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BURIAL OF A WOMAN WITH AN AMBER DISTAFF AT *VIMINACIUM*

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Abstract – A luxurious set of spinning implements was discovered as part of the furnishings in the grave of a woman, unearthed in the surroundings of ancient *Viminacium*. A unique amber distaff with the upper part modelled in the form of a female bust stands out as the most important part of the grave assemblage. Similar artefacts were often misinterpreted, but this specimen was found together with a spindle, thus confirming that it actually is a distaff. Miniature copies of spinning equipment made out of precious materials are known from sepulchral contexts, and are described as objects expressing feminine virtue. It is considered that they were used in wedding rites, thus indicating the possible age of the deceased. Spinning implements can represent useful tools for studying the life course of Roman women. In this paper, an attempt was made to identify the divinity or person depicted on the distaff from *Viminacium*, considering the symbolic nature of these artefacts.

Key words – *Viminacium*, funerary archaeology, spinning equipment, amber, life course studies

The broader city area to the east and southeast of *Viminacium*'s *castrum* and civil settlement is endangered by the expansion of the local strip coal mine and, for that reason, extensive rescue excavations have been conducted in this area since 2008 (Fig. 1). During several continuous campaigns, numerous archaeological features have been unearthed: remains of a settlement of an economic-industrial character, several cemeteries, three villas, three aqueducts, two water towers (*castellum aquae*), as well as roads that led to the smaller fortifications of *Pincum* and *Lederata*.¹ In one of the trenches, strategically placed in order to locate the route of the latter road, five graves were discovered. They were lined up alongside the northern edge of the section of the road. Three burials contained remains of cremated individuals (two belonging to the type Mala Kopašnica–Sase II

and the third to Mala Kopašnica–Sase I)², while the remaining two were inhumed deceased.³

Furnishings in one of the inhumation graves featured luxurious spinning equipment, on which this paper will be focused. The individual was laid on its back in a plain burial pit, without any evidence of the existence of a wooden coffin. The left arm was placed alongside the body, while the right one was bent at the elbow with the hand placed on the abdomen. The legs were crossed at the ankles (Fig. 2). It was determined by the analysis of the skeletal remains that the deceased person was a female, and that she had died

¹ Jovičić, Redžić 2014, 55; Milovanović et al. 2018, 43.

² Јовановић 1984, 100–103.

³ Redžić et al. 2014, 63–64.

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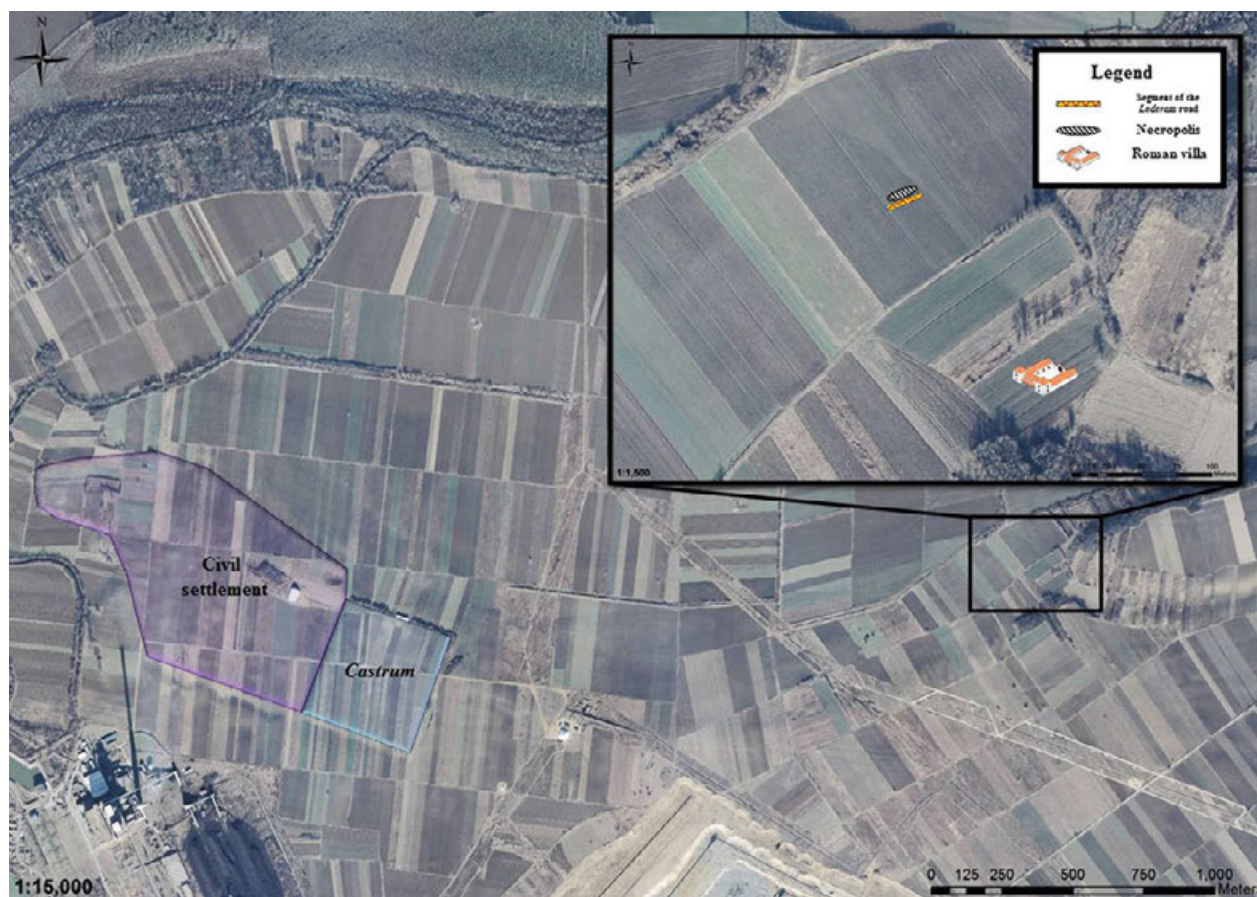


