

AKTI VIII. MEĐUNARODNOG KOLOKVIJA O PROBLEMIMA RIMSKOG PROVINCIJALNOG UMJETNIČKOG STVARALAŠTVA

AKTEN DES VIII. INTERNATIONALEN KOLLOQUIUMS ÜBER PROBLEME DES PROVINZIALRÖMISCHEN KUNSTSCHAFFENS

THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM ON PROBLEMS OF ROMAN PROVINCIAL ART

LES ACTES DU VIII<sup>ÈME</sup> COLLOQUE INTERNATIONAL SUR LES PROBLÈMES DE L'ART PROVINCIAL ROMAIN

ZAGREB 5.-8. V. 2003.

RELIGIJA I MIT KAO POTICAJ RIMSKOJ PROVINCIJALNOJ PLASTICI

RELIGION UND MYTHOS ALS ANREGUNG FÜR DIE PROVINZIALRÖMISCHE PLASTIK

RELIGION AND MYTH AS AN IMPETUS FOR THE ROMAN PROVINCIAL SCULPTURE

LA RELIGION ET LE MYTHE COMME INSPIRATION POUR LA SCULPTURE ROMAINE PROVINCIALE

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PROVINCIALE

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# NOVAE – STELES WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF BIRDS

BY PIOTR DYCZEK

**N**ovae (near modern Svištov in northern Bulgaria) has come to be known foremost as the legionary quarters of the First Italic Legion and as a Late Roman and Early Byzantine town (fig. 1). But the site has also been a trove of epigraphic texts – more than 200 inscriptions and fragments of inscriptions from various chronological periods have been found during the many years of archaeological research on the site and its neighbourhood and in the nearby town<sup>1</sup>. The assemblage is unique and one of the biggest from Bulgaria. Most of these inscriptions have been published in two corpora, the second having appeared in 1997<sup>2</sup>. Since then further interesting finds have come to light. Two of these new finds are fragments of funerary steles – one a piece from the decorated top, the other bearing an inscription – both highly interesting and unique.

The first of the two pieces was uncovered in the area of the *principia*. The original stele had been cut down to size and reworked as a threshold, subsequently to be inserted into a later structure relief side facing down\* (fig. 2).

The second stele comes from the *valetudinarium*<sup>3</sup>, where the archaeological context turned out to be more interesting (fig. 3). The stele had been used as one of the slabs covering a canal in the new street running through the abandoned hospital ruins. This street, which we have come to call *via inscriptionum*, because of the number of funerary inscriptions used the pavement, was made during the reconstruction of the town after the raid of the Goths<sup>4</sup>. Finds of coins issued by

Probus and Aurelian date the spatial reorganization in this part of *Novae* to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The steles appear to have come from the cemetery lying to the west of *Novae*, which had suffered desecration at the hands of the Goths.

The first of these two fragments is made of sandstone; it is currently 46 cm high, 98 cm wide and 20 cm thick. Most of the parts executed in high relief had been hammered away, but a vessel has been preserved, having been sculpted in low relief. It is 18 cm high and has a bird sitting on its edge. The carving is simplified, but not poor in execution. Intentional chiselling of the surface is evident and justified once the remains of white stucco is noticed still adhering to the background here and there. The actual modelling of the ornaments was in the stucco covering the relief, which served only as a base. The vessel is shown standing on what is the partly chiselled away frame of the inscription field. In the right corner of the stone and on its left side there are the remains of a grapevine motif. To the left of the vessel there was once an acanthus-leaf motif, now cut away. On these grounds the stele can be classified as a funerary slab with grapevine motif.

The second of the steles has survived in a bigger piece. It was made of fine crystalline sandstone. The preserved height is 45 cm, width 90 cm and thickness 30 cm.

The carved text of the funerary inscription poses no difficulties for interpretation<sup>5</sup>. It was dedicated to a young woman with the name of *Atilia* and a Greek *cognomen*.

