobylos, we have made a connection between the head of the figurine and female facial features of the iconography of the goddess Venus.*

**KEYWORDS:** MARS, VENUS, TERRACOTTA, CULT, ICONOGRAPHY, KRUŠEVAC, UPPER MOESIA.

In the documentation of the National Museum in Kruševac, a small terracotta plate decorated with a relief presentation from an unknown site was recorded as a rare specimen in the Kruševac surrounding area, from where it is assumed it originates (Рашкових 2017: 337, ТIII/6). In addition, this museum's archaeological collection also keeps two accidental pottery finds<sup>1</sup> with small dimensions. On this occasion, by analysing their artistic details, we tried to resolve to which deities they could possibly have belonged, that is, what could be their purpose. Namely, archaeological finds of Antiquity originating from the Kruševac surroundings most often represent objects of daily use,<sup>2</sup> while finds of a cult character are much rarer.

1 *Antique archaeological collection of the National Museum in Kruševac, inventory number 6, 8.*

2 A more luxurious find, rare in this area, is a bronze jug of the olpe type from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, ornated

However, in the somewhat broader surroundings, finds indicating worship of different cults have been recorded, among which Mithra's cult dominates, based on its frequency. That is how one marble relief dedicated to this deity was found during an excavation in the *Horreum Margi* fortification (Васић 1992: 379–385; Тапавићки-Илић и Петковић 2017: 165-166, fig. 1), while Mithra's marble icons have also been recorded in the villages of Ražanj (Гавриловић-Витас 2017: 187–206, сл. 1-2), Nozrina (Plemić and Vasiljević 2021), Džigolj near Prokuplje (Цветковић-Кузмановић 1995: 165-169) and Dragovo near Rekovac (Зотовић 1973: 25). In addition, the collective find under the hill called Karađorđevo brdo, near Paraćin, has been also recorded in the literature, where, together

with silver, found in the village of Bošnjane on the left bank of the West *Morava river*, today in the National Museum, Belgrade, Поповић 1994: 276.



Fig. 1 Terracotta plaque with a relief decoration (documentation of the National Museum Kruševac).

with Mithra, there were other deities such as Apollo and the Thracian Horseman (Seure 1922; Ceromanović-Kuzmanović 1963: 32–33; Срданковић 2007). Furthermore, in the village of Nozrina, several votive reliefs dedicated to Sol-Apollo, the Thracian Horseman, Jupiter, and Juno were found (Рашковић 2013: 64, Т. 4-5; Васиљевић 2017: 23–25), and on the *Praesidium Pompei* site, a Roman road station located in the village of Ćićina, a cult relief dedicated to Asclepius was found (Племић 2012, 291–298). However, these monuments, in terms of the manufacturing method, material and dimensions, are visibly different from the find presented in this paper, and whose stylistic characteristics and manufacturing quality indicate the possibility of belonging to lower social classes and potential creation in a local craft workshop.

First, we will present a terracotta plate decorated in relief, recorded in the documentation of the National Museum in Kruševac, although without the data regarding the site where it was found. This is an object of 8.2 cm in height and 6.3 in width from highly purified clay and with slightly light-

er-colour baking. The standing figure of a young man with a cap on his head holding an elongated stick or spear-like object in his right hand while holding a round object in his left one is clearly identified (Fig. 1). The figure's left leg is slightly bent and seems raised onto a rock-like elevation. In front of the figure there is a shape resembling a pillar or profiled door-frame, while the scene is situated in the decorated frame whose ornaments in the form of a granulated border are observed only in the upper part, above the figure's head.