Fig. 1. Aerial photo of *Viminacium* with the location of the discovered grave (Documentation Centre, *Viminacium*)

Сл. 1. Аерофотографија Виминацијума са локацијом ојкривеног гроба (Документациони центар Виминацијум)

during the 4th decade of her life. She was around 145 cm tall, while the heightened abrasion of the incisors pointed to her using her teeth as “a third arm” during day to day activities.

On the right side of the mandible a bone sewing needle was located (Fig. 3). Given the position of the object, one can assume that it was used to pin clothes, as a kind of primitive brooch. It has been attested that needles were used for this purpose.⁴ Spinning implements were placed on her chest. An amber distaff was placed on the left side, while fragments of a bone spindle with a glass whorl were found on both sides. The spindle was probably originally placed next to the distaff, but was broken and dislocated due to taphonomic processes (Fig. 4). Next to her feet, the remains of a small casket were discovered. With all perishable materials long gone, only the handle and parts of the lock, both made of bronze, as well as an iron key, were preserved (Fig. 5).

The distaff is certainly the most important part of the inventory of the grave in question (Fig. 6). It consists of the core, which is a rod made out of bronze, measuring 19.35 cm in length, and 27 amber segments, some of which had deteriorated, given their small dimensions. During the conservation/restoration of the artefact it was observed that small sheets of metal⁵ were rolled around the core in order to ensure that the amber beads remained in place.⁶ All segments are made from reddish-brown amber, and all of them are perforated along the vertical axis. At the lower end, a

⁴ MacGregor 1980, 111–112; Petković 1995, 28; 46.

⁵ Physico-chemical analysis of these sheets is required in order to determine exactly which metal was used.

⁶ Conservation and restoration of the distaff were carried out by Robert Koračin of the Institute for the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, Regional Office, Novo Mesto.

pear shaped segment was placed, and above it 12 spherical and 12 conical beads alternated, divided in the middle by a discoid segment. The uppermost piece of amber is modelled in the form of a female bust (Fig. 11). Taking into consideration the limitations that must have been imposed on the craftsman due to the size of

the object, it can be said that the represented person was wearing a *stola* with a *palla* draped over the shoulders, or a short-sleeved tunic. The upper parts of the head are damaged, so information about the coiffure or the headdress is unavailable, although broad horizontal waves can be observed on the side of the head.



Fig. 2. Grave of a woman buried with spinning equipment (Documentation Centre, *Viminacium*)

Fig. 3. Spinning equipment laid on the chest of the deceased (Documentation Centre, *Viminacium*)

Сл. 2. Гроб њокојнице сахрањене са њрибором за њредење вуње (Документѡациони центѡар Виминацијум)

Сл. 3. Прибор за њредење вуње ѡложен на ѡруди њокојнице (Документѡациони центѡар Виминацијум)

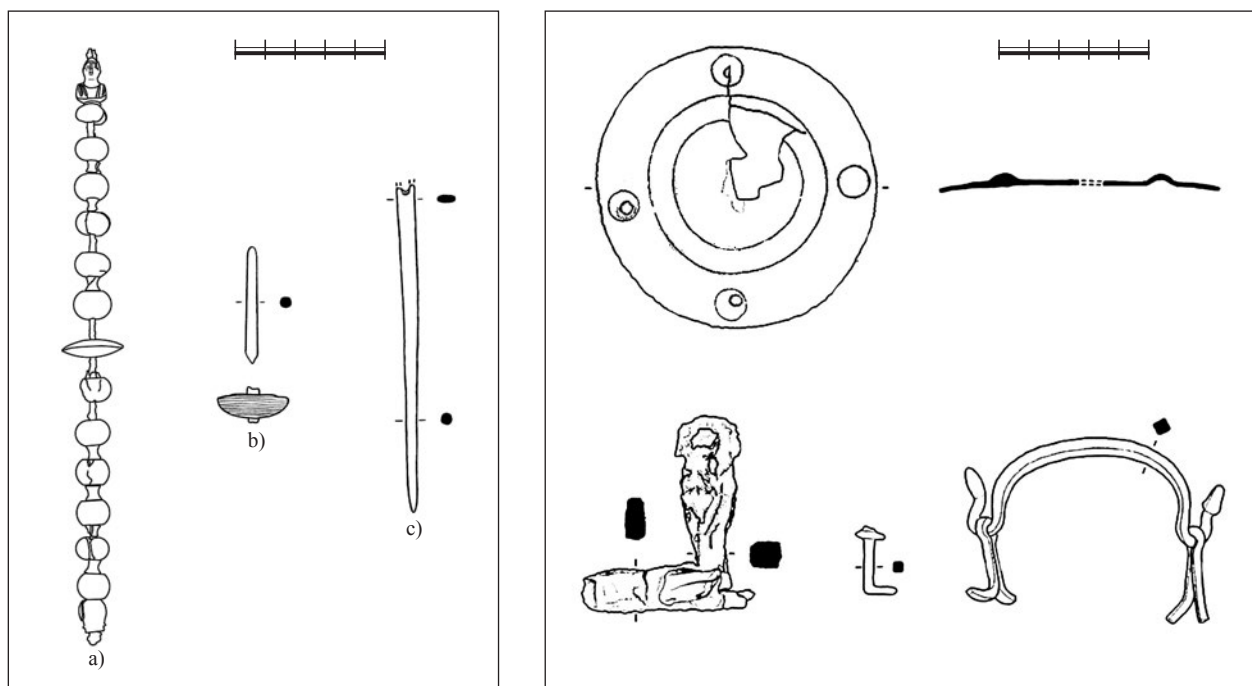


Fig. 4. Grave inventory: a) Amber distaff, b) Bone spindle with glass spindle whorl, c) Needle (Documentation Centre, *Viminacium*)