<sup>1</sup> J. Kolendo, *Historia odkryć i publikacji inskrypcji z Novae*. *Novensia* 1, 1987, 37–52.

<sup>2</sup> J. Kolendo/V. Božilova, *Inscriptiones graecae et latinae de Novae (Mésie Inférieure)* (Bordeaux 1997).

<sup>3</sup> P. Dyczek, *Novae – Western Sector*, 1996. *Preliminary Report on the Excavations of the Warsaw University Archaeological Expedition*. *Archeologia* 48, 1997, 43–49.

<sup>4</sup> P. Dyczek, *Via inscriptionum at Novae*. *Novensia* 10, 1998, 17–29.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kolendo, *Stèles funéraires réemployées dans la construction d'une rue à Novae*. *Archeologia* 50, 1999, 29–31.

\* I would like to thank Prof. T. Sarnowski for permission to use in this article the stele fragment coming from his excavations.

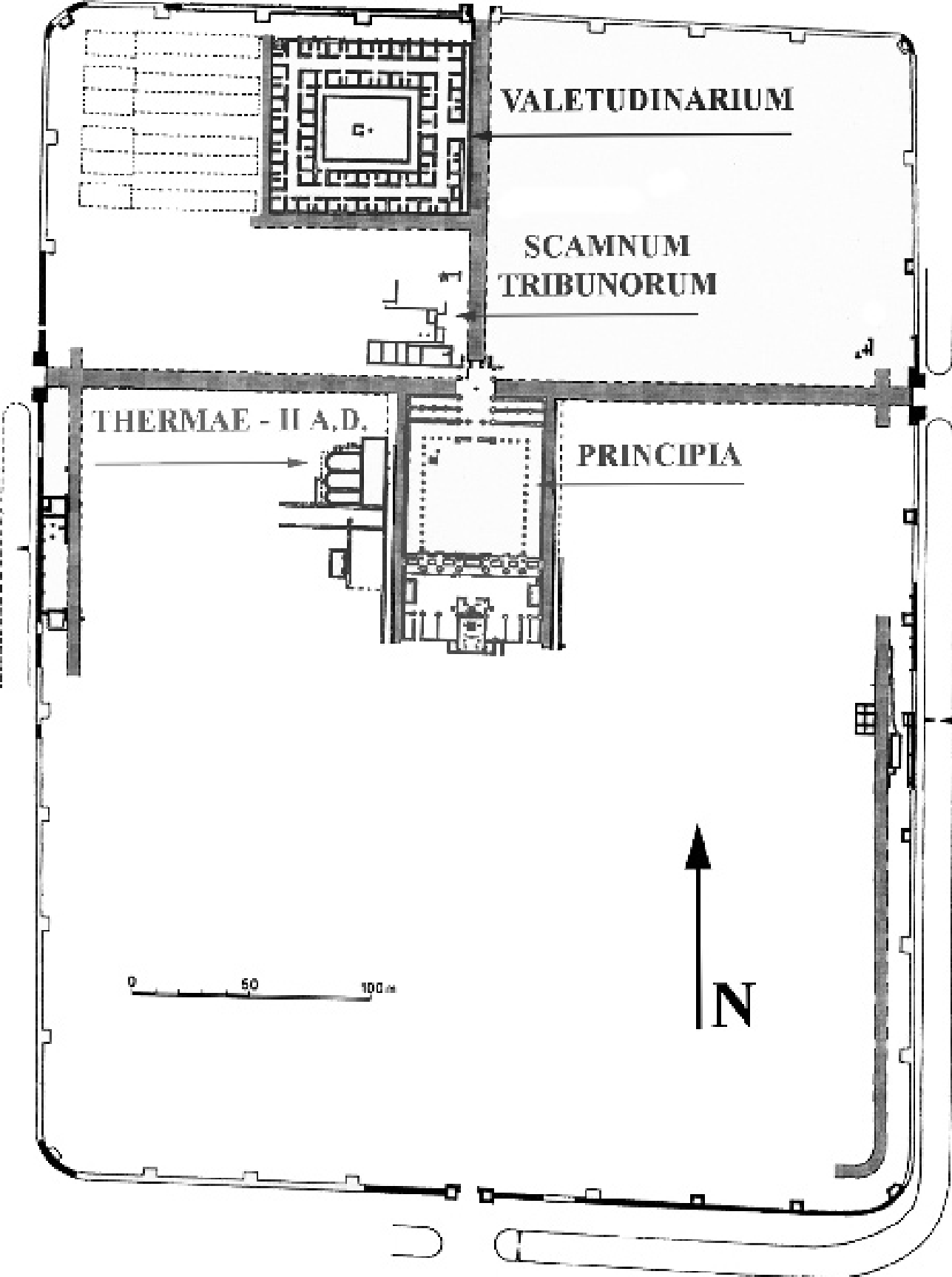


FIG. 1 CASTRUM IN NOVAE 1<sup>ST</sup>-3<sup>RD</sup> C. AD. (ELABORATED P. DYCZEK, T. SŁOWIK).





FIG. 2 FRAGMENT OF STELA FROM *PRINCIPIA* IN *NOVAE* (PHOTO J. RECLAW).

*D(is) M(anibus)*  
*Atiliae C(ai) filiae) Cry-*  
*sidi v[i]x(it) an(nis) XXXX*  
*h(ic) s(ita) e(st)*  
*C(aius) Valerius C(ai) filius)*  
*Festus coniu-*  
*gi piissimae et*

The decoration of this stele is exceptional. It was carved with much care in high relief. A scrolling grapevine with bunches of grapes was depicted encircling the inscribed field. Contrary to what is typical, the vine is “growing” from the top part of the frame. Spaced among

the leaves and grapes are four pairs of realistically rendered birds. The artist did not retain the proper proportions between the various figures, subordinating them to the demands of the composition, but his intention is evident in the carving of the details of the representation. There can be no doubt that viewers were supposed to recognize without any difficulty the actual species of the birds represented on the stele. The top part of the stone was worked with the same exactitude. We find there the facade of a temple with a tympanum complete with profiled cornice and a centrally positioned rosette. Above the temple roof a motif of single leaves reaching up to the top edge of the stele appears. Rising at

