Received: October 14th 2024
Accepted: December 1st 2024
Research article

UDC: 904:745.55"652"(497.11)
https://doi.org/10.18485/arhe_apn.2024.20.3

BEBINA MILOVANOVIĆ[1*] IVANA KOSANOVIĆ[1]

[1] Institute of Archaeology, National Institute of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, Serbia
[*] Corresponding author: bebina27@yahoo.com

RE-OPENING THE QUESTION OF THE USE OF A RARE ROMAN ARTEFACT: THE IVORY OBJECT FROM VIMINACIUM

ABSTRACT

Ivory objects from Viminacium are few (nine pieces) and are generally simple in design and utilitarian in purpose. However, one find stands out due to its specific function. It is currently the only known example from Viminacium and is among the thirty-five finds known from literature, among which twenty-five are from graves.

A flat ivory object – a plaque in the shape of a pelta, was found with two bone rods in the grave of a deceased person, interred in a lead coffin, along with other items that date the burial to between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The unusual appearance and rarity of similar objects has long been the subject of debate among scientists. It was believed that they were elements of a small cabinet, a stringed instrument, a papyrus-scroll winder, an implement used for fine embroidery or a miniature weaving loom. This paper presents three of these interpretations, and stands by one of them, thus recognising the Viminacium find as a loom. Based on the grave goods, among which is the one we present in this paper, it was concluded that the deceased person was a woman. This rare item belongs to the luxury products that could not be afforded by everyone, but only members of high society.

KEYWORDS: IVORY PLAQUE, *VIMINACIUM,* ROMAN GRAVE, GRAVE GOODS, ROMAN WOMAN, WEAVING LOOM, EMBROIDERY, PAPYRUS-SCROLL WINDER, PELTA.

INTRODUCTION

The Romans made objects from the tusks and teeth of wild animals for various purposes. These items represented a luxurious version of cheaper products that were more commonly made from the teeth and horns of domestic and wild animals. Elephant tusks are commonly referred to as “ivory” for this type of material. However, although ivory was indeed the most prevalent among such products during Antiquity, some items were also made from the tusks and teeth of mammoths, hippopotamuses, walruses, and from whale bones. It is believed that ivory reached the Italian Peninsula through the Phoenicians, whose products Etruscan craftsmen imitated in the 7th century BC. Pausanias notes that the Greeks obtained this product from Ethiopia and India (Frazer 1898: XII, 254; Hrnčiarik 2017: 16). The scarce availability of raw materials led to the high price of these luxury products during the ancient period.

Ivory finds are extremely rare in *Viminacium*. This is likely due to the high cost of this type of material. Unlike most other materials, there is no evidence that it held any symbolic meaning for the

Romans, other than being treated as a luxury due to its exotic appearance (Deschler-Erb 1998: 87). Seven of the nine securely identified unpublished ivory objects from *Viminacium* are simple and lack any special artistic treatment (a buckle, a token, two bracelets, a ring and two belt buttons).[1] They were found in the layers of public buildings and structures, as well as in ditches and graves. Two examples stand out: an anthropomorphic plaque[2] and a flat ivory object in the shape of a pelta. The first stands out due to its exceptional artistic treatment, and the second has a specific purpose. This paper focuses on the second find – the flat ivory object, which was discovered in the grave of a deceased individual interred in a lead coffin, likely an adult female. The object requires special attention primarily due to the complexity of its function, which has remained unclear within the scientific community.

Samples from ivory finds excavated in *Viminacium*, together with some other for which it was not sure whether they were made of bone or ivory, have been sent for analysis, which will confirm the material and origin of the tusks from which they were made.[3] Roman craftsmen used African and Asian elephant tusk (Deschler-Erb 1998: 26–27). We expect to find out the species of elephant and a reliable chronology of the objects from *Viminacium* based on DNA and radiocarbon dating.

DESCRIPTION AND CONTEXT OF THE FIND

The flat ivory plaque in the shape of a pelta with volutes (dimensions: 11 x 8 x 1.5 cm), and a central form with carefully rounded details, was found in a deformed lead coffin (southern necropolis of Pećine, grave G-6024; C-14568; **Figure 1**). There are two square perforations that differ in size (1.6 x 1.1 cm and 1.1 x 1 cm) on the lower part of the object. This difference occurred later due to the rapid drying of the ivory, which caused the object to “flake” into layers and become somewhat deformed. Two circular perforations, with a diameter of 0.7 cm, are located at the upper ends ending in the shape of volutes. The upper central part of the plaque is decorated with irregular carvings. The distance between the bottom square perforations is 2.5 cm, while the distance between the top circular ones is 7.3 cm.

Accompanying the object there were two bone rods of a rectangular cross-section (length 12.7 cm; cross-section: 1.1 x 0.8 cm). Neither rod is completely preserved, and their original length is unknown. The rods match the dimensions of the square perforations on the plaque, through which they can pass, and we can, therefore, consider them integral parts of this find (**Figure 2**). Those rods mutually joined and kept the plaques at a certain distance depending on their length, also allowing the stability of the artefact. Although only one flat plaque has been preserved, it is assumed that there were two, along with two more cylindrical rods passing through the upper circular openings of the finds. The absence of these parts, which would make the find complete, is likely a result of the work carried out within the current Kostolac B thermal power plant complex, where the grave in the southern necropolis of *Viminacium* was excavated. The grave was damaged during the digging of a water channel, which also damaged and deformed the lead coffin along with the skeletal remains, while most of the other grave goods were preserved (Milovanović, Golubović and Mikić 2023: 94–96).

At *Viminacium*, there are around thirty well-preserved lead coffins, along with numerous fragmented examples. The many burials in lead coffins suggest that there was likely a workshop in *Viminacium* for their production. The proximity

[1] The fragmented ivory buckle is shaped like the Latin letter 'U,' while the domed token has a depiction of crossed lines intersecting at right angles within an engraved circle on its flat side. Both finds are from the Castrum site (C-447 and C-1783). Two closed-type bracelets, ribbon-like in appearance with a rectangular cross-section, were found in the grave of a child from the eastern necropolis of Pirivoj (C-433 and C-434; Grave G-161). A large ring with profiled edges and a ribbon-like appearance was found in a disturbed grave of a buried individual from the first half of the 3rd century (C-13445; Grave G-2407) at the southern necropolis of Više Grobalja, along with two domed belt buttons from the damaged grave of a buried individual from the same necropolis (C-14343; Grave G-2819).

[2] The *en face* relief-carved head of a bearded man was found in the grave of a cremated individual of unknown gender and age from the southern necropolis of Pećine, dated to the 2nd century (C-14300; Grave G-1190).

[3] The samples were given for analysis within the project – *TuskTrace: Early Globalization and Ecosystem Change from Ancient Elephant DNA in Ivory*. PIs: Anselme Cormier (UCO France), Kyle Harper (Oklahoma), Courtney Hofman (Oklahoma).

Figure 1. a. The lead coffin from the southern necropolis of Pećine at Viminacium; **b.** A flat ivory object in the shape of a pelta with volutes and hairpins (?) of bone in situ; (grave G-6024, photo documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

of galena mines, which provided silver and lead, undoubtedly influenced their abundance. However, the practice of burying the deceased in lead coffins cannot yet be attributed to a specific ethnicity or cult. It is certain only that, based on the preserved grave goods, they belonged to members of the higher social class, most often young females, including children (Milovanović 2017: 167–170). Lead coffins in Serbia are not uncommon. Besides *Viminacium*, they are found in all major urban centres of the then Roman provinces (*Naissus*, *Sirmium*, *Singidunum*), but also in smaller settlements near mines where lead was exploited (Milovanović 2017: 121–124).