Fig. 5. Grave inventory: Parts of a casket (Documentation Centre, *Viminacium*)

Сл. 4. Инвентѡар гроба: а) Преслицѡ од ѡлибарѡ; б) Врѡњено од косѡи са ѡриљѡнком од сѡакла; с) Иѡла (Документѡациони центѡар Виминацијум)

Сл. 5. Инвентѡар гроба: делови ковчежиѡа (Документѡациони центѡар Виминацијум)



Fig. 6. Amber distaff
(Photo: Goran Stojić)

Fig. 7. Bust of an unknown woman,
early 3rd century,
Museo Archeologico Nazionale
di Napoli, Italy
(After: Croom 2002, 82)

Сл. 6. Преслица од ћилибара
(фотографија: Горан Стојић)
Сл. 7. Биста непознате жене,
рани III век,
Национални археолошки музеј
у Напуљу, Италија
(према: Croom 2002, 82)

With much caution, this could be associated with hairstyles typical of members of imperial families in the last two decades of the 2nd century.⁷ While *stola* and *palla* faded out of fashion somewhere around the end of the 1st century CE, the short-sleeved tunic was actually worn in the same period as the described hairstyle (Fig. 7).⁸

Distaffs in the Roman period

Similar artefacts are known from archaeological sites across Europe, and mainly originate from sepulchral contexts. Their interpretation has long been debated, so they have been seen as scented sticks lit during funeral ceremonies or cosmetic rods for applying perfumes.⁹ Other authors have recognised them as sceptres, and believed they represented insignia of power. In several cases they were even interpreted as hand fan handles¹⁰, and in very rare examples they

were identified as spindles, which could simply be the consequence of unfamiliarity with the wool spinning process. Today, it is widely accepted that these objects are in fact hand distaffs.¹¹ The specimen discovered in *Viminacium* reinforces this claim given that it was found together with the spindle, thus completing the equipment needed for spinning.

Distaffs are a diverse category of artefacts. The ones that were used in everyday activities were probably made of wood, and any kind of branch or a stick pronged at the top could be used for this purpose. Due to the perishable nature of timber, not a single such distaff is preserved today, while a fragment of one is on display in the Louvre Museum.¹² This was found in a grave as well, and it is also unique by virtue of the fact that a lump of wool is still preserved attached to the top.¹³ Objects that were actually used in the process of wool making had to be significantly longer than those specimens made of expensive materials because of the need to hold the distaff beneath the left armpit, and resting it on the waist to reduce the tiredness of the arm during spinning.¹⁴

Luxurious specimens manufactured from various materials discovered thus far are almost exclusively distaffs of significantly shorter lengths.¹⁵ Amongst them, a further division can be made, recognising hand distaffs, such as our specimen, and those featuring a ring in the bottom end, which would enable a better grip during work (finger distaffs).¹⁶ These were manufactured from bone, ivory, glass, amber, jet and bronze. Lone examples made out of precious metals and wood with amber and a glass bead on opposite ends are known.¹⁷

Regardless of the material that was utilised, a broad spectrum of interpretations has been proposed by different researchers, so that in addition to the

⁷ Croom 2002, 101.

⁸ Croom 2002, 80–83.

⁹ Galletti 2006, 146.

¹⁰ Aurisicchio et al. 2002, 108.

¹¹ Gottschalk 1996; Aurisicchio et al. 2002; Facchinetti 2005, Палавестра, Крстић 2006, 369. etc.

¹² Facsády 2008, 167.

¹³ Gottschalk 1996, 486.

¹⁴ Smith 1859, 565.

¹⁵ With the exception of four arm distaff made out of ivory, two of them unearthed in Cologne, and one in Milano and Selongey, respectively (Facchinetti 2005).

¹⁶ Gottschalk 1996, 483.

¹⁷ Gottschalk 1996, 483



Fig. 8. a) Scene depicted on the sarcophagus from Ephesus, b) Spinning equipment found inside the sarcophagus (After: Trinkl 1994)

Сл. 8. a) Представа њокојнице на саркофагу из Ефеса; b) Прибор за њређење оџкривен унутар саркофага (ѡрема: Trinkl 1994)

already mentioned explanations they have been recognised as pestles for the grinding of cosmetic and pharmaceutical products or pigments used by painters, handles, mirrors, and specimens with figurally modelled tops as hairpins, votive objects, or even as strigils.¹⁸ There are several confirmations that these are in fact parts of the spinning equipment. A distaff is represented on a grave monument located in Izmir, and it features unspun wool as well as the characteristic ring in the bottom end¹⁹. A similar representation can be seen in a scene depicted on a sarcophagus discovered in Ephesus. Interestingly, amongst other furnishings placed inside this sarcophagus, belonging to a young, pregnant woman and a child, there was a bone distaff, as well as spindle and several whorls (Fig. 8).²⁰ A glass specimen found in the grave of a cremated woman in *Aquincum*, was discovered alongside a bone spindle and a glass whorl.²¹

Amber hand distaffs comprise one of the most numerous categories within this type of artefact. Naturally, one should not forget that the vast majority of distaffs were most probably made out of wood that could not be preserved to the present day. Also, it is to be expected that large numbers of these objects were destroyed as a result of being placed on funeral pyres. This custom is evidenced by at least five distaffs (three made out of bone, one of amber, and one of glass) originating from the cemeteries of *Viminacium*, which displayed different extents of damage due to exposure to fire.