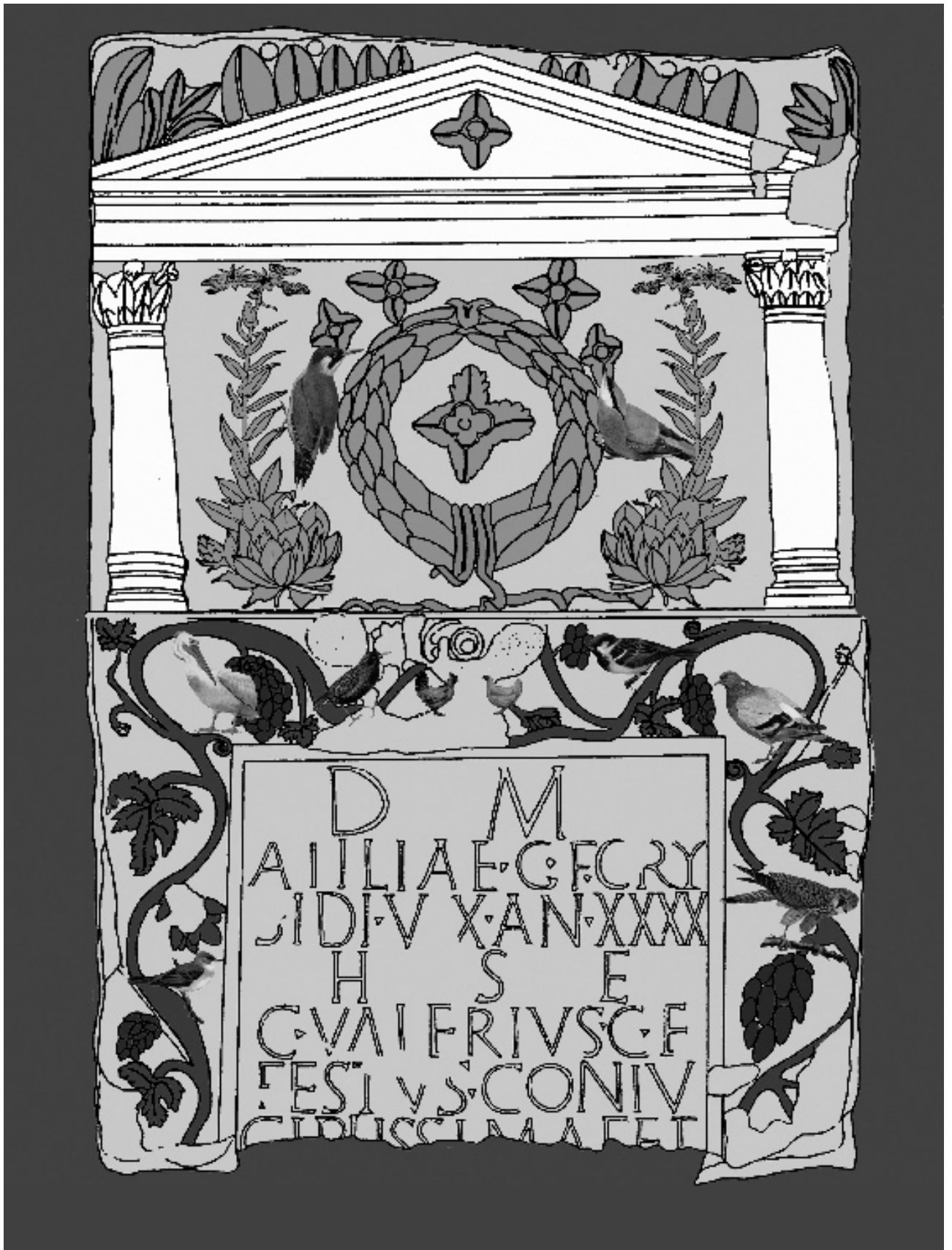


FIG. 3 RECONSTRUKCION OF "STELA WITH THE BIRDS" FROM THE SITE OF VALETUDINARIUM AT NOVAE (ELABORATED P. DYCZEK, J. JANOWSKI).

each corner are acanthus acroteria. The architrave with marked fasciae is supported on two composite columns. In the space between the columns a wreath with fillets is shown centrally and, antithetically, two plants with small flowers. On either side of the wreath there are birds clutching it in their claws. The birds are depicted “drinking nectar” from the flowers of the plants. A pair of rosettes appears symmetrically above the wreath.

The execution of the wreath is good enough to permit identification of the flowers, as well as of the species of the birds. All the elements must have assumedly been even better emphasized by the contrast of colours and a shadow effect – traces of red paint have survived on the architectural elements depicted on the stele and in the carving of the letters. It cannot be excluded, of course, that both the flowers and the birds had once been painted in resemblance of their natural colouring.

These uncommon representations of birds, especially the ones on the second of the two steles discussed here, may appear at first glance little more than an ornamental effect. Upon deeper analysis, however, one is forced to take a different view. Foremost, the motifs appearing on funerary steles were never arbitrary; they were chosen for their specific symbolic meaning, even if that escapes us today. Hence, the representation of birds – specific birds – and of plants – specific plants – must have had a particular significance for the person or persons who commissioned these tombstones.

But before we delve into this issue any further, a look at the other sepulchral steles from *Novae* is, I think, in order. Grapevine and ivy-branch motifs and a variety of forms crowning the composition are among the chief determinants of this category of finds. A comparison of various examples indicates how closely perceived in terms of the iconology were the grapevine and ivy motifs for those for whom the steles were made. While an overall analysis of steles from the Lower Danube limes has already been carried out by M. Alexandrescu-Vianu<sup>6</sup> and S. Conrad<sup>7</sup>, it might prove of interest to reconsider the issue with regard to *Novae* itself. Since 1997 thirteen inscriptions decorated with either grape-

vine or ivy scrolling plus rosettes and wreaths have been found on the site.

