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Reviewed Article:

Mural Painting of a Roman Lady from Viminacium: From Roman Matron to the Modern Icon

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During the late antiquity, fresco decorated tombs had a prominent place in funerary practice. All of the scenes and motifs within tombs are dedicated to the deceased persons and their apotheosis. Usually painted on the western wall of the tomb, these portraits could represent a deceased married couple or sometimes individuals. Examples of deceased married couples, depicted as master and mistress of the tomb, can be seen in the tombs of Beška, Serbia (Đurić 1985a, 5-18; Marijanski-Manojlović 1987, 17-32), Silistra, Bulgaria (**Димитров** and

Чичикова 1986; Danov and Ivanov 1980, 105-121; Atanasov 2007, 447-468), Osenovo, Bulgaria (Pillinger, Popova and Zimmermann 1999, 14), Plovdiv, Bulgaria (**Овчаров** and **Ваклинова** 1978, 26-27) and Thessalonica, Greece (Dunbabin 2003, 454).

> Since 2006, every year, thousands of visitors come to the Archaeological park Viminacium to see the Viminacium Mona Lisa, the woman who wished and hoped for afterlife, which she absolutely gained, and thus became an immortal modern icon of the Archaeological park Viminacium.

In very rare cases, a deceased woman is depicted alone, as in the tombs of Čalma[1] near Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia and **Viminacium** near Stari Kostolac, Serbia. Depiction of a mistress of a tomb on the western wall of Viminacium's[2] Pagan tomb marked as G-2624, discovered in 1983, at the site Pećine (Korać 2007, 166-182), is one of these rare examples where it is possible to speak about a real portrait rendered with all designation of the masterpiece. After conservation, fresco panels from the tomb were transferred to the National Museum of Požarevac, and their copies are now set in subterranean structure, under the Mausoleum, at the Archaeological Park Viminacium. They are displayed together with the copies of frescoes from the Christian tomb and original structure of the Tomb with Cupids discovered *in situ* (See Figures 1, 2).[3] During the excavations skeletal remains of two individuals were discovered indicating a funeral of an elderly man and a woman who probably died before the age of 20. It is of great importance that anthropological analysis coincides with the portrait depicted on the tomb's western wall. The best-preserved part of the skeleton, the femurs, suggested the individual age of the female skeleton, as well as her rachitic suffering (Mikić 2008, 37-45). According to Roman custom, young unmarried women wore fine nets over their heads, which is the case with the depiction of the deceased lady from the tomb (Korać 2007, 104), and since she is painted as a bust, thus avoiding the representation of her legs, it could be said that pictorial representation matches the results gained through anthropological analysis. Since the age of her death coincides with the age of her portrait, the mistress of the Pagan tomb is not depicted as a usual late antique idealized portrait of idealized age, but her representation with individual portrait features reveals an image which was made before her death.

Mistress of the tomb as an image of a dignified Roman matron

The deceased woman is dressed and adorned in a fashionable style of Roman matron. She is depicted wearing a rich dark blue *stola*, usually worn over a *tunica talaris*, thus undoubtedly suggesting matron status (Kunst 2005, 129). The *stola* is adorned with golden threads and *clavi*, as well as a sort of golden collar, decorated with ellipsoid and square ornaments, suggesting jewellery, which testify a luxury dress. Now hardly visible, a small vessel made of white glass is depicted in her right hand.[4] Bottles of this type were found as grave goods of both pagans and Christians in the late antique level of Viminacium cemeteries (Zotović 1980,

340) and according to its shape it could represent a *balsamarium* (Anderson-Stojanović 1987, 105-106), which had a long tradition of use in woman's everyday life. It is usually painted in offering scenes and it could be a part of mistress's toilette (Dunbabin 2003, 462) thus here within the tomb, it suggests funerary gift for mistress that she received from her servants.[5]