Several authors have proposed typologies of specimens manufactured from amber, and a brief review of two of them will be presented here. Raymund Gottschalk,

in his paper which is one of the most detailed studies of hand distaffs, divided the amber specimens into four types:

I. Type *Aquileia A* is characterised by cylindrical, smooth beads, with a subtype in which they can be spirally twisted or fluted. End segments can be of various shapes. This type is the most numerous.

II. Type *Aquileia B* is characterised by rounded beads.

III. Type *Aquileia C* is comprised of distaffs with conical and cylindrical beads. The specimen from *Viminacium* belongs to this type.

IV. *Dorweiler* type is characterised by elongated oval beads which are spirally twisted.²²

The most detailed typology of distaffs in general was presented by Grazia Facchinetti. Based on her division (Fig. 9), the distaff from *Viminacium* can be attributed to type II d5.²³ An ascription of our specimen to this type was made after taking into consideration the way in which the beads of the body of the distaff were made. As there are no analogies for the piece modelled in the form of a female bust, it would only be logical that it represents a separate subtype.

¹⁸ Fremersdorf, Polonyi-Fremersdorf 1984, 111–112; Јевремовић 1996; Ivčević 2002, 474; Facsády 2008, 165.

¹⁹ Trinkl 2000.

²⁰ Trinkl 1994.

²¹ Facsády 2008, 165.

²² Gottschalk 1996, 484–486.

²³ Facchinetti 2005, 205–208.

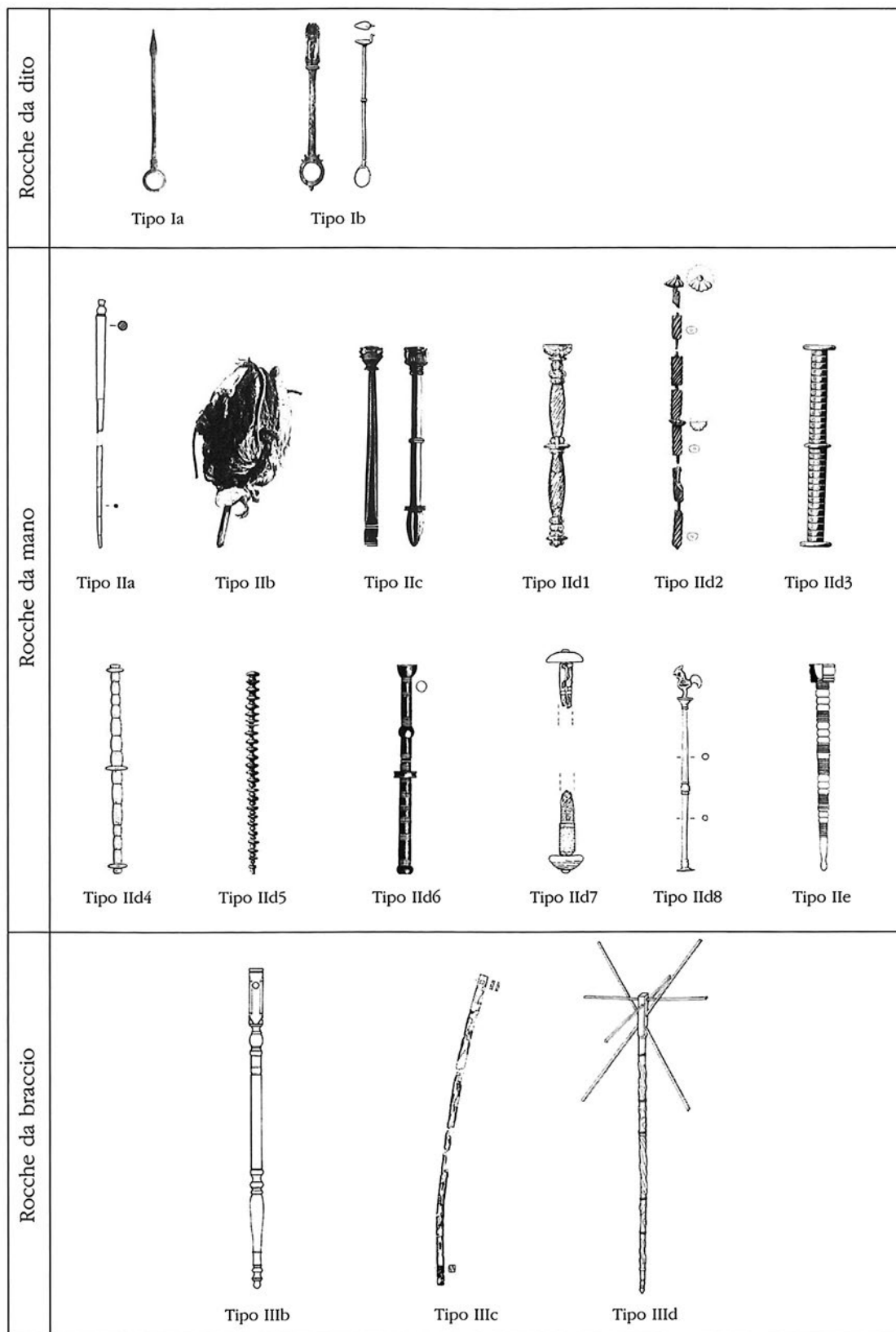


Fig. 9. Typology of Roman distaffs (After: Facchinetti 2005, 221)

Сл. 9. Типологија римских њреслица (њрема: Facchinetti 2005, 221)

The accepted dating for amber distaffs places them in a time span ranging from the reign of Augustus until the first half of the 3rd century.²⁴ Gottschalk moves the upper date to the second half of the 3rd century, while he dates the *Dorweiler* type to the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century.