Near the flat ivory object from *Viminacium* about 50 whole and fragmented thin bone hairpins or knitting needles (?) with pointed ends, three sewing needles made of bone[4], a bone spatula, and a glass *balsamarium* were found **(Figure 3).** Several objects were found outside of the coffin: another *balsamarium,* four other glass toilet bottles, and several bronze plaques with a handle and a lock. All the objects were close together, even two bottles one inside the other, indicating that they were all

[4] About the different uses of bone needles, you can see in: Flemestad *et al.* 2017: 270.

Figure 2. A flat ivory object in the shape of a pelta with volutes and two rods of bone from the grave G-6024 (photo by Goran Stojić).

Figure 3. Hairpins (?), sewing needles, a spatula of bone, and a *balsamarium* from the grave G-6024 (photo by Goran Stojić).

placed within a wooden chest, of which only the bronze plaques, the lock, the handle, and iron nails remained (**Figures 4a and 4b**). Nearby, a shell, and a ceramic oil lamp of the *Firmalampen* type, with an image of a theatrical mask on the discus and a stamp FORTIS on the base, were found (Loeschke IXc; Korać 2018 Vol I–II: 610–611; 355, Type IX c, 1139A). All grave goods belong to the period between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. A bronze coin of Domitian (AD 85/86) was also found (**Figure 5**). The coin is worn and had been in use for a long time (Milovanović, Golubović and Mikić 2023: 94–96).

Figure 4a. Grave goods outside of the lead coffin from the grave G-6024 (photo by Goran Stojić).

Figure 4b. A toilet bottle, *balsamarium*, and remains of a chest from the grave G-6024 (photo by Goran Stojić).

Figure 5. A shell, ceramic oil lamp and bronze coin of Domitian from the grave G-6024 (photo by Goran Stojić).

DISCUSSION

The flat ivory object with two bone rods represents the only find of this type, not only in *Viminacium* but also in the territory of present-day Serbia, which was part of the Roman province of *Moesia Superior*, later *Moesia Prima*. Analogous examples found in pairs – artefacts consisting of two identical plaques with rods of rectangular and circular cross-sections, are known from sites in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and France, while finds of individual elements are known from Spain and Romania. An overview of all finds published so far with basic information is presented in **Table I**, divided by Roman provinces according to the catalogue from J. C. Béal's paper (Béal 2017: 301–309). We added the find from *Viminacium* to these sites.

Looking at the analogous examples from the aforementioned sites, the most similar to the one from *Viminacium* is one of three such finds from Nîmes (France, **Figure 6**). The object is almost completely preserved and differs from the *Viminacium* example in that the upper ends are shaped like stylised bird heads, while the middle area is almost flat with a central notch. It was found in a stone sarcophagus containing the cremated remains of a female individual[5], in an alabaster urn. In addition to the two ivory plaques with two pairs of bone rods, a spindle with a distaff, amber items, and a gold ring were found. The grave is dated to the 1st – 2nd century AD (Béal 2017: 293, fig. 5, 306–307, N°16; Wood 2001: 30, fig. 9).

The find from Nîmes, like the one from *Viminacium*, belongs to simpler examples, while more luxurious ones made of ivory and bone are decorated with mythological scenes in deep or shallow relief, not only on the outside, but also on the inside. Among the most luxurious are the finds from Pompeii and Cologne, with figural depictions from ancient mythology on both sides (Pompeii: plaque A – the birth of a hero (Meleager or Achilles?) and the death of a hero; plaque B – the rape of Persephone and Demetra, Artemis,

Figure 6. The object from Nîmes (artefact 906.10.16). Photograph copyright © Cécile Carrier, Musée de la Romanité, Nîmes – All rights reserved. Published by permission of Cécile Carrier, Musée de la Romanité, Nîmes, given in 2024.

and Athena pursue the chariot of Hades; Cologne: plaque A – Eros, Dionysus and Silenus, the infant Dionysus, and nymph; plaque B – Semele with Hermes and two Erotes and Aphrodite bathing with Eros) (Wood 2019: 414, 420–421, fig. 2; Christof 2010: 344–346, fig. 1–4 a, b; Wood 2001: 24–25, figs. 1, 4; Schneider 1990: 256-267; Groh 1990: 88–89, Taf. 17/32 a, b, c). Mythological depictions related to a scene of Bacchanalians, or a Centauromachy are shown on fragments of plaques from Ostia (Wood 2019: 434–435, cat. 6; Christof 2010: 347–348). The finds from Apt, Nijmegen, and Mangalia (*Callatis*) were worked using the openwork technique (Béal 2017: 292–293, figs. 1, 3, 4; 301–302, figs. 1, 2, 3), simple vegetal motifs from the previously mentioned Marennes example were executed using engraving, while concentric circles are known on one of the three examples from Nîmes (Béal 2017: 295, figs. 8, 10–11).

The find in relation to its context and affiliation

To date, only 35 artefacts of this type of object are known. The rarity of such finds can be explained using other cheaper and porous materials, such as wood for their production, which have not been preserved due to their fragility. This may be why most of the surviving artefacts are made of bone (23 specimens) and ivory (nine specimens), with fewer examples made of wood (two specimens)

[5] The gender has been determined based on a study of the grave goods and an osteological analysis, see in F. Mazauric, Le Musée Archéologique de Nîmes, Recherches et acquisitions, Années 1906 et 1907. *Mémoires de l'Académiede Nîmes*, VIIe série, t. XXX, année 1907, 300–302.

	SITE	CONTEXT OF FIND	FIND	GRAVE GOODS	GENDER	DATING
1	Cologne (North Rhineland-Westphalia/ Germany	Eigelstein necropolis, tomb indeterminate	2 ivory plaques			25 BC-25 AD
2	Nijmegen (Gelderland/Netherlands)	Probably in a grave	2 bone plaques with rectangular bone rods	2 pyxides, about 15 fragments of bone hairpins, a spindle and a whorl		1st and the beginning of the 2nd century
3	Lyon (Rhône/France)	In a pit in a residential sector or public building	a bone plaque and 2 rectangular bone rods			Augusto-Tiberian period
4	Lyon (Rhône/France)	Gallo-Roman dump	a rectangular bone rod			1st - 2nd century
5	Lyon (Rhône/France)	Gallo-Roman dump	a rectangular bone rod			1st - 2nd century
6	Sainte-Colombe-lés-Vienne (Rhône/ France), ancient Vienna		a bone plaque			Gallo-Roman
7	Marennes (Rhône/France)	Cremation tomb Nº 6100 or contemporary tomb Nº 6319	2 ivory plaques	Tomb 6100 - terracotta, glass dishes, gold and bronze objects, terracotta statuettes, coins, an element of a funeral bed Tomb 6319 - a hooked spindle	Tomb 6100 - a child, probably 3-4 years old Tomb 6319 an adult of undetermined sex	Second half of the 1st century - beginning of the 2nd century
8	Voiron (Isére/France)	Funeral pyre from La Brunerie	a deer antler plaque	131 ceramic vases, 10 glass vases, 3 terracotta statuettes, 8 coins, food offerings, bronze and glass dishes, and a gold ring	An adult of undetermined sex	Second half of the 1st century
9	Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux(Drôme/France)	Valladas necropolis, cremation tomb Nº32	2 bone plaques and 2 cylindrical bone rods		A young adult of undetermined sex	60-100 AD
10	Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (Drôme/France)	Valladas necropolis, cremation tomb Nº70	2 bone plaques and one or two cylindrical bone rods		An adult of undetermined sex	40-70 AD
11	Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (Drôme/France)	Valladas necropolis, cremation tomb Nº27	a rectangular rod		A young adult of undetermined sex	40-60 AD
12	Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse/France)	Necropolis in the Maraudi district. A glass funeral urn Nº13.399	2 bone plaques	fragments of box, bone pin, glass melted, bronze fragments and an iron nail		Between Tiberius-Claudius and the end of the 2nd century

Table I. Overview of all plaques published so far with basic information taken from Béal's catalogue (Béal 2017: 301–309) with added find from Viminacium.