As it is already said, her hair follows the face down to the chin, where it was transferred back, and on top of it there is a fine net. Below the net a centre parting is visible, which was the fashion of the time (Minarovičová 2005, 26-27) and possibly an indication of the custom of making such partings for brides (Bartman 2001, 2-3). She is also adorned with rich jewellery, signifying her social status, but has an important symbolical connotation (Tapavički-Ilić and Anđelković Grašar 2013, 69-71). The golden square earrings with blue precious stones that she wears were commonly found within Viminacium cemeteries (Raičković and Milovanović 2011, 98). Since the earrings were not merely an ornament but possessed apotropaic function for the person who wore them (Спасић-Ђурић 2003, 72) the blue precious stone could represent sapphire. The symbolism of this stone is multifold. It could relate to heaven, azure is an amulet against the evil eye (Gerbran andŠevalije 2004, 801-802), and thus it would not be unusual for a blue precious stone to adorn the deceased in the moment of apotheosis. The necklace made of seven pearls again testifies fashion of the time (Volbach 1961, 314, 321-322, 323-324, Pls. 10, 52, 61) and her high social rank (Kunst 2005, 137-138), but it could also suggest cult symbolism. Pearl is a lunar symbol connected with woman as the main part of her feminine creation, which plays a great role in funerary custom, where it could regenerate the deceased person by placing them in the circle of birth, life, death and rebirth (Gerbran andŠevalije2004, 65-67) (See Figure 4).

Since it is hard to speak about the portrait as a specific genre in the late antique sepulchral art, it is possible to define the image of this woman as a portrait, not only because we have the results of aforementioned anthropological analysis, but primarily because of the pictorial qualities and refined style of painting. The portrait is dominated by her big eyes, gazing to the right. Her face is surrounded with dark brown hair and it is rendered in white-beige nuances that are very hard to gain through fresco technique. That is why the master artist polished marble face of the fresco layer and with its shine the face gained volume. Eyes, nose and lips are accentuated with brown contours. Big brown eyes are depicted in the spiritual manner of the late antiquity style, but with some kind of contemplation and vivid spirit, typical for the Fayum portraits. Her smile has a tone of archaic, and together with the whole face it looks mysterious (See Figure 5). The portrait is very important in late antique funerary art because it symbolizes apotheosis. Other scenes and motifs within the tomb are also dedicated to the apotheosis of the deceased lady. Garlands (Рогић and Анђелковић 2011, 98), peacocks (Anđelković, Rogić and Nikolić 2011, 234-236) and floral motifs (Рогић and Анђелковић 2011, 92-93) reinforce the idea of immortality and afterlife (See Figure 3). A blue square area is depicted behind the portrait of the deceased woman and it could represent and symbolize *fenestella* – a sort of window, as a part of architecture, which together with the garlands

suggest epiphany, and separates earthly life from the afterlife (Korać 2007, 114-115). The other opinion is that it could be a sort of nimbus (Korać 2007, 115-117) suggesting a divine person (Gerbran andŠevalije 2004, 646-647). Various shapes of nimbi, depending on the status of the depicted person, most certainly reinforce the person's dignity (Анђелковић, Рогић and Николић 2013, 389). Thus a square nimbus, being less perfect than a circular one, should symbolise the terrestrial character of the person of secular rank. This type of blue, square nimbus is typical for the Orient (Korać 2007, 117). If the artist really wanted to depict the nimbus behind the mistress'shead, that was in order to suggest her high social rank and importance (See Figure 4).

Across the deceased lady, on the opposite eastern end wall, a young man was depicted as a servant in an offering scene. The offering scene is typical for pagan tombs from late antique funerary art (Dunbabin 2003, 443-468). Usually there are more participants within a scene depicting a funerary procession, and here the reduction to a sole servant, makes this scene more immediate, puzzling and intimate, but still with the same meaning and massage. In the servant's hands there is an oval tray with ritual breads - *panis corona* - whose symbolism combined with the vine from the *cantharoi* in front of peacocks on side walls, (indicating vine as male, apropos bread as female symbol of fertile and birth) again indicates aspirit which dies and is resurrected through rebirth (Korać 2007, 96) (See Figure 3).

On the northern and southern side walls peacocks are depicted in profile, with their heads toward the portrait of the deceased lady at the west. Peacocks are among the favourite motifs of late antique and early Christian art. They may refer to the Dionysus cult or they can be present as an emblem of goddess Juno, sometimes as the symbol of princes or empress, but most frequently they signify the garden of Eden and apotheosis or immortality (Anđelković, Rogić and Nikolić 2011,231-248). Floral motifs - garlands, four petal flowers and ivy leaves - in the background of panels with peacocks and servant are also in function of this lady's victory over death with their apotropaic and triumphant significance (Рогић and Анђелковић 2011, 85-104) (Figure 3).