When the geographical distribution of amber distaffs is taken into consideration, one may notice three areas with a higher occurrence of these artefacts. First is the city of *Aquileia* and neighbouring territories with which it had an intensive trading relationship (*Histria*, *Emona*, *Poetovio*...). Three specimens originate from the cemeteries of *Emona*,²⁵ and three more from the necropolis in Ribnica na Dolenjskem (Slovenia).²⁶ In *Poetovio*, an amber distaff with an unclear context was discovered.²⁷ This should not come as a surprise, given that the city of *Aquileia* was situated at the southern end of the European amber road, which led from the Baltic, and because of this fact workshops specialised in manufacturing objects from amber were established right here. There are indications that workshops also existed in the area of *Pompeii* and *Herculaneum*²⁸, although they maybe should be ruled out as a place of provenance of amber distaffs because of their absence from archaeological records south of the vicinity of the city of Rome. The second territory with a higher concentration of distaffs is noted along the *Limes Germanicus*, while the third region is the province of *Pannonia Superior*.

In the neighbouring province of *Dalmatia*, the city of *Salona* stands out with several distaffs made out of amber that have been unearthed there.²⁹ Also, one specimen was discovered in the grave of inhumed female individual in *Doclea*.³⁰

Three partially preserved specimens are known from the territory of the province of *Moesia Superior*, not including the distaffs from *Viminacium*. Unfortunately, they all originate from unknown contexts, given that two of them are parts of the Dunjić private collection, while the third was bought in the territory of Guberevac.³¹

Besides the artefact discussed in this paper, two more amber distaffs have been found in *Viminacium*. The first of them was placed inside a Mala Kopašnica–Sase II grave with cremated remains, which was discovered in the southern city necropolis. The object is fragmented, possibly because it was placed on a bonfire alongside the deceased person, after which the remains were gathered and laid in the grave. It can be attributed to the type IId3. The grave inventory also

included a glass *balsamarium* and a clay oil lamp, which had a stamp reading NERI. Lamps of this particular type are dated to the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century.³²

The second distaff originates from the eastern city necropolis. It was discovered inside a vaulted tomb containing the remains of a wooden coffin. It belongs to the type IId3. The tomb was dated by mints of *Antoninus Pius*, *Faustina Maior* and *Septimius Severus*.

The fact that all three distaffs from *Viminacium* were discovered in a funerary context precisely reflects the situation recorded in the territory of the whole Empire, not only where amber distaffs are concerned. Specimens found outside sepulchral features are extremely rare, and a group of eight such objects discovered in a residential area of Ephesus is a unique example.³³ In order to explain these circumstances, one needs to reflect on wool spinning and the place it had in the tradition and ideology of the inhabitants of the Roman state.

Wool working as a metaphor in antiquity

In order to start spinning wool, several actions need to have been completed beforehand. The first step was the shearing of the sheep, after which the wool was washed and beaten with a specially designed tool in order to remove any impurities. Next, the raw material was combed and in some cases dyed, and only then was the wool prepared for spinning. Spinning equipment consisted of three elements: a distaff (*colus*), a spindle (*fusus*)³⁴ and a basket in which the first two, as well as rovings of unspun wool and balls of yarn, were kept (*calathus*).³⁵ Further along the process of spinning,

²⁴ Facchinetti 2005, 201–202.

²⁵ Petru 1972, 74, 122–123; T.XXVII, T.LV.

²⁶ Križ 2017, 132–133.

²⁷ Jevremov 1985, 423, T.5.

²⁸ Girardi Jurkić 2010, 164.

²⁹ Galletti 2006, 144.

³⁰ Цермановић-Кузмановић et al. 1975, 114–115.

³¹ Палавестра, Крстић 2006, 301.

³² Korać 2018, 493–494.

³³ Trinkl 2005, 301.

³⁴ When compared to distaffs, spindles were a rather less diverse group of objects. Mostly they were comprised of a shaft made of wood or bone, which was weighted by a spindle whorl at one end in order to stabilise rotation. The whorl was most commonly made of baked clay, but specimens manufactured from bone, metal, glass etc. are also known.

³⁵ Facsády 2008, 166.

a lump of wool would be attached to the top of the distaff which was held in the left hand, and threads would be extracted from the lump with two fingers. The right hand held the spindle on which there was a little bit of already spun yarn, which would be connected with the threads. At that moment the spindle would be spun, and its rotation would catch the unspun threads, thus making yarn. When the spindle reached the ground, spun thread would be coiled around it, and the process would be repeated.³⁶

Wool was of special significance to the Romans. The fact that the Latin term for this material – *lana*, was also simultaneously used for clothes, speaks for itself.³⁷ It also had a certain religious importance. Robes of priests had to be made exclusively of wool; it was used for the weaving of the bands that were tied around the heads of animals prepared for sacrifice, sacred trees, altars, temple columns etc. Wool symbolises a good relationship with nature because, unlike leather, it comes from an animal that continues to live.³⁸

Wool spinning, as well as weaving, was considered a woman's job, and it was expected of them to provide clothes for the family.³⁹ At the same time, it was an activity that was conducted in the household, so it implied that the woman was taking care of it. Weaving was probably handed down to younger girls or slaves, given it required a greater physical investment. Actually, it was the only labour intensive task expected of women, according to the treaty agreed after the Rape of the Sabine Women.⁴⁰ Besides, weaving required that the person doing it was bound to one place in the home, the place where the loom was stationed, most commonly in the *atrium*. On the other hand, spinning allowed mobility, so a matron could oversee all the other activities in the household, or easily put away the equipment if her assistance was needed elsewhere.