	SITE	CONTEXT OF FIND	FIND	GRAVE GOODS	GENDER	DATING
13	Orange (Vaucluse/France)	Terracotta cinerary urn Nº9073	a bone plaque			Gallo-Roman
14	Apt (Vaucluse/France)	Eastern necropolis cremation tomb?	2 bone plaques, 2 restangular bone rods (and 2 cylindrical bone rods ?)	pyxides and a small handle of bone		1st and the beginning of the 2nd century
15	Nîmes (Gard/France)	Necropolis of the Porte d'Auguste	2 bone plaques and 2 rectangular bone rods			Gallo-Roman
16	Nîmes (Gard/France)	Oriental necropolis Stone chest with funerary urn in alabaster	2 ivory plaques, 2 rectangular ivory rods and 2 cylindrical bone sticks	a spindle with whorl, amber objects and a gold ring	Female (according to the grave goods)	Gallo-Roman
17	Nîmes (Gard/France)	Residential and public thermal baths	a bone plaque			250-400 AD
18	Gulf of Fos-sur-Mer (Bouches-du- Rhône/ France)	Underwater in the cove	a wooden plaque			Gallo-Roman
19	Saint-Gilles ((Gard/France)	Burial incineration in funeral urn	a plaque	an oil lamp, a mirror, a hairpin, a glass balsamaria and a bone comb		
20	Narbonne (Aude/France)	Northern necropolis from Narbonne, on the Domitian way	a bone plaque			Gallo-Roman
21	Albenga (Liguria/Italy)	Necropolis south of Albenga, tomb 3	a bone plaque and 2 rectangular bone rods	a strigil; bones and metal elements, lock elements and key of box	Female (according to the grave goods)	The end of the 1st century
22	Rignano Flaminio (Lazio/Italy)	Tomb	2 bone plaques and a rectangular bone rod	ceramics vessels		1st century
23	Ostia (Latium/Italy)	Tomb on the Via dei Sepolcri	2 ivory plaques	fragments of funeral bed and various bone objects		2nd century BC- beginning of the 1st century BC
24	Pompeii (Campania/Italy)	In a small wooden cabinet	2 ivory plaques			50 BC – 1st century of AD

Table I. (continued).

	SITE	CONTEXT OF FIND	FIND	GRAVE GOODS	GENDER	DATING
25	Pompeii (Campania/Italy)	Necropolis of the Porte de Nocera, cremation area	a bone plaque			60-79 AD
26	Pompeii (Campania/Italy)	Necropolis of the Porte de Nocera, tomb Nº207	a bone plaque and rectangular rods		Female	0-40 BC
27	Pompei (Campania/Italy)	Region VI, 15,9	1 rectangular rod			Before 79 AD
28	Taranto (Apulia/Italy)	Necropolis at the arsenal, burial XXV	6 bone plaques, 3 rectangular bone rods (and a cylindrical bone rod ?)		Female (according to the grave goods)	First half of the 1st century AD
29	Taranto (Apulia/Italy)					
30	Taranto (Apulia/Italy)					
31	Taranto (Apulia/Italy)	Santa Lucia necropolis, tomb 48, marble urn	2 ivory plaque and a rectangular rod		Female (according to the grave goods)	Between the Augustan era and the middle of the 1st century AD
32	Italy? (Fitzwilliam Museum)	Funerary cist	2 ivory plaques, 2 rectangular rods and 2 cylidrical rods	ivory combs, pixides, jars, mirror, knife and writing tablets		Beginning of the 1st century AD
33	Catalonia/Spain		?			
34	Mangalia (Dobruja/Romania)	Necropolis of the Callatis, in sarcophagus	2 wooden plaques and a rectangular wooden rod	glass objects, two coins of Faustina the Elder (141-147), rods, wooden and leather shoes, pyxides, comb, spindle with whorl, a pair of earrings, 3 necklaces and 2 rings, a box in gilded bronze, a mirror, a basket and a glass situla	Female	Middle of the 2nd century
35	Viminacium (Kostolac/Serbia)	Southern necropolis of Viminacium (Pećine), grave G-6024, lead coffin	an ivory plaque and 2 rectangular bone rods	around 50 bone hairpins (?), 3 bone sewing needles, a bone spatula, 2 balsamariums, 4 glass bottles, a ceramic oil lamp, a bronze coin, a shell, and bronze and iron remains of the elements of a wooden chest	Female (according to the grave goods)	2nd century

Table I. (continued).

and deer antler (one specimen). The scarcity of these finds is probably one of the main reasons for the lack of a consensus on their function. What connects most of these finds is that they are generally discovered in graves; twenty-five out of a total of thirty-five examples (including the one from *Viminacium*) have been found in such contexts (**Table I**).

Cremation graves dominate (ten graves), while only two graves belong to inhumated individuals. The burial ritual of the others is unknown (Béal 2017: 301–307). The prevalence of these types of artefacts in cremation graves during the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD are generally from those graves where the deceased were placed in urns or cists (**Table I**: 12−13, 16, 19) (Béal 2017: 306–307, N°12, 13, 16, 19). In one case, the find was discovered together with the remains of the funerary bed (**Table I**: 23) (Béal: 2017: 307, N°23). One of the urns is made of precious alabaster material (**Table I**: 16) (Béal: 2017: 306–307, N°16). The finds from *Viminacium* (Milovanović, Golubović and Mikić 2023: 94–96) and *Callatis* (**Table I**: 34) (Béal 2017: 307, N°34) are the only ones known for certain to be from the graves of inhumated individuals, and they belong to the 2nd century, or 2nd and 3rd centuries. Only two finds come from public buildings (**Table I**: 3, 17) (Béal 2017: 301, N°3, 307, N°17).

The predominance of cremation graves is entirely understandable considering they come from necropolises in the western provinces of the Roman Empire, chronologically dated to between the 2nd and 1st century BC, and the 1st century AD and, very rarely, in the 2nd century AD. Chronologically, the oldest example of all artefacts dated so far is from Ostia and belongs to the 2nd century BC and the beginning of the 1st century BC (Béal 2017: 307, N° 23). Most others are dated to the transition from the old to the new era and the 1st – 2nd centuries AD (Béal 2017: 301–308). The latest example is from the baths in Nîmes, dated from 250 to 400 AD (**Table I**) (Béal 2017: 307, N°17). However, the noticeable absence of such artefacts after the 2nd century AD cannot simply be accepted as a temporary state caused by insufficient site exploration or unpublished materials from museum storage facilities where other such artefacts might be hiding, but that the artefact's function became obsolete and simply "fell out of fashion" during the late antique period.

