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ANTHROPOMORPHIC AMULETS FROM *VIMINACIUM*

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Abstract. – The paper focuses on a group of five anthropomorphic pendants, deposited in graves of sub-adult and female individuals, discovered in cemeteries of ancient Viminacium (Serbia). The selection of raw materials (jet and amber), as well as other parts of the necklaces these pendants were incorporated in, suggest their apotropaic character. Various data sources have been employed in order to answer questions regarding the identification of the depicted beings, reasons for their usage by certain population groups, etc. A comparison has been made with analogous specimens from across the Roman world, which are not numerous but are prominently widespread. Three examples from Viminacium originate from recent archaeological campaigns, meaning that osteological material was available for analysis.

Key words. – *Viminacium*, Roman magic, anthropomorphic amulets, amber, jet

During several decades-long excavations of ancient Viminacium (modern-day Serbia) nearly 13,000 graves have been unearthed, yielding more than 18,000 artefacts, making this archaeological site a unique place to study various phenomena related to Roman Antiquity.¹ The research object of this paper is a group consisting of five anthropomorphic pendants manufactured out of various materials and dated to the 3rd century CE (Fig. 1).² Until recently, similar artefacts had not been thoroughly researched in academic papers, which were sporadically issued from the late 1930s onwards. Additionally, the majority of these amulets were published without precisely determined circumstances of the find. Such a situation contributes to the importance of the Viminacium collection, given that the pendants come from secure archaeological contexts. Before going into the interpretation of these artefacts in greater detail, an overview of the objects themselves as well as the sepulchral units in which they were discovered, will be presented.

1. Grave 3239 (southern necropolis, Pećine site)

The first amulet originates from the grave of a child³ laid on its back in a plain burial pit. The osteological remains are almost completely deteriorated. The grave is dated to the first half or middle of the 3rd century.⁴

In the neck area, parts of a necklace were discovered. It consisted of four glass beads, a copper-alloy *bullae*, and a jet pendant (Fig. 2). The last-mentioned artefact (26 mm high and 24 mm wide) is modelled in the form of a bust of an anthropomorphic being, frontally facing the viewer. The eyes are round, the nose is

¹ Зотовић, Јордовић 1990; Кораћ, Golubović 2009; Спасић-Ђурић 2015.

² These artefacts were first presented to the academic community through a lecture at the conference HOMINES FUNERA ASTRA. Death and Children from Prehistory to the Middle Ages, held in Alba Iulia (Romania).

³ Anthropological analysis was conducted by Ž. Mikić.

⁴ Спасић-Ђурић 2011, 28–29; Спасић-Ђурић 2015, 211, кат. бр. 218.

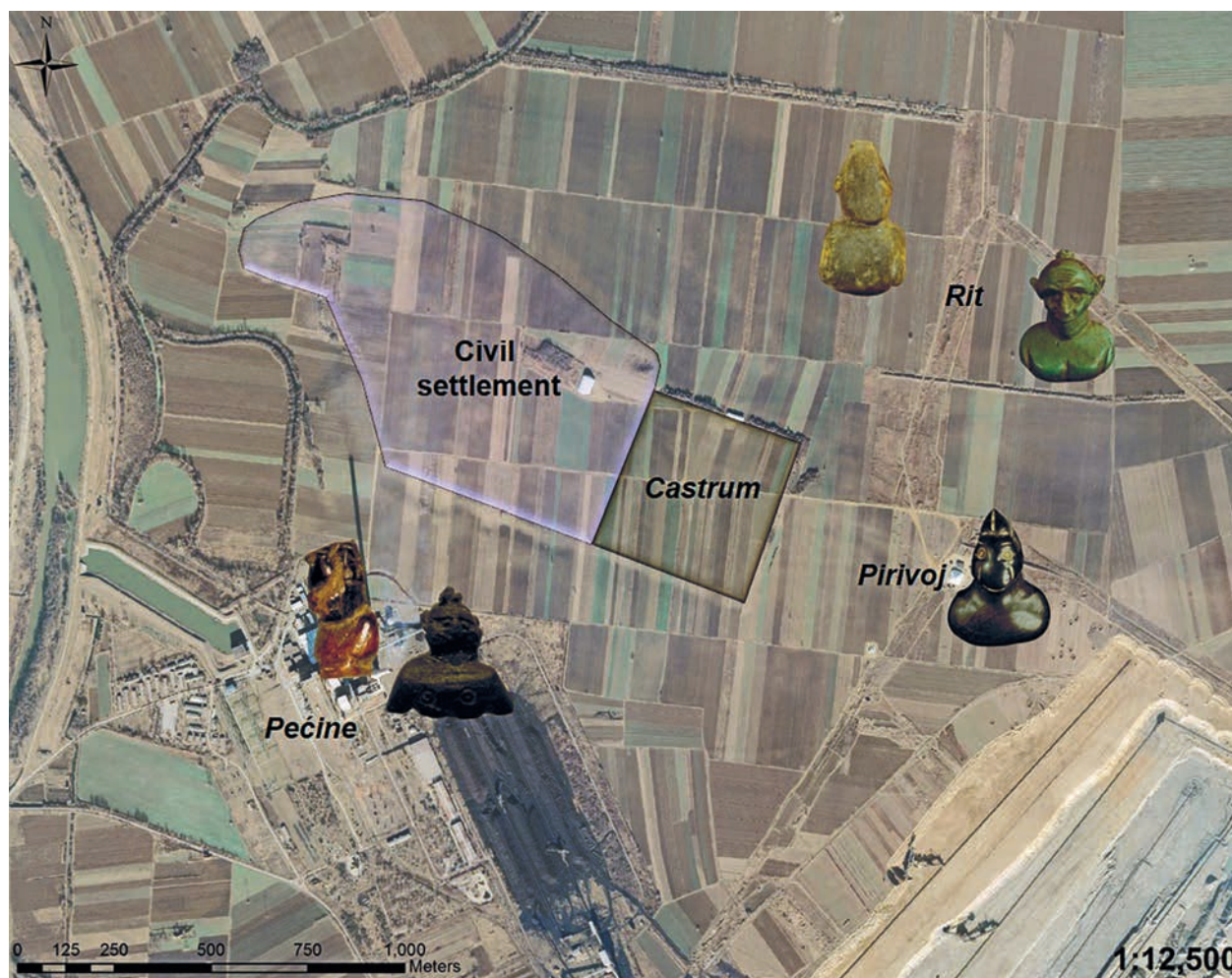


Fig. 1. Aerial photo of *Viminacium* with the locations of the discovered amulets (Documentation Centre *Viminacium*)