Over time, spinning became a symbol of femininity and an expression of female virtue. This was why a number of epitaphs from the time of the Republic incorporated the words *lanam fecit*. A good example is a funerary monument dated to the 2nd century BCE, which informs us that *Claudia* was married, gave birth to two sons, was pleasant to talk to, took care of the household, and that she spun wool.⁴¹ So, these were the qualities that a Roman woman was expected to have possessed. The truth is that developed industrial production most likely would have existed by then, making domestic manufacture completely obsolete. Even if this was not true, it seems that ladies gave this job over to servant girls, which was the “problem”

accounted by *Columella* in the 1st century BCE. He says that women gave themselves to luxury and pastimes, that they even refused to oversee spinning of the wool, and that their only interest was to buy clothes for large sums of money.⁴²

By that time, a woman spinning wool had gained a metaphorical meaning in literary works. The most famous instance is Livy's story of *Lucretia*, whose husband was absent due to war. During the siege of a city, he met with other commanders, Etruscan royals, and the discussion of their wives' virtues ensued. The decision was made to pay them an unexpected visit. They found them engaged in dancing and leisure, while *Lucretia* was at home, spinning wool, though it was late in the evening.⁴³ After a few days, an Etruscan prince raped *Lucretia*. She made her father and brother take an oath to avenge her, then she committed suicide. This led to an uprising against the Etruscan rule and the founding of the Republic.⁴⁴ Female virtue, highlighted by the spinning metaphor, thus lies in the core of the story of the birth of the Roman state.

Although men employed in wool production had to exist, literary sources bring us descriptions which hold that the involvement in these activities reflected moral weakness. One samian ware cup depicts *Marcus Antonius* in a chariot procession, followed by women carrying his fan, parasol, basket and distaff. In such a manner his incompetence to rule over Romans was highlighted. Another example is brought to us by *Dio Cassius*, who mockingly says that *Elagabalus* likes to spin wool.⁴⁵

As part of extensive reforms that had the goal of reviving Roman virtue, *Octavianus* ordered female members of the Imperial family to take part in spinning and weaving. *Suetonius* informs us that he, except on rare occasions, wore the clothes made by them. Mastery of these skills became part of an aristocratic upbringing, and every woman was expected to aspire to them.⁴⁶

³⁶ Facchinetti 2005, 203–204.

³⁷ Larsson Lovén 1998, 85.

³⁸ Sebesta 2001, 47.

³⁹ Allason-Jones 2005, 104.

⁴⁰ Larsson Lovén 1998, 87.

⁴¹ Larsson Lovén 1998, 88.

⁴² Croom 2000, 19.

⁴³ Thurston Peck 1898, 1526.

⁴⁴ D'Ambra 2007, 58.

⁴⁵ Pasztókai-Szeőke 2011, 128.

⁴⁶ Larsson Lovén 1998, 89.

Spinning was accepted as the symbol of female virtue across the Empire. Instead of the *lanam fecit* formula, depictions of distaffs and spindles appear on funerary *stellae*. The actual process of spinning the wool is never shown, only the equipment.⁴⁷ On the aforementioned sarcophagus from Ephesus, a distaff, spindle, and basket are shown beneath the bed on which the matron is reclining. Other way in which these object can be shown is passively, in the hands of the portrait of the deceased. Lumps of unspun wool can regularly be seen on distaffs, and coils of yarn on the spindles. Such representations are typical for the western parts of the Empire. For example, in *Pannonia*, spinning equipment is represented exclusively in this manner,⁴⁸ but is also very common in the Eastern Aegean, Syria, Germany, and occasionally in Britain.⁴⁹

The last method of the symbolic expression of feminine virtue and care of the household is the custom of placing luxurious hand distaffs in graves of deceased women.⁵⁰ It is important to underline that, judging by their miniature dimensions, and fragile and/or expensive materials, several authors proposed that these objects did not serve the purpose of actual spinning.⁵¹ This is particularly true for those specimens made from amber and jet. They are, rather, artefacts of symbolic and ritual character. The corpus of distaffs from *Viminacium* confirms that they were, above all, used in funerary rites. Of 39 bone distaffs from this site, as many as 26 were found in graves and a further 9 within the area of the cemetery. It can be assumed that the latter were dislocated from their original context during the cleaning of the necropolis and the devastation of the older strata of the graves by the new ones. *Viminacium* has yielded six bone spindles, all from a sepulchral context. Every single one of the seven glass distaffs come from graves or cemeteries.⁵² As has already been mentioned, three specimens made from amber were parts of grave furnishings.