Although the gender and age of the deceased in these graves are not always known, where determined, they are women of a younger age and, in one case, a child aged between 3 and 4 years (**Table I**: 7, 16, 21, 26, 28, 31, 34) (Béal 2017: 306–307, N°16, 21, N°26, 28, N°34 and N°7). In most cases, gender was determined only based on the grave inventory attributed to women. In addition, most of graves were discovered at the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century and, consequently, anthropological analyses were not performed. The modest osteological material from the damaged lead coffin from *Viminacium*, based on physical anthropological analysis, belongs to an adult of undetermined gender and age (Milovanović, Golubović and Mikić 2023: 98, Table 2). However, based on the previously mentioned grave goods, it can be assumed that the deceased was female.

The grave goods in all graves where these finds were found are numerous and can be roughly grouped into toiletry and sewing/spinning tools. The function of these artefacts could also indicate that the deceased were female, even in cases where no anthropological analyses were performed. The grave goods were chosen to highlight not only gender, but also the role of women in Roman society, especially those from respectable families. A woman's role was, among other things, to showcase refinement and elegance, which was achieved through neatness, elegance, and body care. Therefore, they used luxurious cosmetic and toiletry items for beautification and storing cosmetics (Danković and Marjanović 2022: 216).

The find in relation to its possible function and use

The function of finds similar to the one from *Viminacium* has long been the subject of debate among scientists. There are different interpretations of the use of this item. It was believed that it was a small cabinet, a papyrus-scroll winder (Wood 2001: 23–40), a stringed instrument, a tool for fine embroidery (Béal 2017: 296), a miniature wagon, a jewellery or needle container (Schneider 1990: 271–272) or a miniature weaving loom (Schneider

1990: 271-272; Christof 2010: 349–356; Wood 2019: 411–420).

Until recently, three opposing opinions dominated. Two of them were supported by S. Wood. The first one, published in 2001, considers the find to be probably used for unrolling or securing a papyrus scroll during reading, that is, as a papyrus-scroll winder (Wood 2001: 23–40). In 2019, she expressed an opinion according to which she favoured the artefact being a weaving loom (Wood 2019: 411–420), as it was also considered in 1990 by B. Schneider among other possible purposes (Schneider 1990: 271–272), as well as E. Christof in 2010 (Christof 2010: 349–356). Some authors shared the same opinion at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, but in the meantime that interpretation has been neglected (Béal 2017: 296). The third opinion, in some ways similar to the second one, since being connected to the textile/fabric making, was supported by J. C. Béal, who interpreted the find as an object used for braiding or decorating fabric bands with fine embroidery (Béal 2017: 291–313). All authors have detailed their views, using the accompanying finds with which this one was discovered, possible reconstructions and ethnographic data supporting its function for the stated purposes.

In this paper we wanted to consider all three interpretations to acquaint the readers with all the pros and cons that the mentioned authors and ourselves encountered while considering the function of this artefact. Since the interpretation of the artefact as a papyrus-scroll winder was given as the most detailed among all others by Susan Wood, and raised many questions, consequently being neglected even by the author herself, we have tried to apply it to the *Viminacium* find, with an aim to further analyse this possibility.

The papyrus-scroll winder

According to S. Wood, while reading texts, readers often need to gesture to the audience to emphasize and dramatize certain sequences, especially when reading poetry. This tool allowed the reader to free one hand occasionally and address the audience directly (Wood 2001: 29). She mentions two different ways of using this artefact with papyrus, depending on whether it has cylindrical rods in the upper or lower part of the plaque. If the circular perforations are in the lower part, where rectangular ones are also located for the rods connecting the two plaques (the examples from Pompeii, Fitzwilliam Museum (**Figure 7**), Ostia, Cologne, and Taranto), the use of this artefact would be as follows: cylindrical rods would pass through small circular perforations, allowing the papyrus to slide underneath them and over the square ones which do not rotate. In this way, the scroll could be easily replaced by simply pulling out the cylindrical rods (Wood 2001: 26–29, fig. 8) (**Figure 8a**).

The usage, according to S. Wood, would be somewhat different in the case of other finds, such as the *Viminacium* example, which has circular perforations in the upper part and square or rectangular perforations in the lower part, but whose plaques were also shaped so as to have curves that form the beds for rods. In this case, the cylindrical rods threaded through the scrolls were put in the beds and could have been removed from them without dismantling the artefact. The part of the papyrus being read was stretched

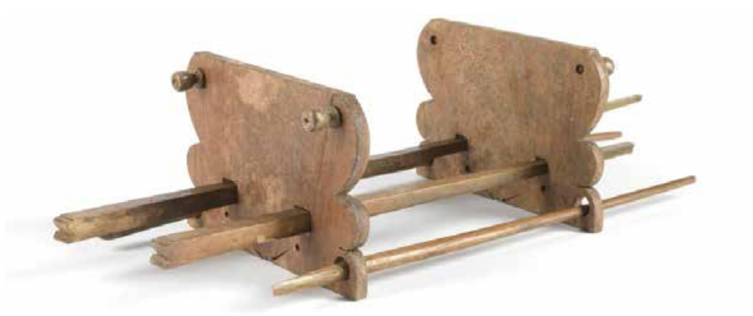

Figure 7. The object from The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge (photo taken from https://collection.beta.fitz.ms/id/image/media-209616) Photograph copyright © The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge – CC BY-NC-ND (accessed on October 21st, 2024).

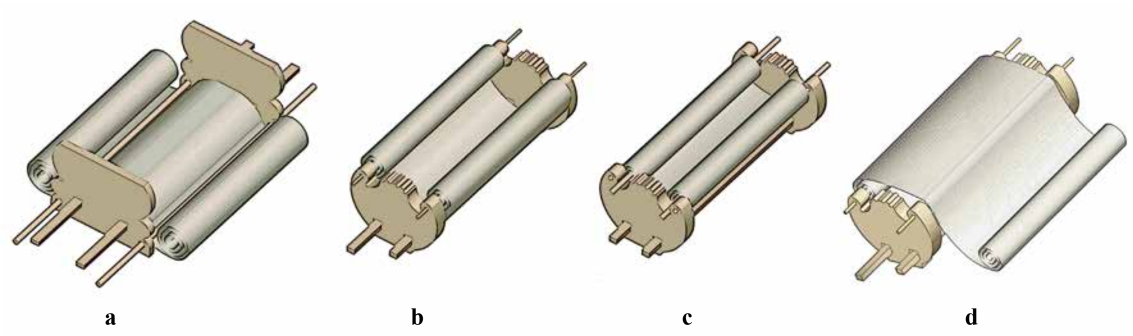

Figure 8. The ideal reconstruction of the use of the *Viminacium* artefact as a papyrus scroll-winder: **a.** the object from the Fitzwilliam Museum (after S. Wood's description and model of Pompeian object); **b.** *Viminacium* object (after the modification of S. Wood's description); **c.** *Viminacium* object (after S. Wood's description); **d.** *Viminacium* object (additional option of use) - (reconstructions-3D models created by Emilija Nikolić).