Сл. 1. Аеро фототографија Виминацијума са локацијама откривених амулета (Документациони центар Виминацијум)

broad, while the ears are prominent and pointed at the top. A topknot (*cirrus in vertice*) is observable on the crown of the head. There is a perforation in the pendant to allow suspension. The lower parts of the face are damaged. The neck is short and thick, while the shoulders are rounded with arms reaching away from the body. The nipples are represented with incised concentric circles. The backside of the being are polished with a central line accentuating the musculature.

2. Grave 5275 (southern necropolis, Pećine site)

The second burial was described in the field journal as a child's grave, which is an observation made by an

archaeologist, and not a physical anthropologist. The deceased individual was also laid on its back in a plain burial pit. Only bones of the rib cage and arms have been preserved. The grave is dated to the 3rd century.

In the neck area, there were remains of a necklace made out of 27 beads of different coloured glass, a copper-alloy *bullae*, and a bone (possibly ivory) pendant (Fig. 3). A silver earring was also found in this grave. The amulet measures 20 mm in height and is modelled in the form of a bust of an anthropomorphic being, depicted *en face*, head slightly lowered. The eyes, nose, and mouth are executed with incisions. A pointed hat is observable on the head, and the amulet includes a perforation for suspension.



Fig. 2. Amulet no. 1 (Cūacuḥ-Ḃyupuḥ 2015, 211)
Сл. 2. Амulette број 1 (Cūacuḥ-Ḃyupuḥ 2015, 211)



Fig. 3. Amulet no. 2 (National Museum Požarevac)
Сл. 3. Амulette број 2 (Народни музеј Пожаревац)

3. Grave 288 (eastern necropolis, Pirivoj site)

The third pendant was discovered as part of the grave goods of a grave constructed out of bricks, inside which the remains of a female individual, between 16 and 18 years old, were found.⁵ The body was laid on its back, with arms bent at the elbows and hands resting on the abdomen. Iron nails indicate the existence of a wooden coffin. The grave is dated to the mid-3rd century.

Parts of a necklace were discovered in the neck area (Fig 4a). It consisted of 68 glass, stone, amber and jet beads, as well as a jet pendant (Fig 4b). The grave inventory was completed with a silver ring and a tubular bronze container. The pendant (23 mm high and 17 mm wide) is modelled in the form of an anthropomorphic being, with incised, casually represented facial features. The eyebrows, eyes, nose (?), and mouth are executed with grooves filled in with a white, unidentified substance. On the top of the head, a pointed hat is represented, including a vertical incision in the front dividing it into two halves. A perforation for hanging runs from side to side of the head, in the locations where the ears should be.

4. Grave 79 (north-eastern necropolis, Rit site)

The fourth specimen was placed in a grave constructed with tegulas, which was, to some extent, damaged during plundering. On the same occasion, parts of the skeleton were dislocated. Only the lower jaw, several vertebrae, and the lower parts of the legs were discovered *in situ*. Anthropological analysis determined

that the individual buried here died at approximately 12 years of age. Based on enamel hypoplasia lines it was possible to detect at least four stagnations in development caused by periods of famine or severe diseases.⁶ The grave is dated to the mid-3rd century.

Inside the grave, scattered parts of a necklace were found (Fig 5a). It was made out of 42 glass, jet and amber beads, a small silver loop, and a bone pendant (Fig 5b). The grave goods also included a bone die, nine coins⁷, a bronze tubular container and two bronze rings. One of the rings had a glass inlay. The pendant depicts the bust of a frontal faced anthropomorphic being, 29 mm high and 21 mm wide, with incised eyes, an aquiline nose and a broad mouth. The forehead is high and wrinkled, while the ears are pointed. A top-knot is placed on the top of the head, and in front of it there is a perforation ending in the back of the head, used for suspension. The back is plain and polished. The pendant is dyed green.

⁵ Anthropological analysis was conducted by N. Šarkić.

⁶ Anthropological analysis was conducted by N. Šarkić.

⁷ Three coins were minted during the second quarter of the 3rd century in the town of Nicaea (minted during the reign of Emperor Gordian III). Single specimens represent the mints of Macrinus (mint of Ephesus, BMC Ionia, 90, no. 297); Alexander Severus (provincial coinage, unknown mint); Gordian III (RIC IV.3, 25, no. 84); Philip the Arab (RIC IV.3, 76, no. 70), Herennia Etruscilla (mint of Viminacium; Борић-Брешковић 1976, 84, cat. 1257–1260), and one more originating from a provincial mint (2/4 of the 3rd century, Nicaea?). The ninth coin is illegible.



a

Fig. 4. Necklace with amulet no. 3
(Photo: Goran Stojić)

Сл. 4. Ојрлица са амулејом број 3
(Фотографија: Горан Стојић)



b



a

Fig. 5. Necklace with amulet no. 4
(Photo: Goran Stojić)

Сл. 5. Ојрлица са амулејом број 4
(Фотографија: Горан Стојић)



b



Fig. 6. Necklace with amulet no. 5
(Photo: Goran Stojić)
Сл. 6. Ојрлица са амулетом број 4
(Фототоирафија: Горан Стојић)



5. Grave 121 (north-eastern necropolis, Rit site)

The second pendant from the Rit site was discovered with a deceased laid on its back in a plain burial pit. Physical anthropologists were able to determine that the remains belonged to a woman, between 40 and 50 years old. One episode of metabolic stress was detected. It occurred before the individual reached seven years of age. Apart from occupational stress markers, the osteological remains showed traces of periodontitis.⁸ The grave is dated to the second half of the 3rd century.