The manner of painting in the tomb also reinforces some details connected with the deceased's origin and personality. The dominant pictorial element in the tomb is symmetry, visible in the scenes as well as in composition of the tomb's space. The depiction of the lady dominates the western wall. She is represented frontally and almost perfectly symmetrical with vertical and horizontal symmetry her posture looks solemn and festive, which reinforce her role as mistress of the tomb (Anđelković Grašar, Nikolić and Rogić 2012, 254-255). Lookingat composition, peacocks on the side walls stand in the left hand, right hand symmetry in regard to the mistress, who is positioned as an axis of their symmetry and thus the centre of an idea of apotheosis and immortality, which is reinforced with unnatural size of peacocks and four petal flowers (Anđelković Grašar, Nikolić and Rogić 2012, 257) (See Figure 3). The artist who had painted this portrait knew how to represent the human form, especially

with the facial expression showing a hint of emotion that produced her enigmatic spiritual condition. The main achievement of this portrait is that the three dimensional face is so atypical compared to late antique paintings from neighbouring provinces. Nuances provide fine gradations with the aim to evoke softness and freshness of her skin. Use of colours of natural-mineral origin causes the reduced colouring, however harmonies of beige face and blue nimbus in the background of her head represent another quality of the portrait. All of these image qualities contribute to the fact that this portrait is one of the best rendered portraits in late antique funerary mural painting in the Balkan territory. According to the expression this portrait can be compared with the famous Fayum portraits (Zaloscer 1961) with the similarity of accentuated eyes and conspicuous individualism. The painter also followed the Roman aesthetic principles, where the portrait of the deceased represents the deepest expression of inner and spiritual life. This artistic solution, between the traditions of the East and the West, testifies of portrait which was rendered as a masterpiece (See Figure 5). According to the analyses of style and iconography, as well as coins discovered within the tomb from the period of Constantius, the painting in the 'Pagan tomb' can be dated between 346 and 350 AD.

As a conclusion: How Roman *Divina* became Viminacium Mona Lisa

During the excavations and research of iconography of the 'Pagan tomb' the magnificent portrait of this Roman lady drew great attention from various scientists who in unofficial talks liked to sentimentally call her Divina, because of her divine appearance. When Viminacium was established as an archaeological park in 2006, as it is stressed above, the copy of this tomb structure was set in the Pirivoj site underground, together with other two tomb structures. The idea was to present the great legacy of Roman art to the contemporary visitors, through a unique emotional experience. Thus, visitors needed to step into the dark corridor that leads to the underground with tombs, which again, under the light, could convey the right impression of the afterlife ideology and the brightness of fresco colours (Anđelković 2012, 1-7). During this tour, guides explained the whole concept, iconography and details of every particular image within the mural painting so the deceased lady kept her divine name and was introduced to visitors as Roman *Divina*. Somehow visitors themselves spontaneously gave the new name to this dignified Roman matron. Most probably because of her mysterious appearance, solemn pose, glance directed to the side and, most of all, puzzling smile, Roman *Divina* became the Viminacium Mona Lisa. The master painter who achieved this masterpiece portrait of the late antique art, had craft and talent, thus according to the modern criterion he was Roman Leonardo da Vinci. Since funerary painting was dedicated to the deceased person, with the aim to make his/her afterlife dwelling more intimate, with massages known only to him/her personally, and without intention to be visible to anybody else, it is great exclusivity that we are able to enjoy this beauty today. Since 2006, every year, thousands of visitors come to the Archaeological park Viminacium to see the Viminacium

Mona Lisa, the woman who wished and hoped for afterlife, which she absolutely gained, and thus became an immortal modern icon of the Archaeological park Viminacium.