(hung) between the left and right scrolls, and over the square rods at the bottom. Again, the scroll could be easily replaced by simply taking out the scrolls with the cylindrical rods from the beds. A schematic reconstruction of this method, on the basis of its description given by S. Wood while reconstructing the Nîmes artefact (Wood 2001: 31–32), is shown on the *Viminacium* example (**Figure 8c**). bermore, since the circular perforations in the *Viminacium* example are larger than those in the Nîmes artefact, they allow the thick cylindrical rods with threaded scrolls to be put through them instead of being laid in the plaque beds and offer us a somewhat different reconstruction (**Figure 8b**), which slightly changes the S. Wood method in the *Viminacium* case. However, it must be agreed that both ways are unsuitable for reading, because the space between the plaques is too narrow, the size of the papyrus would have had to be llimited and, thus, the reading space between the covers would be extremely small. Thus, the size of the papyrus would have had to be limited to smaller examples containing columns of poetry (Wood 2017: 28).

However, most representations on wall paintings, or stone reliefs, statues or tombstones, show closed scrolls of papyrus being held in the hand (Grüll *et al*. 2023: Figs. 1−5, 7, 9, 13, 15). According to J. W. Clark, the method of reading when both halves of the scroll are turned inwards, as is the case in these reconstructions, was mostly used (Clark 1901: 27–28; Birt 1907: 135), as can be seen in some depictions (e.g., **Figure 9**; an example from Viminacium - Pilipović 2022: cat. 38). Another method of papyrus reading, where one half of the scroll is turned inwards and the other is turned outwards, such as the one presented

Figure 9. A drawing of a papyrus reader, traced from a fresco from Herculaneum
(photo taken from Birt 1907: 165, Abb. 103).

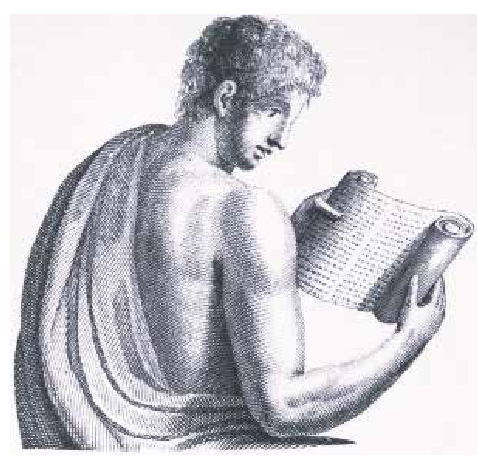

Figure 10. A drawing of a papyrus reader, traced from a fresco from Pompeii
(photo taken from Clark 1901: 28, sl. 9).

in **Figure 10** (Clark 1901: 28, fig. 9), offers us the possibility of a different use of the *Viminacium* artefact, which is shown on another reconstruction, where one cylindrical rod is used for threading through the scroll, while the other one supports the papyrus while reading (**Figure 8d**). Again, this case does not seem entirely plausible, mostly since the mutually opposite directions of papyrus rolling and unrolling would probably lead to damage. We can also assume that the presentation of the reader given in **Figure 10**, schematically presents the holding of the papyrus while reading and does not reflect its real, at least, not its prevailing use.

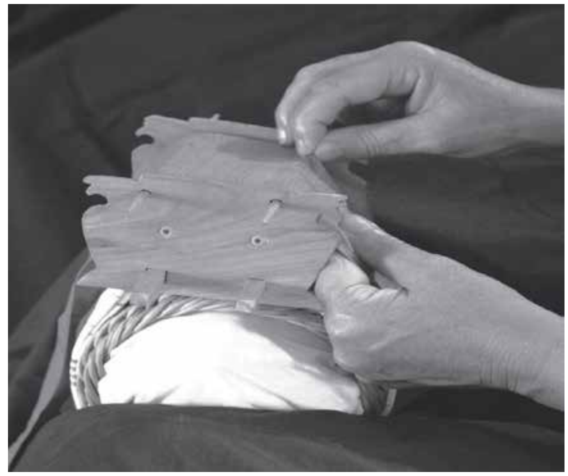

Figure 11. Interpretation of the object as a tool for embroidery given by J. C. Béal (Béal 2017: 299, Figure 19). Photograph copyright © Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise – CC BY-NC-ND (accessed on October 21st, 2024).

The embroidery tool

J. C. Béal based his opinion that an artefact of this type could be used for fine embroidery on the find from a grave excavated at Roman *Callatis* (Dobruja, Romania). Together with two wooden plaques and a rectangular wooden rod, a cylindrical woven straw basket covered with remnants of fabrics was found, which he interpreted as a kind of "pillow" on which these two plaques connected with a rod would rest, acting like frames holding the stretched fabric for embroidery (Béal 2017: 298–299, figs. 16–18, 308, N°34) (**Figure 11**). He believed that this artefact was used for luxurious embroidery with gold thread, the remains of which are rarely represented in the western provinces of the empire, while they are much more abundant in the eastern provinces. According to him, the presence of artefacts for embroidery in graves does not symbolise the skill of a woman who was expected to be familiar with this activity but indicates the luxury and high social status to which the woman belonged (Béal 2017: 300–301). However, while considering the possibility of the artefact´s use as an embroidery tool, even while decorating narrow bands we can say that the artefact is too small, but also too unstable to hold the fabric taut for such precise work using gold thread. Besides, we are not clear what could have kept the fabric taut. Béal´s reconstruction does not show that.

An iconographic depiction of this type of find has so far only been known from the stela of a married couple from *Heraclea Pontica* (Turkey; **Figure 12**), where a possible plaque with one rectangular rod, similar to a find at *Callatis* (Béal

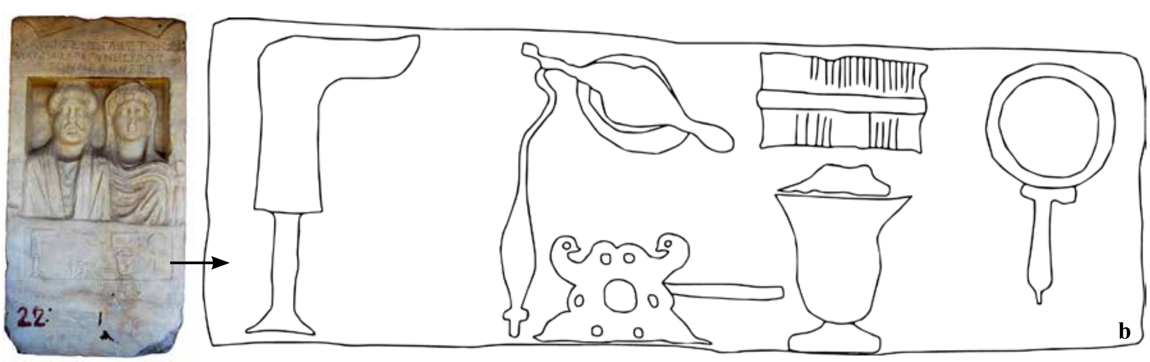

Figure 12. The stela of a married couple from *Heraclea Pontica*: **a.** Overview of the stela (Öztürk 2022: 184. Figure 21). Photograph copyright by © Archaeopress and Bülent Öztürk – All rights reserved. Published by permission of Archaeopress and Bülent Öztürk; **b.** The detail of the representation of various artefacts on stela, among which is a plaque with a rod (drawing created by Emilija Nikolić and Davor Radulj tracing the Figure 21 in Öztürk 2022: 184).

2017: 298, fig. 16), along with artefacts of various purposes: a curved tool, a spindle, a distaff, a comb, a mirror, and a sewing basket with a lid − *kalathos* (Öztürk 2022: 184, Figure 21; Béal 2017: 298, fig. 13, 309, N°35) was depicted. The depicted carved tool is presumed to be a billhook used for pruning vines (Béal 2017: 298, fig. 13), and is frequently shown on stelae with married couples, as a symbol of the pruning skills of the depicted husband (Cappelletto 2017: 252–253, fig. 3). All the other artefacts depicted on this stela can be considered symbols of women and are depicted on most stelae of married couples.