Parts of a necklace were detected in the neck and chest area (Fig 6a). It consisted of 105 glass, jet, stone, gold foil, and bone beads, a copper-alloy *bullā*, and an amber pendant (Fig 6b). The grave inventory also included a pair of gold earrings, a glass perfume bottle, and a bronze coin⁹. The pendant represents the bust of a frontal faced anthropomorphic being, 33 mm high and 18 mm wide.¹⁰ The facial features are vaguely recognisable only on the left side of the face, which could be due to wear induced by rubbing of the artefact. The ears protrude from the head, which is elongated, and probably finishes with a perforated topknot. Two vertical incisions are used to represent the arms. The backside of the being are plain and polished.

To summarise, the types of graves in which anthropomorphic pendants were discovered do not imply that

the deceased originated from wealthy population circles. The users were predominantly children (in three cases), while single specimens were worn by both a young and a mature female individual. All of the burials were dated to the 3rd century CE.

Interpretation of anthropomorphic pendants in Viminacium

Three important signs indicate that the anthropomorphic pendants discovered in the cemeteries of ancient Viminacium are, indeed, amulets or, more precisely, artefacts utilised in magical practice. Magic is, here, defined as a specific type of religious activity¹¹, in which professional persons “drew on religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism”.¹²

⁸ Anthropological analysis was conducted by N. Šarkić.

⁹ The obverse of this coin is illegible, but the reverse shows that it is the product of Viminacium’s mint, dating it to the middle of the 3rd century.

¹⁰ Anthropomorphic amber artefacts are not very common in grave assemblages at Viminacium. Besides amulet no. 5, so far, an amber distaff with the upper part modelled in the form of a female bust (Danković 2019), and a ring with a portrait of a woman have been discovered.

¹¹ Bremmer 2015, 11.

¹² Wilburn 2012, 17.

First of all, these pendants occur in archaeological records together with other objects of apotropaic and magical capacity. In every single case, they were parts of necklaces made from beads of various sizes and colours, with some of them manufactured from raw materials that had magical connotations themselves, which will be discussed later. Three of these necklaces included bronze *bullae*, objects generally regarded as protective.

Such compositions of necklaces can be seen as evolved (or rather simplified) versions of 2nd century amulet strings, very well attested in the necropoles of *Viminacium*. Besides *bullae*, these usually consisted of pierced coins, crescent and phallic-shaped pendants, perforated animal teeth, shells, bells, and beads (often with the ‘evil eye’ motif). Such objects were all referred to as *crepundia*, derived from the Latin word *crepare* – to rattle, to make a sound, which indicates their function as an instrument that could ward off evil spirits and bad luck by producing noise.¹³

Crepundia were mainly reserved for members of the youngest age group in *Viminacium*, children up to seven years old, but occasionally one or two apotropaic pendants can be found in graves of older, even adult individuals. Such a situation corresponds with data available for pre-Roman Greece, where children could have more than a dozen amulets, while women wore only one or two.¹⁴ Skeletons of the victims of Vesuvius can provide an interesting insight into the everyday use of amulet strings, which differs slightly from the image provided by sepulchral contexts only. Namely, few young women fleeing the eruption were wearing them, while a mature female individual had a casket containing an elaborate string with 35 various pendants.¹⁵ The last example raises some interesting questions, given that this woman obviously wasn’t using amulets, but rather keeping them as mementos, either of her childhood or her child.

Wearers of necklaces with anthropomorphic pendants in *Viminacium* are the second clue that points to their interpretation as magical amulets. Two such individuals were described as children, possibly under seven years of age, one is at the threshold of adolescence, 12 years old, one 16–18, and one 40–50. In the last two cases, anthropologists have confirmed the sex to be female. As shown in the previous passage, children and women were exactly the parts of the community one would expect to wear amulets, because they were deemed by their contemporaries as most vulnerable and in need of protection.¹⁶

The raw materials from which pendants were manufactured need to be taken into consideration. Primarily this concerns amber and jet, known for their healing properties, which led to them being regarded as apotropaic. Amber had numerous therapeutic qualities in Roman times, especially where children are concerned, and was believed to prevent and cure fevers, jaundice and bladder stones, as Pliny the Elder informs us.¹⁷ Amber amulets in the cemeteries of *Viminacium* are restricted to children during the 2nd century, and only in the 3rd century can their intrusion into grave assemblages of older individuals (women, as a rule) be observed. A possible reason for such a phenomenon could be the expansion of eastern ideas regarding magic and religion, but also one could argue that this period of turmoil and constant concern for wellbeing and safety made the need for protection through amulets a daily concern.

On the other hand, there are no mentions of jet amulets in written sources, although references to its healing properties have been preserved. Pliny is the most informative author when it comes to this material, and he says that the kindling of jet drives away snakes, cures suffocation of the uterus, and relieves toothache, amongst other things.¹⁸ When used for making amulets, the qualities of its smoke became permanent and non-degradable¹⁹, and this could also be true for jet jewellery. Jet amulets are not a significantly diverse category, consisting of small bear figurines found in children’s graves, medusa pendants²⁰ and, in the opinion of some authors, the so-called betrothal medallions.²¹

There are several qualities of jet and amber that contributed to their reputation as materials with magical potential. First of all, both substances possess electrostatic properties that the Romans were aware of.²² Also, they tend to give off a distinctive smell when rubbed or exposed to fire.²³ The amber anthropomor-

¹³ Martin-Kilcher 2000, 67; Milovanović 2016; Danković et al. 2018, 73.