The question that needs to be addressed is whether the luxurious spinning equipment was crafted solely for the needs of funeral rituals or it was amongst the belongings of a woman during her lifetime. Mentions of spinning equipment in literary sources might be scarce, but they can lead to the sought after answer. During the wedding ceremony, more precisely in the procession from her maiden home to that of the groom (*deductio in domum mariti*) the bride would carry a distaff and spindle in her hands.⁵³ Accounts of this custom can be found in works of Pliny the Elder⁵⁴ and Plutarch.⁵⁵ It can be assumed that costly spinning equipment was

acquired exactly with the purpose of being used in such an important life event.⁵⁶ Its lavishness would highlight the status and wealth of the family.⁵⁷

Later in life, a luxurious distaff was presumably amongst the most prized possessions of the matron and it could be used during public appearances to emphasise status or in front of guests and clients in the *domus*, and to symbolise the care she took of the household. The group of distaffs unearthed in a residential area of Ephesus is particularly informative regarding this matter, given that all of them were found in premises that had public character.⁵⁸ Lavish spinning equipment, being objects of a specifically personal nature, were laid with a woman in her grave after she passed away. As these artefacts were probably obtained during wedding preparations, they can be very informative from the perspective of life course studies. Specifically, they could point to the particular age group in which women were married. In the province of Asia Minor, it is attested that representations of distaffs and spindles in the hands of women mean that they have entered into matrimony.⁵⁹

Finds of spinning equipment in graves of ten-year-old girls in *Pannonia* might be something to consider further. However, it should be noted that although the legal age for marriage was 12 years, there are known cases of girls getting married before fulfilling this requirement.⁶⁰ The discovery of spinning implements in

⁴⁷ Facsády 2008, 169.

⁴⁸ Pasztókai-Szeőke 2011, 129.

⁴⁹ Carroll 2013, 301.

⁵⁰ This tradition probably has its roots in mythical times when Kings ruled the city of Rome. Namely, a number of 7th century graves in Latium have yielded spinning equipment (Le Glay et al. 2005, 19)

⁵¹ Bíró et al. 2012, 22; Trinkl 2005, 290–291; The functional aspects of bone spinning equipment from *Viminacium* will be part of a separate study.

⁵² Ропкић 2006.

⁵³ D'Ambra 2007, 75

⁵⁴ Plin. *Nat.* VIII.74.

⁵⁵ Plut. *Quaes. Rom.* 31.

⁵⁶ Facsády 2009, 690.

⁵⁷ Roman poet *Ovidius*, telling the myth of the origins of amber, informs us that Roman brides used it to make necklaces worn during the wedding (Палавестра, Крстић 2006, 22). Girls whose families could afford to buy distaffs made out of this precious material would have indirectly been following this ancient custom.

⁵⁸ Trinkl 2005, 300–302.

⁵⁹ Facsády 2009, 690.

⁶⁰ Pasztókai-Szeőke 2011, 126–127



Fig. 10. Bone distaff from unknown site in Pannonia (After: Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 133)

Fig. 11. Top of an amber distaff from *Viminacium* modelled in the form of a female bust (Photo: Goran Stojić)

Сл. 10. Кошћана ћреслица са нејознајној налазишћу у Панонији (цртеж: Pasztókai-Szeöke 2011, 133)

Сл. 11. Врх ћреслице од ћилибара из Виминацијума, моделован у виду женској појрсја (фотографија: Горан Стојић)

the grave of a six-year-old girl in France has been referred to as a way of compensation for an unattained wedding.⁶¹ It is important to stress that not a single item of spinning tools from the cemeteries of *Viminacium* comes from a grave of a subadult individual.

Judit Pasztókai-Szeöke⁶² proposes an alternative explanation for the nature of the tradition in question, based on certain observations regarding finger distaffs with the depiction of a female figure nursing an infant at the top (Fig. 10). She paid attention to vertical lines rising from the navel in some of the specimens. After explaining that until the 19th century Caesarean section was actually performed in this manner, she suggests that an unknown deity, the protector of childbirth, or a woman who survived this extremely complicated procedure, was represented. Accordingly, she interprets distaffs as symbols of maternity and fertility, as well as guidelines for the bride who carries the distaff during the wedding procession, instructing her to continue the thread of the family and society itself.

Conclusion

The amber distaff from *Viminacium* is the single chronologically sensitive artefact from the inventory of the grave in question. As was already mentioned, such objects are dated from the reign of *Augustus* until the beginning of the 3rd century CE. Early dates should be ruled out because there is no archaeological confirmation of residential activities in this area from the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century. Also, it is not

likely that the distaff was in prolonged usage given the personal character of the artefact, which would not be expected to have been passed down to the next generation. An important thing to notice is that the production of amber objects in *Aquileia*, the reasonable place of provenance of the distaff, began to decline towards the end of the 2nd century.⁶³

Two graves, located to the west of the burial containing the distaff, were dated by the mints of *Hadrianus* and *Antoninus Pius*. Based on all the factors, the narrowest timeframe that can be proposed is the second half of the 2nd century to the beginning of the 3rd century, which would correspond with the dating of the remaining two amber distaffs from *Viminacium*. Additional confirmation for this claim, although one that should be taken with caution, is the already mentioned possibility that the figural depiction at the top of the distaff has coiffure that resembles that of the women of imperial families in the last two decades of the 2nd century.

The miniature dimensions of the segment depicting the bust of a female (Fig. 11), as well as the damaged parts of the hair and headdress (?), do not allow us to make a definitive conclusion about the deity or the person the craftsman wanted to represent. The first

⁶¹ Carroll 2013, 301.