Artefacts like distaffs and spindles were common tools essential for preparing yarn, while a special basket, such as the one depicted on the stela and known by the Greek name *kalathos*, was used for storing and collecting raw wool as well as wool processed into yarn. Wool baskets were typically made from willow twigs or similar organic materials (Trinkl 2014: 190−192). Therefore, the basket found in the grave in *Callatis* could simply be a storage basket for wool, rather than, as suggested by J. C. Béal, a basket used as a sort of cushion on which the two wooden plaques served as an embroidery tool. Some of the artefacts depicted on the stela from *Heraclea Pontica* are found among grave goods along with a plaque-like object. Spindles with whorls were found in graves from Nijmegen and Nîmes, and a comb and mirror in graves from Saint-Gilles and *Callatis.* Besides these, all other finds from graves, including the one from *Viminacium*, can be classified as toiletry and sewing/spinning/knitting tools. Typically, these include pyxides, glass, toilet bottles, hairpins, and sewing needles (Nijmegen, Vaison-la-Romaine, Saint-Gilles; Béal 2017: 301, N°2, 306, N°12, 307, N°19).

The miniature loom

B. Schneider had three solutions for using these artefacts, those being a wagon, a container for jewellery or a weaving loom. She was the first to interpret the device as a loom, but she herself was not sure of the exact way to use it (Schneider 1990: 413−420). E. Christof also accepted the opinion that it was the miniature loom, and was the first one to give an example of a modern weaving device whose principle of operation is similar to the Roman artefact (Christof 2010: 343−361). The papers of both authors were of crucial importance for S. Wood, who would, two decades after her first interpretation of the artefact as a papyrus-scroll winder, develop their interpretations and provide the ideal reconstructions of the artefact as a miniature loom. Studying the plaques from Cologne and Pompeii, all three authors had come to the same conclusion about its function as a weaving loom.

S. Wood described it in 2019 as a loom for weaving narrow strips (Wood 2019: 413−420) giving two possibilities of its use. According to the first one, the threads were stretched across the plaques' tops, perpendicular to them and parallel to the rods. Their stable position was assured either by guides or a roughened plaque surface. The notches on the tops of the plaques such as those at the Nîmes (**Figure 13)**, Albenga and Saint-Colombe, could have been used to guide the threads (Wood 2019, 415; Béal 2017: 295, fig. 8; 303, fig. 1−2; 304, fig. 9), while the shallow crisscross incisions were used for roughening the surface and creating friction, such as those at the plaques, from the Cologne, Pompeii and Fitzwilliam Museum (**Figure 8**) (Wood 2019: 413−415, fig. 1−3). The threads were fixed to the plaques either by being wrapped around the plaque knobs (such as could have been the case with the plaques from the Fitzwilliam Museum) or pulled through the plaque holes (as in some other examples). The activity was further conducted by weaving the weft threads through those already fixed, that is, perpendicular to them and the longer axis of the loom, using a needle or a small shuttle. Today's looms for making beaded strips can help to

Figure 13. The object from Nimes (Béal 2017: 295, Figure 8). Photograph copyright © Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise – CC BY-NC-ND (accessed on October 21st, 2024).

visualize this process (**Figure 14).** The second possibility of using the loom was applied to plaques that have the shape of pelta with volutes, bird's heads or similar. The threads were placed perpendicular to the circular rods that passed through the upper circular perforations and parallel to the plaques. These examples did not have rigid heddles, like modern day looms (**Figure 15)**, but they used shed rods to separate the threads. This type includes the find from *Viminacium*, an example from Nîmes (**Figure 6**), as well as those from *Callatis,* Rignano, and probably from Apt, Nijmegen, and Tarent (Béal 2017: 292−293, fig. 1, 3-5; 298, fig. 16; 302, fig. 3-4; 306, fig. 5−7). We can conclude that the first possibility of using the loom was for weaving along its length, so only for narrow strips, while the second possibility allowed weaving along the width, for wider strips. Multiple perforations on some plaques, on some finds, probably offer the use of the loom in both ways.

* * *

Based on everything stated so far, and along with the prevailing interpretations we can hardly interpret the objects from *Viminacium* as elements of a papyrus-scroll winder, neither as elements of a tool for embroidery. We indeed believe that those objects were probably elements of a miniature weaving loom.

The three bone sewing needles found in the *Viminacium* grave alongside the ivory plaque, which could support the idea that the artefact was used as an embroidery making tool, do not seem suitable for fine embroidery. Embroidery needles needed to have extremely sharp tips, which is not the case with the *Viminacium* examples, where the end with the hole is pointed while the other end is not. Although we know little about embroidery needles from the period of the Roman Empire, it is known that three types of needles existed in Egypt. One type was short with both ends pointed and a hole at one end, another had one pointed end while the end with the hole was flat, and the third type had one pointed end and the other bent to form a thread eye. It is also known that these needles were made of wood, bone, bronze, or iron (Droß-Krüpe, Paetz gen. Schieck 2014: 207−209). The needles from *Viminacium*, however, have tips that are insufficiently sharp for piercing fabric, unlike the other end, which is extremely pointed but features a hole for the thread. Therefore, we assume that these needles were used for sewing but, in addition, they could have been used for threading on the loom (Flemestad *et al.* 2017: 270). Furthermore, about 50 bone pins with both pointed ends found in the *Viminacium* grave could have been used for hair but could also have been knitting needles or used for some activity connected to weaving. However, in the context of prevailing interpretations of the artefact purpose given above - as those used for textile/fabric making (though by different techniques) - we can assume that their use was for weaving.

Among analogous plaque objects, there are certain differences in the shape and in the position of the circular openings, as previously mentioned. Some of them are rectangular or in a volute, or pelta shaped. The perforations can be in the upper part (*Viminacium*, Nîmes, Apt) or in both the upper and lower part of the plaques (Cologne, Pompeii, Fitzwilliam Museum, Taranto). Additionally, some of the specimens have several pairs of circular openings (Taranto, Lyon, *Callatis*, Nîmes, Albenga), while some have only one rectangular perforation (*Callatis*, Mangalia, Rignano, Narbonne) (Béal 2017: 302−304, 306). All of this is important regarding the method in which the weaving object is used. The artistic representations of women using small weaving looms through history (**Figure 16**) that are also preserved in the museum ethnographic collections (**Figure 17**), along with the contemporary miniature home table looms previously presented (**Figure 14; Figure 15**), though they all differ in shapes and dimensions, may help us better understand the possible use of each element in the construction of the presented artefacts as well as the artefacts themselves.

The special skills and creativity of women were emphasised through knowledge of handicrafts such as spinning, sewing, weaving, braiding, and embroidery. Decorative items like spindles and distaffs were important elements during wedding ceremonies and remained in the matron's home as symbols of the marital bond (Lindgren 2013: 137). They were used for traditionally female work, which was performed even by women from wealthy families, without shame (Clark 1981: 198; Danković 2020; Danković and Marjanović 2022: 213). The ivory plaque, interpreted as a miniature loom, would represent yet another item

Figure 14. A modern home bead weaving loom (photo taken from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/preciosa-ornela/7751569694/in/album-72157630998259160/). Photograph copyright © Preciosa Ornela– CC BY 2.0 (accessed on December 12th, 2024).