The fact that there were several finds in the wider surroundings of Kruševac connected with the cult of Mithra probably encouraged the previous opinion of the investigators that this deity could also be represented on the terracotta plate described above. So, the details like a cap on the head of the figure and an elongated object in the right hand are recognised as a *Phrygian* cap and a shepherd's crook (*pedum*), while Mithra, in his left hand, is offering food, as a part of the *Mithraic* Eucharistic, standing in front of a *Mithraeum* (Рашковић 2017: 337–338). However, it is known that the so-called *tauroctony*, a ritual scene in which the god Mithra kills a bull as the central presentation of *Mithraic* cosmogony, is actually the most commonly presented composition on objects of his cult (Cumont 1903; Hinnells 1975: 290–312; Merkelbach 1984: 153). The figure of the naked Mithra with a *pedum* is not a typical iconography even for the scenes of his cycle that appear around a central presentation on the complex icons of larger dimensions (Vermaseren 1956–1960: no. 1247, 1283, 1292–1293, 1301, 1400, 1472, 1920 and 1935). Additionally, a *pedum* occurs more often on Mithra's reliefs from Upper Moesia, but as an attribute of *dadophoroi*, *Cautes* and *Cautopates*, who usually surround the deity at the moment of *tauroctony* (Зотовић 1973: 130). Bearing in mind that all the mentioned Mithra reliefs from the area that is geographically close to Kruševac present typical depictions of the god Mithra in *tauroctony*, we believe that, based on the frequency of such an iconographic setting, it would be logical that the deity is also depicted in such a manner on the plate that we are discussing here.

Based on all the aforementioned, we would suggest a slightly different possibility for the identification of this relief presentation. Namely, the

nude young man with a helmet, spear, and shield, is actually one of two typical art presentations of the god Mars, which originated most probably under the influence of Hellenistic art, i.e. the iconography of the Greek god Ares (Cermanović Kuzmanović i Srejšović 1992: 333-334). In Roman mythology, this deity was primarily worshipped as the god of war (*Gradivus*), but also as a protector of agriculture and animal husbandry (*Pater*), which is why prayers were addressed to him to protect the land, both from enemies and natural disasters. Precisely because of the stated characteristics, his cult was widespread in Upper Moesia, which is confirmed by numerous finds, from epigraphic testimonies and small sculptures to jewellery and ceremonial objects (Васиљевић 2009). Moreover, it is known that most probably in the area of today's Kosmaj, a batch of coins was minted with the head of the god Mars on the obverse and armour on the reverse (Душанић 1971). Bearing all that in mind, we will presume that the long cap on the figure's head presented on the plate in question, like a Phrygian cap, is actually a stylised helmet with a tall crest, typical for the god Mars. Furthermore, we propose the identification of the attributes thus: in the right hand, the deity holds a spear (*hastae Martis*), and, in the left, a shield (*ancilla*), which is similar to the so-called Thracian shield, with a small round form, which was generally worn by members of the equestrian units, and Mars votive monuments on which he has epithet, *equitum*, are among the most numerous in the Upper Moesia (Mirković 1986: no. 299; Petrović 1995: no. 7-9; Јовановић 2007: 211). The parallels for such a depiction of Mars are found on the votive relief made of grey limestone dedicated to Jupiter, Mars, and Silvanus that is today built into the tower of the eastern rampart of the City of Smederevo (Цветковић 2009: 35-39; Васиљевић 2009: 200, сл. 1). Here, the nude Mars, with his weight on the right leg, is placed to the right of Jupiter. In the left hand, the deity holds a round shield, while the right one is next to the body, and maybe there was some attribute in it, such as a spear. In addition, a bronze figurine from Viminacium, today in the National Museum in Belgrade, with a height of 11.1 cm, has a similar iconography (Величковић 1972: 19, бр. 10; Јовановић 2007: 210-211; Васиљевић 2009: 201, сл. 2). Here, the nude young deity is presented in a standing position, of non-emphasised

contrapposto, with the right leg slightly stretched forward. In his left hand he holds a small round shield in front of his thigh, while in his right hand, raised above his shoulder, the attribute is missing, but it is assumed that it might have been a spear or a trophy. A luxurious helmet with a tall crest is on the head, and Mars is covered with a short cloak, fastened at the left shoulder, partly covering the chest. Such iconography is probably based on the classical role of Ares *Borghese*,<sup>3</sup> attributed to the Greek artist Alcámenes, which was a prototype of numerous later Roman copies of this deity (Lawrence 1929: 221, pl. 69b). Unfortunately, the non-elaborated execution of the relief presentation on the plate from the Kruševac area makes impossible to perceive the additional details, so it cannot be stated with any certainty whether in this case the figure had a short cloak, like the figurine from Viminacium.