⁶² Pasztókai-Szeöke 2009; 2011

⁶³ Палавестра, Крстић 2006, 77

step would be to take into consideration the mythical characters that are known for their ties to wool spinning, *Ananke* and *Clotho*. *Ananke* was the personification of natural necessity. In her lap she keeps a diamond spindle around which the whole universe revolves.⁶⁴ Her daughter, *Chloto*, one of three *Parcae*, spins the destiny of every human being.⁶⁵ The custom of depositing distaffs inside graves was explained as part of the *Parcae* cult,⁶⁶ but this interpretation is very unlikely, given the aforementioned evidence.

A certain number of distaffs depict *Venus Pudica*, a symbol of modest femininity, but always the whole body, in a standing posture.⁶⁷ Analogies for the representation of the unidentified female bust can be found in bone specimens from *Sirmium*⁶⁸, as well as in three distaffs from Asia Minor, two of which are on display in the Afyonkarahisar Archaeological Museum⁶⁹, and the third one originating from Ephesus.⁷⁰ Elisabeth Trinkl proposed that the last mentioned specimen might represent the goddess Minerva, based on similarities with a spatula with a female bust from Gaul. In that way, two important qualities of a Roman matron would have been combined: care of the household, metaphorically illustrated by wool spinning, which was only made possible by a proper education and upbringing, which are symbolised by this particular divinity.⁷¹

The last explanation, and probably the most plausible is that the represented female is, in fact, an

idealised representation of a Roman matron, which the owner of the distaff wanted herself to be, and which society expected of her. This interpretation makes even more sense if the coiffure of the bust really imitates that worn by women of the royal families at the turn of the 3rd century. The Empress was mother of all the citizens of the Empire, a literal embodiment of female virtue and, as such, the best role model for every woman who wanted to run a successful household.

Our lady with an amber distaff was buried less than 100 m from a villa discovered in this area, and it is safe to assume that this was the household she took care of. She had to be a member of the family of the estate owner, because there were not many people who could afford an object that precious. Even if slightly exaggerated, a passage from the work of Pliny the Elder, telling us that one small effigy made out of amber was worth more than an actual human, even one that was healthy and strong⁷², is very informative when it comes to the price of this material. This is why, at first glance, the type of her grave, a plain burial, is a bit puzzling, especially when you bear in mind that most of the distaffs made out of bone, jet and amber come from sarcophagi or cists.⁷³ On the other hand, maybe it should not come as a surprise, and can be viewed as a continued display of feminine virtue: she was humble during her life, and remained humble, even in the afterlife.

Translated by the author

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⁶⁴ Срејовић, Цермановић-Кузмановић 2004, 30

⁶⁵ Срејовић, Цермановић-Кузмановић 2004, 272

⁶⁶ Martin-Kilcher 2000, 65.

⁶⁷ Ivčević 2000; Trinkl 2005, 282-283; Kat. Nr. 1; Eckardt 2014, 142.

⁶⁸ Шарановић-Светек 1981, 156; Т II, 11,12; Т IV, 7

⁶⁹ Encyclopédie des petits objets archéologiques; QNL-4012; <http://artefacts.mom.fr> (Retrieved: 22.01.2019)

⁷⁰ Trinkl 2005, 284; Kat. Nr. 2

⁷¹ Trinkl 2005, 302.

⁷² Plin. *Nat.* XXVII.12.

⁷³ Gottschalk 1996, 493.r

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САХРАНА ЖЕНЕ СА ПРЕСЛИЦОМ ОД ЋИЛИБАРА ИЗ ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА

Кључне речи – Виминацијум, фунерарна археологија, прибор за предење, ћилибар, студије животног тока

Приликом заштитних ископавања шире градске територије античког Виминацијума откривен је гроб жене преминуле у тридесетим годинама живота, а сахрањене са луксузним прибором за предење. Посебно се издваја преслица, начињена од ћилибарских перли нанизаних на језгро од бронзе, коју јединственом чини врх који је фигурално моделован у виду женског попрсја. Минијатурне копије алата за упредање вуне, начињене од различитих материјала, познате су са територије целог Римског царства, и махом потичу из фунерарног контекста. Вуна је за Римљане имала посебан значај, о чему говори податак да је латински назив за овај материјал – *lana* – уједно био и назив за одећу. Одора свештеника израђивана је искључиво од вуне, као и тканине употребљаване у религијским ритуалима. Предење је сматрано женским послом и од жена се очекивало да опскрбе породицу одећом. У исто време то је била активност која је обављана у оквиру домаћинства, те је у пренесеном смислу и то значило да се о њему стара жена. С временом је предење постало симбол женског рода и израз женске врлине, а особа која преде добила је метафорично значење у литератури. Материјална манифестација симболике предења јесте луксузни прибор што је полагаан у гробове покојница.

Антички писани извори нас обавештавају да су невесте носиле преслицу и вретено током свадбене процесије која се кретала од њиховог девојачког дома ка кући будућег мужа. Може се претпоставити да је управо за тако битан животни догађај набављан скупцени, ритуални прибор за предење, који би током церемоније наглашавао висок статус и богатство. Луксузне преслице, као изражено лични предмети које су жене поседовале у току живота, постајале су део гробног инвентара, што их чини веома корисним алатом са становишта студија животног тока, будући да упућују на припаднице конкретне старосне групе – удате индивидуе.

Примерак откривен у Виминацијуму може се на основу расположивих показатеља одредити у период краја II и почетка III века, што одговара датовању римске виле у чијој је близини гроб откривен, тако да се покојница може довести у везу с породицом у чијем се власништву налазило то газдинство. Минијатурне димензије фигуралне представе не допуштају прецизно утврђивање божанства или особе која је приказана. У раду је изнета претпоставка да се ради о генерализованој представи римске матроне, што је био идеал коме је власница предмета тежила.