Figure 15. A modern home rigid heddle loom (photo taken from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/origamichan/3639603898/). Photograph copyright © Tokyotogo – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (accessed on December 12th, 2024).

Figure 16. A detail from 15th century miniature (illuminated manuscript *L'Epistre d'Othea* by Christine de Pisan) (photo taken and modified from: https://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/BYVANCKB%3Amimi_74g27%3A059v_min). No copyright photograph © House of the Book & Royal Library, The Hague – PDM 1.0 (accessed on December 12th, 2024).

Figure 17. A traditional weaving loom from Norway (Vev. Bandvevstol. Betegnelse som er brukt i eldre museumsprotokoller. Båndvev) (photo taken from: https://digitaltmuseum.no/011023227011/vev). Photo by Anne-Lise Reinsfelt. Photograph copyright © Norsk Folkemuseum – CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed on December 12th, 2024).

confirming not only the woman's skill, but also her belonging to a higher social class that could afford such a luxurious ivory artefact, which could be richly decorated with carvings (Wood 2019: 413–414, fig. 1–2).

CONCLUSION

The ivory plaque presented in this paper with the additional bone elements is an important discovery as it is first one of its kind found in *Viminacium*, as well as the second known similar example from this geographical area, alongside the specimen from *Callatis* (Romania). Both come from the graves with goods connected with women. Among all published finds of this type, only these two came from a grave clearly determined as an inhumation. Chronologically, they belong to the later examples, which were likely imported, as the scarcity of ivory finds in *Viminacium* does not support the existence of a local workshop for their production. Such workshops can be expected in the western provinces of the empire (Italy, France), where the majority of these artefacts have been found. Most of the artefacts of this kind mentioned in this paper (and given in the **Table 1**) were discovered during excavations conducted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to the research so far, these items were prevalent in the western provinces during the early centuries of the empire and almost unknown in the eastern provinces.

Through the analysis of the *Viminacium* find, two of the most plausible interpretations of the use of similar objects from the Roman period found so far have been analysed, concluding that each has their own strengths and weaknesses. The use of the *Viminacium* artefact for unrolling and reading from papyrus, as first interpreted by S. Wood, seems theoretically possible, but it is practically non-functional with a limited reading area, which we have tried to prove with graphical reconstructions. The J. C. Béal theory that the artefact was used as an embroidery tool, for decorating bands using gold thread, exhibits similar shortcomings, being small and unreliable for precise work. Bearing in mind examples of similar artefacts for weaving – from later historical periods, folk art remains, or modern arts and crafts looms, but also the second interpretation of S. Wood, previously given by B. Schneider and E. Christof, we can support the opinion that the ivory plaque and rods from *Viminacium*, like other similar objects, were part of an artifact used as a miniature loom for weaving. The differences among all objects of this type found so far can lead us to further research of the existence of variants of weaving techniques used by Roman women, depending on the type of fabric they intended to make. An attempt to reconstruct the activity by a modern weaver using a replica of the *Viminacium* artefact, additionally using the knowledge of different textile remnants found in *Viminacium* so far, can be one of the solutions for proving our conclusions of determining the artefact from *Viminacium* as a weaving loom and could offer us detailed insights in the weaving process.

The finds presented in this paper were predominantly found in the graves of cremated individuals which, based on the grave inventory, can be related to women from the higher social classes. The weaving loom from *Viminacium* was accompanied by tools used for sewing and probably knitting and weaving, along with typical artefacts used by Roman women for beautification, suggesting that the buried woman was skilled in different textile/fabric making crafts. It is also important to emphasise that each artefact we accepted as a weaving loom is unique, not only in shape but also in its decorative motifs, which along with fact that they most of them were made of ivory, confirm that these were luxury goods that not everyone could afford. This conclusion can lead us one step closer to understanding more about the unknown lady buried in grave G-6024 who lived in *Viminacium* between the 2nd and 3rd century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Dr Cécile Carrier, Specialist in sculpture and iconography of Roman Antiquity from Musée de la Romanité, Nîme, for permission to use the photography of the artefact 906.10.16. from the same museum (Figure 6), as well as to Emma Darbyshire, Image Library and Rights Manager from The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, for the kind communication considering the use of the photography we present in the paper as Figure 7. Also, we are grateful to Dr Bülent Öztürk from Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Archaeology for kindly providing us with the photography of the stela represented at Figure 12 and the permission to use it, as well as to Patrick Harris, Director and Head of Sales and Marketing in Archaeopress Publishing Ltd., for the same permission. Finally, we are very grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose kind suggestions influenced every aspect of this paper, encouraging us to research its topic more deeply.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Béal, J-C. 2017
Le chevalet de brodeur (?) antique d´Apt (Vaucluse) et les chevalets du monde romain, *Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise* 50 (2017): 291–313.

Birt, T. 1907
Buchrolle in der Kunst. Archäologisch-antiquarische Untersuchungen zum antiken Buchwesen, Leipzig: Druck und Verlag Von B. G. Teubner.

Cappelletto, E. 2017
Funerary reliefs with spinning objects: a new issue, in: *Iconographie du quotidien dans l´art provincial romain: modèles régionaux. Actes du XIVème Congrès international d´art provincial romain, Dijon, 1er-6 juin 2015, Dijon*, Lefebvre, S. (ed.), Dijon: ARTEHIS Éditions, 249‒266.

Clark, G. 1981
Roman women in Greece & Rome, *Greece & Rome*, second series 28(2): 193‒212.

Clark, J. W. 1901
The Care of Book. An Essay on the Development of Libraries and their Fittings, from the Earliest Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century, Cambridge: University Press.

Christof, E. 2010
Römische Elfenbeintäfelchen und kleinformatige Webtechniken, *Römische Abteilung*, 116: 343‒361.

Danković, I. and Marjanović, M. 2022
Woman, wife, mother: Everyday life of female residents in Viminacium in *VIVERE IN VRBE – VIMINACIVM*, Vojvoda, M., Danković, I. and Milovanović, B. (eds.). Beograd: Arheološki institut, 203‒282.

Danković, I. 2020
Inventar grobova ženske populacije kao odraz životnog doba. Studija slučaja viminacijumskih nekropola od I do IV veka, PhD Thesis, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy.

Deschler-Erb, S. 1998
Römische Beinartefakte aus Augusta Raurica, Rohmaterial, Technologie, Typologie und Chronologie, *Text und Tafeln,* August: Römermuseum Äugst.

Droß-Krüpe, K., Paetz Gen. Schieck, A. 2014
Unravelling the tangled threads of ancient embroidery: a compilation of written sources and archaeological preserved textiles, in: *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress, an Interdisciplinary Anthology,* Harlow, M. and Noch, M. L. (eds.), Oxford-Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 207‒235.

Flemestad P. *et al.* 2017
Observations on the terminology of textile tools in the *Edictum Diocletiani* on maximum prices, in: *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD,* Gaspa, S., Cécile, M. and Noch, M. L (eds.), Lincoln: NE: Zea Books: 256‒277.

Frazer, J. G. 1898
Pausanias´s description of Greece, J. G. Frazer (trans.), New York: The Macmillan Company.

Groh, S. 1990
Römische Bein – und Elfenbeinschnitzereien mit Erotendarstellungen, Graz: ungedruckte Diplomarbeit der Karl-Franzens-Universität.

Hrnčiarik, E. 2017
Bone and Antler Artefacts from the Roman Fort at Iža, Archaelogica Slovaca Monographiae Tomus XXIII, Nitra, Trnava, Komárom: Institute of Archaeology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences,

Faculty of Philosophy and Arts of Trnava University, György Klapka Museum Komárom.