We will continue the overview of terracotta findings from the antique collection of the National Museum in Kruševac with a description of the small icon representing a bust, crafted in high relief (Васиљевић 2017: 24). It is an object with a width of 4.5 cm and height 4 cm, with a maximum relief height of 3.2 cm. It is a specimen of slightly less pure clay with a darker baking colour. On the obverse of this terracotta, there is a head with a part of the bust, slightly emphasised short coiffure with partially persevered traces of curled styling (Fig. 2). On the reverse of the find, there is an opening with a diameter of approximately 2 cm, which we assume might have served to hang the relief on a solid surface (Fig. 3). As the presentation is significantly damaged, here it is impossible to make a more accurate attribution, but the short hair leads us to the thought that it depicts a man. In addition, there is an open question as to whether this could be a deity, considering that this icon as a cult object could easily be transferred or be a part of a house altar.

Finally, we end this short overview with a description of a small pottery head made in high relief, with a width of 4.5 cm and height up to 5 cm, and with a maximum relief height of 2.5 cm (Fig. 4). It is a fragment made of well-purified clay and traces of fine-grained sand, and with a reddish

<sup>3</sup> *Département des Antiquités grecques, étrusques et romaines*, Louvre (inv.no. Ma 866), <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010279164> (accessed: 17/05/2022)



Fig. 2 Terracotta icon with a high-relief bust – obverse (documentation of the National Museum Kruševac).



Fig. 3. Terracotta icon with a high-relief bust – reverse (documentation of the National Museum Kruševac).

baking colour. Unlike the previous find, the features of a woman's face can be clearly recognised, with the axis slightly bent to the left, with a chipped nose and chin. Since only the coiffure of this head reveals more details, we will try, on that basis, to provide a proposal for the identification of this presentation. Namely, the hair parted in the middle and combed into strands towards the vertex, emphasising the sliced structure and usually collected in a low bun at the nape of the neck, belongs to the so-called melon (*melonen*) style. This is a fashion known from the Hellenistic representation of unmarried girls during the Roman period, popularised by Princess Plautilla from the Severan dynasty through her portraits (Cambi 2005: 124). Additionally, on the vertex, some kind of groove or ribbon that goes around the head is observed, above which there is a profiled accessory resem-

bling the high-placed diadem that is characteristic of the *Venus Felix* iconography type, named after the statue from the second half of the 2nd century, today at the Pio-Clementino Museum in the Vatican (Delivorrias, Berger-Doer and Kossatz-Deissmann 1984: 79, no. 696, pl. 69; Hallett 2005, 199, 201, pl. 122, 219, 222, 238, n. 33, 332, 334), as well as the so-called Asia Minor type of Venus/Aphrodite (Битракова-Грозданова 1987: 138). Another possibility for interpreting the profiled accessory on the vertex is that here is a simply made top knot (*krobilos*) that represents a high bun similar to a bow-knot that often characterises the coiffures of the goddesses Venus and Diana. Such an iconography setting confirms numerous examples recorded across Roman provinces on the Central Balkans, as well as in Upper Moesia. These comprise various pieces of archaeological material, from monumental marble sculptures, preserved in fragments or completely, such as the head of Diana from Putinci near Ruma (Срејовић и Цермановић-Кузмановић 1987: 72–73; Племић 2017: кат. 11), then those from Sirmium (Venus or Diana?) (Поровић 2006: 153–159; Племић 2017: кат. 12) and Mediana (Venus or Diana) (Vasić i Gavrilović-Vitas 2012: fig. 3–5; Племић 2017: кат. 13), as well as the statute of a head from Mediana (Venus or Diana) (Plemić 2013: 121–127; Племић 2017: кат. 19) to the sculpture of Diana Lucifera from Čitluk, or bronze figurines such as one from an unknown site in Upper Moesia, and votive reliefs (Племић 2017: кат. 15, 22, 74). Among the stated parallels, we would single out the marble head of the goddess from Mediana, today at the National Museum in Niš. Its coiffure style on the vertex, i.e., *krobilos*, has a flat, almost rectangular form that is not similar to a bow, and its shape resembles that from a terracotta in the National Museum in Kruševac, even though there is an entirely different stylisation of strands.