¹⁴ Faraone 2018, 51.

¹⁵ Faraone 2018, 59–60.

¹⁶ Huntley 2010, 136; Faraone 2018, 27–28.

¹⁷ Plin. *Nat.* XXXVII.15.

¹⁸ Plin. *Nat.* XXXVI.34.

¹⁹ Faraone 2018, 92.

²⁰ Crummy 2010; Parker 2014, 15; Davis 2018.

²¹ Eckardt 2014, 112.

²² Solin. *De Mir. M.* XXIII.

²³ Faraone 2018, 91.

phic pendant from *Viminacium* shows signs of rubbing to the extent that all the facial features have been worn off. Also, due to the poor conductivity of amber, it can “feel warm to the touch in the cold, and cool in the heat”.²⁴

The colours of these materials should not be ignored, given that they could have played an important role when making objects intended for ritual use.²⁵ The black colour of jet is easy to associate with the chthonic domain, and ancients connected it to the night, death, and bad omens. The red colour of amber was linked to the fire and the sun.²⁶ Jewellery of certain colours may have had a protective function, and Pliny wrote that green malachite was especially useful for protecting children and defending against evil forces, and notes that in the East everybody wore a green stone as an amulet. The green colour of extremely popular emeralds symbolised vegetal growth, fertility, and prosperity.²⁷ Nina Crummy proposes that more affordable jewellery pieces (glass beads for example) were intentionally made in the colours of precious stones with apotropaic qualities.²⁸

This brings us back to the fact that pendant no. 4 from *Viminacium* was made out of bone and dyed green, possibly with the intention of instilling certain magical qualities to an otherwise ordinary material. Bone is not usually considered to have magical characteristics, but it was often used for amulet production. Perhaps it was viewed as an animal substance with regenerative properties similar to those attributed to antlers.²⁹ The same can probably be proposed for ivory, if one of the pendants from *Viminacium* is indeed made out of it. Another important characteristic of the last-mentioned material is its exotic nature, and the fact that it was not that easy to come by.

Precisely its rareness or exotic factor played an important role in choosing a raw material for manufacturing artefacts used in magic rituals. Substances that looked unusual and strange were deliberately selected in order to achieve the desired “coefficient of weirdness”. This coefficient was developed to measure to which degree magical language was different to the ordinary, and it may have included made-up words such as *abracadabra* and intentionally corrupted words, but it also could be applied to material culture.³⁰ A manifestation of the same phenomenon can be observed in recipes for remedies containing exotic ingredients, such as the hair of the mule, lizards, dung, blood of a baboon, etc, which possess no curative properties themselves.³¹ Without a doubt, the grotesque appearances

of beings represented by the *Viminacium* amulets contribute to the overall weirdness of these artefacts. Interesting is the comparison with the so-called *mīmī*, entertainers wearing grotesque looking masks, which were intended to illustrate scandalous and inappropriate affairs of everyday life. They took part in public festivities, such as *Lupercalia*, intending to ward off evil spirits.³²

Analogous examples of anthropomorphic pendants

The first step towards the possible recognition of the supernatural entities in whose form the anthropomorphic pendants were modelled is to look for similar examples across the territory of the Empire. Analogous specimens are not numerous, and usually not published in detail, at least not in the literature available to authors of this paper.

Geographically closest to *Viminacium* are three specimens discovered in Stobi (North Macedonia). Two of them originate from the burial of a female individual, between 14 and 16 years of age. She was buried inside a stone and marble cist, with a bracelet consisting of pottery and glass beads, as well as five jet and amber pendants. An anthropomorphic amulet was made out of each of these materials. A gold ring, a bone pin, and a glass amphoriskos were also deposited with the deceased.³³ Unfortunately, the illustration provided in the original publication is black and white, and not of great quality, so any further discussion on these amulets is impossible. The third specimen from the same site, also made out of jet, has not yet been published.³⁴

Single specimens exist in Aquileia (Italy) Ptuj (Slovenia), Astorga (Spain), Vienna (Austria), and Copenhagen (Denmark). The context of the amber pendant

²⁴ Causey 2011, 38.

²⁵ Wilburn 2012, 17; Eckardt 2014, 95.

²⁶ Eckardt 2014, 124; Davis 2018, 73.

²⁷ Berg 2002, 40.

²⁸ Crummy 2010, 54–55.

²⁹ Dasen 2018, 130.

³⁰ Wilburn 2012, 12–13.

³¹ LiDonnici 2002.

³² Wright 1875, II, 28, 30–31.

³³ Vinčić 1970, 141–142.

³⁴ The authors would like to express their gratitude to Dimitar Nikolovski (National Institution Stobi) for informing us about the existence of this artefact.



Fig. 7. Analogous specimens; a. Aquileia (After: Calvi 2015, Tav. 36), b. Astorga (After: Garcia Marcos, Vidal Encinas 1995, 115, 277, no. 4), c. Vienna (After: Casal García, Bóveda Fernández 2001, 132), d–f. Cologne (After: Hagen 1937, Taf. 29), g. Colchester (After: Parker and McKie 2018, cover), h–i. Palmyra (After: Raat 2013, 150), j. Unknown provenance (After: barnebys.com)

Сл. 7. Аналогни примерци; а. Аквилеја (према: Calvi 2015, Tav. 36), б. Астиорја (према: Garcia Marcos, Vidal Encinas 1995, 115, 277, no. 4), в. Беч (према: Casal García, Bóveda Fernández 2001, 132), д–ф. Келн (према: Hagen 1937, Taf. 29), г. Колчестер (према: Parker and McKie 2018, насловна страна), h–i. Палмира (према: Raat 2013, 150), j. Нејознајно налазиште (према: barnebys.com))

from Aquileia is not available, except a description of it as a part of a *crepundia*.³⁵ A feature that sets this specimen apart from others is the different and more elaborate coiffure, which appears to be shorter on top of a prominently high forehead, while it is longer on the sides and at the back. The eyes are executed by small holes, the nose is flat and triangular, or this might be the upper lip. The nipples are also represented by small holes (Fig. 7a).