Korać, M. 2018
Oil-Lamps from Viminacium (Moesia Superiour), Vol I. Text, Belgrade: Institute of Archaeology.

Korać, M. 2018
Oil-Lamps from Viminacium (Moesia Superiour), Vol II. Plates, Belgrade: Institute of Archaeology.

Loeschcke, S. 1919.
Lampen aus Vindonissa. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte von Vindonissa und des antiken Beleuchtungswesens, Zurich: Beer und Cie.

Lindgren, M. 2013
Education and work, in: *A cultural History of Women in Antiquity, Vol I.,* Tulloch, J. H. (ed.), London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 125−145.

Milovanović, B., Golubović, S. and Mikić, I. 2023
Recently discovered lead coffins from Viminacium (*Moesia Superior*), *Старинар* (н. с.) 73 (2023): 89–109.

Milovanović, B. 2017
Mining and Metallurgy Lead Complexes and Finds in the Roman Provinces at the Territory of Serbia, Belgrade: Institute of Archaeology.

Öztürk, B. 2022
Some aspects of the socio-cultural life of Roman Heraclea Pontica in the light the epigraphic, numismatic and literary evidence, in: *Tios/Tieion on the Southern Black Sea in the Broader Context of Pontica Archaeology*, Tsetskhladze, G. R., and Yildirim, S. (eds.), Bicester: Archaeopress, 168−194.

Pilipović, S. 2022
Nadgrobne stele Viminacijuma, Beograd: Arheološki institut.

Schneider, B. 1990
Zwei römische Elfenbeinplatten mit mythologischen Szenen, *Kölner Jahrbuch fûr Vor- und Frühgeschichte,* 23: 255-272.

Trinkl, E. 2014
The wool basket: function, depiction and meaning of the *kalathos,* in: *Greek and Roman textiles and Dress, an Interdisciplinary Anthology,* Harlow, M. *and* Noch, M. L., Oxford-Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 207−235.

Wood, S. 2001
Literacy and luxury in the early empire: a papyrus-roll winder from Pompeii, *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 46 (2001): 23–40.

Wood, S. 2019
Women´s Work and Women´s Myths: Mothers and Children on Ivory Looms, *American Journal of Archaeology,* Vol. 123/ 3: 411–438.

REZIME

PONOVNO OTVARANJE PITANJA UPOTREBE RETKOG RIMSKOG ARTEFAKTA: PREDMET OD SLONOVAČE IZ VIMINACIJUMA

KLJUČNE REČI: OPLATA OD SLONOVAČE, *VIMINACIUM,* RIMSKI GROB, GROBNI PRILOZI, RIMSKA ŽENA, RAZBOJ ZA TKANJE, VEZ, PREDMET ZA ODMOTAVANJE PAPIRUSA, PELTA.

Predmeti od slonovače iz Viminacijuma su malobrojni. Nalaz neobičnog izgleda, od oplate pločastog izgleda u obliku pelte za sada je jedini poznat primerak iz Viminacijuma i jedan od tridesetak poznatih iz literature. Uz oplatu su nađena i dva štapića od kosti u grobu inhumiranog pokojnika sahranjenog u olovnom kovčegu. Na osnovu antropološke analize pokojnik pripada odrasloj osobi neodređenog pola i uzrasta. Kovčeg je oštećen i deformisan, dok su grobni prilozi uglavnom sačuvani. Na osnovu njih, grob je opredeljen u period između 2. i 3. veka.

Nalazi iz rimskih provincija analogni viminacijumskom sastoje se od dve identične pločaste oplate sa dve kvadratne, češće pravougaone perforacije u donjem delu i najmanje dve, a često i više kružnih perforacija u gornjem delu. Sastavni deo predmeta su činila i dva štapića neujednačenog četvrtastog ili pravougaonog preseka i dva ili više štapića kružnih preseka.

Pravougaoni štapići su prolazili kroz donje perforacije oplata, držeći ih na određenom rastojanju u zavisnosti od svoje dužine i omogućavajući stabilnost predmeta. Cilindrični štapići u gornjem delu su prolazili kroz kružne perforacije. Najsličniji viminacijumskom je jedan od tri nalaza iz Nima.

O nameni predmeta ovog tipa u literaturi postoje oprečna mišljenja. U radu su razmatrane tri interpretacije. Prema jednoj, predmet je mogao biti korišćen kao pomagalo za čitanje, odnosno držač papirusa. Papirus bi bio razvučen između oplata i fiksiran pomoću štapića postavljenih između njih, kako bi čitalac mogao nesmetano da čita ne koristeći ruke. Zbog malog razmaka između oplata, mogao se koristiti samo papirus manjih dimenzija sa uskim kolonama na kojima su ispisana poetska dela. Prema drugoj, predmet je mogao biti korišćen kao pomagalo za vez. Preko njega bi se prebacila uska traka koja je ukrašavana finim vezom. Treća interpretacija koja je među prvima bila aktuelna, ali ne odmah i prihvaćena, svrstava predmet u minijaturni razboj na kome su tkane trake za ukrašavanje tkanina. Nedoumice kod autora postoje i stoga što se predmeti ovakvog izgleda ne pominju u istorijskim izvorima, niti su prikazivani na spomenicima, freskama i sličnim medijima. Jedini prikaz nalazimo na steli iz Herakleje Pontske (Turska) zajedno sa ostalim ženskim priborom vezanim za predenje i ulepšavanje. Na osnovu prezentacija žena sa razbojima u umetnosti, sličnih primeraka iz etnografskih muzeja i savremenih predmeta ove funkcije koji su danas dostupni na tržištu, kao i na osnovu interpretacija autora koji zastupaju ovo mišljenje, predmet iz Viminacijuma smo opredelili u minijaturni razboj za tkanje.

Predmeti ovog tipa su najčešće nalaženi u grobovima, od kojih je pouzdano da su deset pripadali kremiranim, a svega dva inhumiranim pokojnicima. Najstariji nalaz ovog tipa je iz Ostije i pripada 2. veku p. n. e. i početku 1. veka p. n. e. Većina ostalih je datovana u vreme prelaza iz stare u novu eru i u 1−2. vek n. e. Najmlađi primerak iz termi u Nimu potiče iz sloja široko datovanog od 250. do 400. godine n. e. Iako nisu uvek poznati pol i uzrast pokojnika, tamo gde je to utvrđeno reč je o ženama mlađeg uzrasta, a u jednom slučaju o detetu starosti između 3. i 4. godine. Prilozi iz većine grobova, uključujući i viminacijumski, mogu se grupisati u toaletni pribor i predmete za predenje, šivenje i tkanje. Skroman osteološki materijal iz oštećenog olovnog kovčega iz Viminacijuma, na osnovu fizičko-antropološke analize, pripada odrasloj osobi neutvrđenog pola i starosti. Međutim, na osnovu prethodno navedenih grobnih dobara može se pretpostaviti da je pokojnica ženskog pola.

Materijal od kojeg je predmet iz groba u Viminacijumu izrađen i njegova retka zastupljenost potvrđuju da se radi o luksuznoj robi koju nije mogao svako da priušti već samo viši staleži, kojem je pripadala i žena iz Viminacijuma, koja je verovatno poznavala različite tehnike izrade tkanina.

* * *

Use of tools based on large language models and generative AI: ChatGPT (translation).