Abbreviations

AJA = American Journal of Archaeology
AJP = American Journal of Philology
BAR = British Archaeological Reports
MHJ = The Medeival History Journal

Note:
The article results from the project: Viminacium, Roman city and military camp – research of the material and non material culture of inhabitants, using the modern technologies of remote detection, geophysics, GIS, digitalisation and 3D visualisation (no 47018), funded by The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

1 In earlier interpretations (Đurić 1985b, 169-171) this female figure was defined as a maidservant – gift-bearer. According to recent new interpretation of this painting (Popović 2011, 241-243), this woman is interpreted as a deceased mistress who is depicted waiting to enter the gates of Eden.

2 Viminacium was a military camp and the capital of the Roman province Moesia Superior, today archaeological site and archaeological park in the Eastern Serbia. www.viminacium.org.rs

3 More about presentation of the frescoes within the Archaeological park Viminacium in: Anđelković 2012, 1-7;

4 Today this vessel is hardly visible and more information about its look can be found in: Korać, 2007, 120; Đurić 1985b, 11.

5 During the Constantine's dynasty these vessel types were popular as part of cosmetic sets in the Danube basin (Срејовић 1969, 98).

Link(s)
http://www.viminacium.org.rs

Keywords painting
grave

Country Serbia

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FIG 1. AERIAL VIEW OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK VIMINACIUM

FIG 2. THE MAUSOLEUM

FIG 3. FOUR PANELS WITH FRESCOES OF PAGAN TOMB, G-2624

FIG 4. WESTERN WALL WITH THE IMAGE OF MISTRESS OF THE TOMB, VIMINACIUM MONA LISA

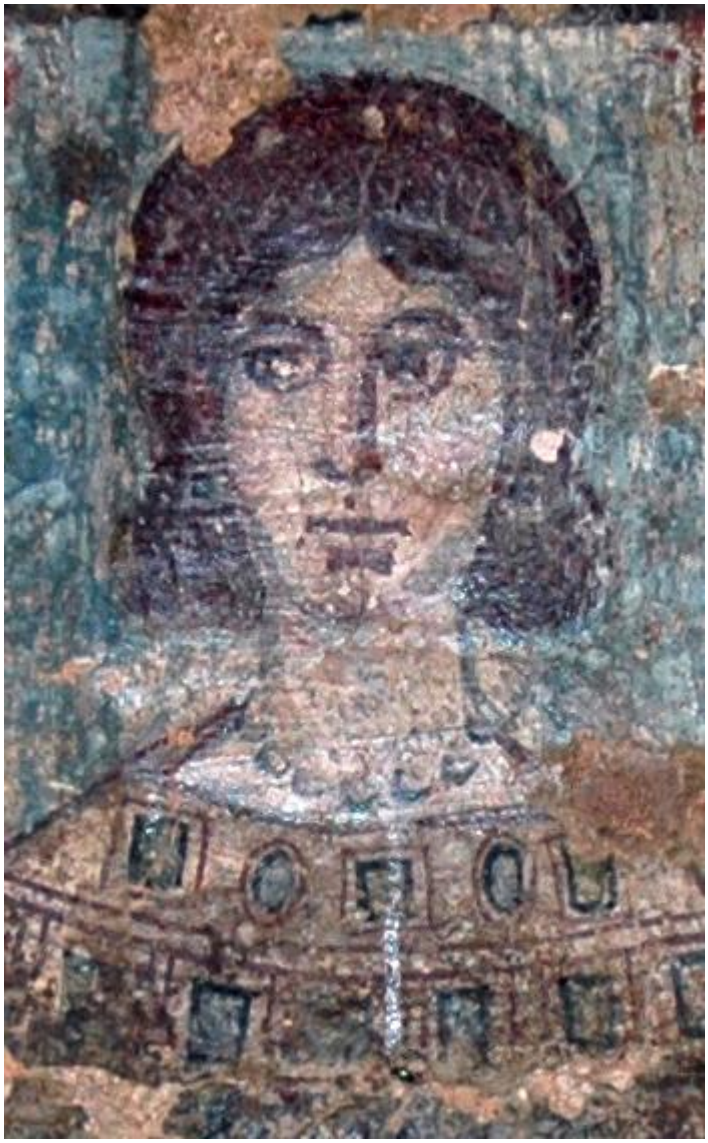

FIG 5. DETAIL OF THE FRESCO, PORTRAIT OF THE MISTRESS OF THE TOMB, VIMINACIUM MONA LISA