The specimen from Ptuj comes from a fairly well documented context, given that it was discovered in the late 19th century. It was part of an amulet string found inside a lead sarcophagus. The necklace consisted of

seven amber pendants and three snail shells. Besides the anthropomorphic one, three were phallic-shaped, two in the form of a gladiator's helmet, and one in the form of a teardrop. The one shaped like a bust bears most resemblance to amulet no. 4 from Viminacium. This burial was dated to the 3rd century by the find of a coin minted during the reign of Gallienus.³⁶

An anthropomorphic jet pendant from north-western Spain shows striking similarities to specimen no. 4

³⁵ Calvi 2005, Tav. 36.

³⁶ Istenič 2000, 256–257, T. 177.

from *Viminacium* (Fig. 7b). It is 19 mm high, with angular facial features, an aquiline nose, bent ears, and a topknot. Around the neck, there is a gold wire collar with an additional piece of gold wire attached to it. The archaeological context of the find is unknown, but researchers have associated it with material dated back to the 1st or the 2nd century CE.³⁷

Another very similar example is displayed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, originating from Syria, and dated to the 3rd or the 4th century CE (Fig. 7c). It is made out of clay and dyed black, perhaps in an attempt to imitate the rarer and more expensive jet. The description mentions a topknot, round nose, and “ears of a fighter”.³⁸ A unique gold pendant kept in the Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen was part of the private collection of Bertel Thorvaldsen, probably acquired during his stay in Rome. It is in the form of a bust, with marked nipples. A wide, flattened nose, an open mouth, and a topknot are observable on the head. This specimen is dated to the 1st century CE.³⁹ Amulets from Vienna and Copenhagen are also very similar to our amulet no. 4.

Most specimens, apart from those from *Viminacium*, come from Cologne (Germany). Three jet specimens are known from this important urban centre, with a fourth that could possibly originate from there.⁴⁰ The first of them (Fig. 7d; 15 mm high) is typologically closely related to amulet no. 4 from *Viminacium*, both pieces displaying a topknot, a beak-like nose, and pointed ears. An amulet that supposedly comes from Cologne is described in a similar manner, but there is no illustration provided for it. It measures 25 mm in height. The third pendant differs significantly from the previous two because the facial features are executed with grooves and notches on an egg-shaped head. In this regard, it is similar to our amulet no. 3, although it also has a topknot, while the *Viminacium* specimen appears to have some kind of a pointed hat (Fig. 7e). The last pendant from Cologne appears less grotesque. It is seemingly bald, without a topknot or a hat.⁴¹ Triangular eyes, prominent eyebrow ridges, and depicted nipples make this amulet analogous to amulet no. 1 from *Viminacium* (Fig. 7f). Hagen states that there are two similar examples, one in *Antiken-sammlung* in Vienna, and one, badly damaged, in a museum in Aquileia. Neither of these finds was available to the authors of this paper. Hagen also mentions a jet anthropomorphic pendant from Coninxheim (Belgium)⁴², which differs significantly from all the specimens described in this paper. It appears much more realistic,

and is clad in clothes, which casts doubt on whether this artefact should be taken into consideration when talking about anthropomorphic amulets.

Geographically close to Cologne are two pendants recently discovered in Zülpich near Bonn (Germany). These finds stand out because they come from a secure archaeological context, namely they were placed with a female individual, buried in a stone sarcophagus. Both specimens are made out of jet. The first one resembles amulet no. 3 from *Viminacium*, while the other is slightly more schematic, and was initially recognised as a phallic-shaped pendant.⁴³

Colchester in England yielded two specimens, one of amber and one of jet. The first pendant was included on an amulet string together with a perforated canine tooth of a dog, a copper-alloy phallus with a *lunula*, a miniature copper-alloy bell, an as of Hadrian in a silver mount, and two pierced bronze coins (Claudius I and Julia Maesa).⁴⁴ It has a ridged coiffure, an extremely narrow face, and an elongated nose (Fig. 7g). These features make it comparable to amulet no. 4 from *Viminacium*. A black mineral (possibly jet) amulet from Colchester has not yet been published.⁴⁵

Two anthropomorphic pendants made out of ivory were discovered in the city of Palmyra (Syria), and could be dated slightly earlier than most of the rest, possibly to the 2nd century (Fig. 7h, i). Both of them were probably parts of the same amulet string, together with 36 beads of different colours, shapes, and materials, as well as four additional pendants: a heart-shaped bronze specimen, a miniature glass amphora, an ivory dog, and the Egyptian god Bes made out of stone. Interestingly, one of the ivory anthropomorphic pendants was dyed green. A bronze bracelet, 4 cm in diameter could indicate that a child was buried with these artefacts.⁴⁶

³⁷ Casal García, Bóveda Fernández 2001, 129; Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 167–168, Fig. 12.A.

³⁸ Casal García, Bóveda Fernández 2001, 129.

³⁹ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 172, Fig. 12.M.

⁴⁰ Hagen 1937, 127, T. 2, 3.

⁴¹ Hagen described it as a person wearing a helmet (Hagen 1937, 127), despite the existence of ears on the sides of the head.