Considering the opinion that speaks in favour of the more probable possibility for the identification of the head from Mediana as the Venus of Capitoline type has been presented (Vasić i Gavrilović-Vitas 2012: 147), we would also point out that the find discussed here, can rather be classified in the iconography opus of Venus than Diana, which is evidenced by the previously mentioned possibility for interpreting her hairstyle. In terms of dating, based on the *melonen* coiffure, which



Fig. 4. Head of the terracotta figurine (documentation of the National Museum Kruševac).

was popular from the time of Princess Plautilla (202-205), the wife of Emperor Caracalla, we suggest the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century as the earliest period of origin of this figurine.

At the end of this brief overview of the terracotta find from the National Museum in Kruševac documentation and the archaeological collection of the same, bearing in mind their possible cult nature, it is necessary to consider what their purpose could have been. Since these are finds of small dimensions that could be easily transported, they may have been an expression of an imported cult practice intended for house altars or some sacral facilities such as votive gifts. On the other hand, the technical and stylistic characteristics, showing a simple execution, indicate that they might also have originated in some provincial pottery workshops (Jeremić, Antonović and Vitezović 2018: 134-159). Additionally, the possibility that these are grave finds must not be ruled out, especially in the case of the female head, because the *Venus Furrerariae* cult has been confirmed multiple times in the area of Upper Moesia (Јовановић 2000: 11-19;

Глумац 2005: 369). However, without data on the context of the finds, it is impossible to discuss in more detail the places they were intended to be or their function. Therefore, we hope that this brief overview may serve as one of the guidelines for future research and that their results will enable a new, more complete knowledge about life in these areas during the period of Roman domination.

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mogli nastati u nekoj provincijskoj radionici. Takođe, nije isključena mogućnost da se radi o grobnim nalazima, posebno u slučaju ženske glave jer je kult *Venus Funerariae* višestruko potvrđen na tlu Gornje Mezije. Pretpostavljajući da potiču iz okoline Kruševca, kao područja za koje nemamo dovoljno podataka dobijenih putem arheoloških istraživanja, dok se poznati materijal dobijen rekognosciranjem svodi na utilitarne predmete i novac, nadamo se da prikazani nalazi mogu poslužiti kao jedna od smernica nekim budućim istraživačima antičke prošlosti tog prostora.

\* \* \*

## REZIME

### PRILOG POZNAVANJU IKONOGRAFIJE ANTIČKIH TERAKOTA NA TLU PROVINCIJE GORNJE MEZIJE

KLJUČNE REČI: MARS, VENERA, TERAKOTA, KULT, IKONOGRAFIJA, KRUŠEVAC, GORNJA MEZIJA.

U radu su predstavljena tri slučajna nalaza od terakote zabeležena u evidenciji Narodnog muzeja Kruševac: jedna pločica sa reljefnom predstavom, poprsje figure u visokom reljefu i glava ženske figurine. Shodno karakteristikama njihove ikonografije naslutili smo mogućnost da je ovde reč o kulturnim predmetima. Tako je prikaz na pločici koji čini naga muška figura sa kopljem i štitom, identifikovan kao likovni obrazac boga Marsa. Imajući u vidu otvor za kačenje na reversu, uz vidljivo kraću frizuru sa naznakama stilizacije na poprsju, pretpostavili smo da ono prikazuje mušku figuru ali je usled loše očuvanosti nije moguće identifikovati. Konačno, glavu ženskih crta lica, zahvaljujući *melonen* frizuri i dodatku na temenu koji asocira na *krobilos* (*krobylos*) ili visoko podignutu dijademu, doveli smo u vezu sa ikonografijom boginje Venere.

S obzirom na to da su ovo nalazi manjih dimenzija koji su se mogli lako transportovati, moguće je da su predstavljali izraz importovane kultne prakse, namenjeni kućnim oltarima ili nekim sakralnim ambijentima kao votivni darovi. Sa druge strane, tehničke karakteristike i sumarnost izvođenja govore u prilog činjenici da su

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