⁴² Hagen 1937, 127, abb. 8.

⁴³ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 169, Fig. 12.F.

⁴⁴ Henig 1984, 244–245.

⁴⁵ We would like to express our gratitude to Glynn Davis (Colchester + Ipswich Museums) for informing us of the existence of this amulet (Crummy & Davis 2020 forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Raat 2013, 61–62.



Fig. 8. Geographical distribution of anthropomorphic pendants

Сл. 8. Географска дистрибуција антропоморфних мулета

Lastly, four amulets were discovered in Crimea (Russia). Unfortunately, we have not been able to acquire works in which these finds were published, and we are only aware of them thanks to descriptions by Andrea Menéndez Menéndez. The amber specimen from Chersonesos is the earliest and has been dated to the second half of the 1st century – first half of the 2nd century.⁴⁷ The remaining three specimens are all made of jet, and dated to the period of the 4th century, two originating from the Sovkhoz cemetery, and one from the Neyzats necropolis.⁴⁸ Any comparison with amulets from Viminacium is not possible, given that we did not have access to photos or drawings of these objects.

Three additional specimens should be mentioned. The first one is displayed on the barnebys.com auction website (Fig. 7j).⁴⁹ It is not modelled in the form of a bust, but rather only the head of a grotesque anthropomorphic being, sharing similarities with amulet no. 4 from Viminacium, as well as with the amber specimen from Colchester. An almost identical pendant is kept in the National Museum in Lisbon, and originates from a private collection.⁵⁰ The last specimen, a jet amulet from Jacquelyn Babush's Gallery, has a piece of gold wire used for hanging, similar to the one from Astorga. Morphologically, it resembles amulet no. 1 from Viminacium.⁵¹

Identification of represented beings

The geographical distribution of anthropomorphic amulets, as shown in figure 8, is sparse but widespread, from north-western to south-eastern parts of the Empire. Such a situation implies the existence of a knowledge shared by a small group of people, connected to the same belief system or with the same ethnic background. Also, this could be the result of the activity of specialised individuals distributing magical amulets to anyone in need of them, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliation.

The scarcity of this particular type of artefact, accompanied by the partial publication, often without archaeological context, makes the interpretation and possible identification of the represented being/s very difficult. Indeed, only a couple of attempts have been made to explain the nature of these amulets. Based on the “ridged coiffure, receding brow, and thick lips”

⁴⁷ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 171–172.

⁴⁸ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 170.

⁴⁹ <https://www.barnebys.com/auctions/lot/ancient-roman-black-jet-pendant-amulet-of-a-head-of-a-grotesque-wdotyeggt>

⁵⁰ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 173, Fig 12.Q.

⁵¹ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 170, Fig. 12.J.

that can be observed on the jet pendant from Colchester, Martin Henig suggests that this is a depiction of an African. Also, he describes the slit eyes and pointed ears similar to satyrs, and the elongated nose as potentially phallic. To conclude, he describes the object as a fertility amulet, “the Ethiopian or Pygmy representing the teeming wealth and fecundity of Africa”.⁵² Such an attribution has since been doubted.⁵³ The amber specimen from Aquileia has similarly been described as “the head of a negroid”.⁵⁴ The one discovered in Astorga was labelled as a “pendant with negroid” by Garcia Marcos and Vidal Encinas⁵⁵, while Casal García and Bóveda Fernández saw the represented person as Asiatic. The pendant kept in Vienna was similarly characterised as a bust of an “oriental gladiator”.⁵⁶

Dragana Spasić-Đurić interpreted the only published *Viminacium* specimen so far (amulet no. 1), as a grotesque portrait of an athlete, apotropaic-magical in its nature. According to her, it was supposed to protect the child against evil forces, securing his health and strength, which was the utmost ideal of the *palestra*.⁵⁷ A similar stance is taken and thoroughly elaborated by Andrea Menéndez Menéndez.⁵⁸ This interpretation is based mostly on the hairstyle of the depicted being. A topknot was indeed seen as a distinctive marker of male athletes in Rome, but it must be noted that such fashion originated in Italy, and did not exist in Greece and eastern parts of the Empire.⁵⁹ The last piece of information might be important, bearing in mind the possible provenance of anthropomorphic amulets. Certain facial features, and probably the colour of jet, were principal reasons that led some authors to describe these busts as depicting people of African origin. Indeed, it is important to notice that depictions of Pygmies⁶⁰ were also considered an apotropaic device in the Roman world. It was believed that the laughter produced by their antics and unusual looks could ward off the Evil Eye.⁶¹ Nevertheless, when the whole corpus of these artefacts, as well as various coloured raw materials used for their manufacture, are observed, it becomes obvious that at least some of them do not possess features that could lead to interpreting them in either of the two proposed manners.

A very important issue that needs to be addressed in the attempt to identify the represented creatures is whether it is one or more supernatural beings we are dealing with. Undeniably there are common features that can be observed. Three specimens from *Viminacium* sport a ponytail, or a topknot,⁶² while the remaining two seem to be wearing some kind of pointed

hat.⁶³ Amulet no 4 from *Viminacium* has the most analogous specimens across the Empire and, in this case, the same creature is certainly depicted (Table 1).

At this point, the hypothesis that all these individual traits were not as important as the need for the being to appear grotesque should be taken into consideration. Such an appearance is to be expected if these amulets are to be seen as a continued eastern tradition of frontal face depictions on prophylactic pendants. These include Humbaba and Pazuzu in Mesopotamia, Bes in Egypt, silens and other demons of the Phoenicians, and Gorgon in ancient Greece.⁶⁴

If the presumption is that it is one distinctive grotesque being in question, which would need to be backed up by several common features displayed on the amulets, how is it that some of them differ to such an extensive degree? The answer to this question could lie in the fact that anthropomorphic amulets are made in great detail, with some undeniable artistic value, and it would require a skilful pair of hands to produce one of them. It is hard to imagine that at least ten ancient magicians or sorcerers, scattered across the Empire, were such craftsmen that they were producing these artefacts themselves. A more reasonable solution is that the pendants were made by order and under instructions from a professional in jewellery workshops. Only after that, a specialised individual would perform a ritual that endowed the object with its protective powers.⁶⁵

⁵² Henig 1984, 245.

⁵³ Eckardt 2014, 85.

⁵⁴ Calvi 2005, Tav. 36.

⁵⁵ Garcia Marcos, Vidal Encinas 1995, 115, 277, no. 4.

⁵⁶ Casal García, Bóveda Fernández 2001, 129.

⁵⁷ Спасић-Ђурић 2011, 28–29.

⁵⁸ Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 174–177.

⁵⁹ Crowther 2009, 348.

⁶⁰ Pygmies represented in frescoes and mosaics can sometimes wear a turban-like headdress (Clarke 2003, 208), possibly resembling the pointed hats seen in some of the anthropomorphic amulets.

⁶¹ Clarke 2003, 195.

⁶² As do the amber specimens from Ptuj and Colchester, one of the pendants from Palmyra, the gold one from Copenhagen, three jet specimens from Cologne. This is also true for the ones from Astorga, Vienna, Zülpich, Lisbon, Jacquelyn Babush's Gallery and the auction house, all made out of the last-mentioned material.

⁶³ This is probably the case with the other amulet from Palmyra.

⁶⁴ Faraone 2018, 68; Menéndez Menéndez et al. 2015, 464.

⁶⁵ Wilburn 2012, 37.










No.	VIMINACIUM	ANALOGOUS SPECIMENS					
1							
		Cologne	Aquileia				
2-3							
		Cologne	Palmyra				
4							
		Cologne	Astorga	Colchester	Vienna	auction	Palmyra
5							

Table 1. Analogous specimens by type

Табела 1. Аналогни примерци разврстани по типовима

Such a possibility could indeed explain similar traits of an essentially differentiated group of depictions. Maybe the magician was providing instructions based on vague descriptions of terrifying supernatural beings, available in magic textbooks of the time, which brings us back to the shared magical knowledge in Antiquity. Curse tablets and magical gems that have been found in various parts of the Roman world utilize the same phrases, formulas, names, and symbols or, in short, a shared vocabulary of magical practice.⁶⁶ Spreading this knowledge could have been done by travelling sorcerers teaching, exchanging or selling their practice, or by books.⁶⁷ A certain fact is that these amulets were not mass-produced, but rather ordered in cases with specific needs. Interesting in comparison is the case of jet Medusa pendants which differ beyond a reasonable degree, with no two specimens alike, suggesting that these pendants were produced by multiple hands.⁶⁸

The most compelling argument for the theory of more than one being is the employment of various materials, as well as dyeing the pendants green in Viminacium and Palmyra. As stated earlier, these qualities could have been very important when making objects of ritual significance. The choice of raw material was not, in any case, random, given that magical practice followed strict protocols in order to be effective.⁶⁹

The need for a specific substance in order to create an amulet could further imply different evil forces, enemies, or diseases against which the protection was required. Unfortunately, the corpus of only 29 amulets is not nearly enough to try and detect possible patterns

⁶⁶ Wilburn 2012, 51.

⁶⁷ Wilburn 2012, 265–266.

⁶⁸ Allason-Jones 1996, 24; Eckardt 2014, 114.

⁶⁹ Sánchez Natalias 2018, 15.

in the occurrence of pendants of the same type (material, colour) with particular age groups, or their connection with possible diseases. Of course, the disease would have to leave traces on the osteological material, which most illnesses do not, and it must be kept in mind that sometimes magic could have been sought to resolve mental disorders. A detailed analysis by a physical anthropologist is available for only two graves from *Viminacium*, but nothing more than signs of metabolic stresses induced by famine or illness could be detected, apart from one individual suffering from periodontitis. This person was buried with a necklace comprising beads made out of jet, which was believed to relieve toothache when boiled in wine.⁷⁰ The pendant in this grave was made out of amber, which isn't specifically referenced by ancient authors as remedial for teeth related problems, but Pliny informs his readers that it is beneficial when attached to infants in the form of amulets.⁷¹ This practice survived through the Middle ages, and in the 19th century, a physician in a respected medical journal writes about amber necklaces being used to protect children from convulsions from their first teeth.⁷²

Finally, another expression of the heightened need for prophylactic amulets that can be observed in the cemeteries of *Viminacium* during the 3rd century needs to be noted. It is manifested by the occurrence of bronze and silver containers (*phylacteria*), used for storing gold and silver sheets inscribed with magical texts (*lamellae*).⁷³ One such sheet was discovered in the grave of a 4-years-old child in the north-eastern necropolis of *Viminacium*. It included 11 columns filled with names of various deities and demons, which can mainly be connected to eastern provinces of the Empire. Some of the mentioned beings are *Thôbarrau*, *Semesilam*, *Sesengenpharange*, and *Sasibêl*, originating from Aramaic, Syrian, Phoenician, Hebrew, and Egyptian religious-magic circles, and they were summoned for help and protection. Similar formulas have been observed on tablets discovered in Hermopolis Magna (Egypt) and Gelduba (Germany), and they represent reproductions of the same model from a long lost magical textbook.⁷⁴

If the theory of amulets as depictions of multiple supernatural beings was to be true, and bearing in mind that they probably had roots in the ancient Near East, the same as magical *lamellae*, it could be argued that these pendants represent some of the numerous deities and demons mentioned on the tablets. In short, it would mean that *lamellae* containing prophylactic

texts and anthropomorphic amulets are expressions of the same magical and religious concepts, manifested through different media.

Concluding remarks

At the current level of knowledge of Roman anthropomorphic magical amulets, it is not possible to derive any definitive conclusions or interpretations. A bigger corpus of data is needed, and one of the goals of this paper is to trigger the publication of similar specimens that presumably exist. Also, a reassessment of known pendants, including an analysis of osteological material where possible, would be valuable. The main reason for the lack of more thorough studies on these amulets lies in the fact that the material aspects of ancient magic were more or less neglected in academia, with researchers' emphasis mainly on texts, the magician himself, and the social practices related to magic. The materiality of magic entered the focus of scientific interest only recently, in the last decade.⁷⁵

What can be stated with a high degree of certainty is that anthropomorphic pendants are magical devices epitomizing an aggressive stance against harmful forces threatening the health and existence of the wearer, which is usually the case when depicting a frontal face or an eye on amulets.⁷⁶ The provenance of the represented beings, as well as the practice of using such artefacts, should be sought in eastern parts of the Roman Empire, suggested also by the earlier dates for similar analogous amulets from Palmyra in Syria, where they are dated to the 2nd century CE, while specimens from *Viminacium* exclusively originate from 3rd century contexts. This does not necessarily imply migrations of the population from that region to other parts of the Roman world. It could be the result of the adoption of exotic elements into magical practice, or simply of the sharing of knowledge. In this regard, it would be interesting to conduct a study employing

⁷⁰ Plin. *Nat.* XXXVI. 34.

⁷¹ Plin. *Nat.* XXXVII.12.

⁷² Riddle 1973, 4.

⁷³ An interesting case of a pairing of these containers with frontal faced amulets originates from the eastern necropolis of *Viminacium*. A woman in her early thirties was buried with three silver *phylacteria* as well as with a necklace incorporating a Medusa amulet, jet, and amber beads (Milovanović 2018, 107; 110; fig. 3).

⁷⁴ Korać, *Riel* 2017, 164–170.

⁷⁵ Gordon 2015, 8–9.

⁷⁶ Faraone 2018, 72.

physicochemical methods to determine if the users of amulets were incomers to a specific area or residents utilizing foreign magical practice in a time of need.

It is also safe to assume that, based on differences in the choice of material, colour, and perhaps the physical appearance of the depicted supernatural beings, pendants were intended for protection against particular diseases and dangers. Amulets aimed against rather specific medical disorders are well attested.⁷⁷ The scarcity of anthropomorphic amulets indicates that they were used in unusual situations against peculiar ailments and enemies. The price of these apotropaic pendants was probably somewhat higher than other protective devices, especially bearing in mind that they were made of luxurious materials such as amber, ivory, and jet. An additional claim to such an idea is that anthropomorphic pendants never became part of

the mass-production of standardised amulets employed against everyday concerns and threats, ready-made and available for purchase.⁷⁸

A logical consequence of the expense of these amulets would be their exclusive usage by wealthier parts of the society, but archaeological evidence does not support such an assumption. Three out of five deceased wearers of pendants from *Viminacium* were inhumed in plain burial pits, while the remaining two were buried within simple brick constructions. On the other hand, they have not been discovered in more lavish types of graves (fresco decorated family tombs, stone sarcophagi, and memorial hypogea) belonging to the “elite” population of *Viminacium*. It seems that the need for the protective powers of anthropomorphic amulets dictated their consumption, rather than social status.

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⁷⁷ Gordon 2019, 701.

⁷⁸ Gordon 2019, 702.

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АНТРОПОМОРФНИ АМУЛЕТИ ИЗ ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА

Кључне речи. – Виминацијум, римска магија, антропоморфни амулет, ћилибар, гагат

Током вишедеценијских истраживања виминацијумских некропола откривено је пет гробова, датованих у период III века, који су као саставни део инвентара имали огрлице са антропоморфним привесцима. Два привеска су израђена од гагата, два од кости (један, можда, од слоноваче), а један је од ћилибара.

Три су битне карактеристике ових артефаката по којима се они сврставају у ред апотропејских амулета, коришћених за заштиту њихових носилаца од злих сила, болести и урокљивог ока. Пре свега, јављају се у археолошким контекстима заједно с другим предметима протективног карактера, као делови огрлица са разноврсним перлама, од којих су неке начињене од материјала који сами по себи имају магијска својства. У три случаја откривени су скупа са булама од бронзе.

Важни подаци добијени су физичко-антрополошким анализама остеолошких остатака индивидуа које су ове амulette користиле. Две су окарактерисане као деца, највероватније испод седам година старости, једна особа неутврђеног пола преминула је око 12. године живота, док је женски пол утврђен за покојнице чија је старост процењена на 16–18, односно 40–50 година. Будући да су управо жене и

деца сматрани најрањивијим деловима популације, сходно томе пружана им је и заштита.

Није био занемарљив ни избор сировине за израду амулета. То се првенствено односи на ћилибар и гагат, којима су приписивана куративна својства код разних здравствених тегоба, те су они као такви с временом стекли апотропејски карактер. Виминацијумски примерци упоређени су са аналогним предметима откривеним широм римског света, који показују изразито широку географску распрострањеност, уз не тако велики број примерака. Таква ситуација указује на постојање знања које је поседовала мала група људи, припадника истог религијског круга или заједничког етничког порекла, али такође и на могућност деловања специјализованих професионалаца, који су дистрибуирали амulette онима којима је заштита била потребна.

У раду смо покушали да идентификујемо једно или више бића представљених путем антропоморфних привезака, и то имајући у виду типолошке карактеристике, материјале, боје и археолошке контексте. У ширем смислу, чланак спада у ред публикација које као тематику имају материјалне аспекте античке магије, што је тренд који је у академски фокус ушао тек током претходне деценије.