From the point of view of typology, there are six iconographic groups to be distinguished at *Novae*. But if we take into consideration the chronology of the *Novae* finds, we see four clearly separate periods for the occurrence of various motifs. The oldest of our steles, even when a broad margin is assumed, come from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. At this time two iconographic groups seem to have been *en vogue* simultaneously. The first corresponds to Vianu’s type VI<sup>8</sup>, which is characterized by a scrolling branch surrounding the inscription on three sides, the top being in the form of a tympanum with a wreath and rosette decorating it. Two of the steles from *Novae* can be included in this group<sup>9</sup>.

The second group includes steles with wreaths and a mirror represented at the top. Around this central motif there appear rosettes, sometimes shells, even a knife for harvesting bunches of grapes<sup>10</sup>. A scrolling grapevine frames the space for the inscription. Stele no. 94 is of particular interest. It was the epitaph of *Marcus Atronius Hermes* and his wife *Atronia Tyche*. *Marcus Atronius Hermes* appears to have been a local wine producer and his name is noted in the *Bacchi Vernaculorum* list<sup>11</sup> and at *Nicopolis ad Istrum*<sup>12</sup>. The bunch of grapes and harvesting knife depicted on the stele leave little doubt that they are connected with his profession, but they can also be interpreted in another sense: as symbols of a life interrupted.

Perhaps the association of mirrors with the gender of the deceased on steles of women and couples is accidental, but on the other hand, the symbolism, so characteristic not only of Roman iconography, is closely related to gender. It is especially true when we consider the other symbols, the meaning of which is quite transparent.

The second chronological period, in which steles occur, covers all of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. This is a period when the wreath and mirror motif develops. The top of the stele is composed of a wreath with a rosette inside it and pairs of rosettes on either side. Above the scrolling, intertwined grapevine branches there is an additional band containing representations of mirrors, shells and combs<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> M. Alexandrescu Vianu, *Les stèles funéraires de la Mésie Inférieure*. *Dacia* 29, 1985, 57–79.

<sup>7</sup> S. Conrad, *Die Grabsteine der Provinz Moesia inferior. Zeugnisse der Romanisierung an der unteren Donau*. In: S. Altekamp/A. Schäfer (ed.), BAR IS 921, 2001, 91–113.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandrescu Vianu (note 6) 61–62.

<sup>9</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 91:126–127, no 98:132–133.

<sup>10</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 94: 129, no. 95: 129–13.

<sup>11</sup> CIL III, 7437=6151.

<sup>12</sup> CIL III, 12433.

<sup>13</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 103: 136.

A variant of this iconographic type is represented by two steles, where the vine motif originates from the base of the epigraphic field, sometimes from an acanthus leaf. The top is the same as in the group already discussed above.<sup>14</sup>

The third chronological period starts in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and continues until the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The iconographical type is identical with Vianu's type VII, which is a development of his type VI<sup>15</sup>. At *Novae* there are three steles belonging to this group<sup>16</sup>. They are characterized by scrolling grapevine branches growing from the base and intertwining in the frame above the epigraphic field. The top is semicircular with *infulae*. In the case of the *Novae* steles, the decoration is supplemented with representations of Tritons, for example, an urn instead of a rosette inside a wreath, finally an image of a mirror.

The latest type of steles comes from the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and it features a wreath depicted among acanthus or ivy leaves<sup>17</sup>.

The remaining finds from this category are too damaged to be included in the typology.

A review of this material demonstrates the currency of two traditions at *Novae*. One tradition treats the stele as a kind of symbolic building crowned with a tympanum. The other tradition concentrates on various compositions of the wreath and rosette. Taking into consideration the trends in stele development, the stele with birds should be dated to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and should be treated as a composite variant, a transition between Vianu's type VI and the iconographic type with a wreathed rosette between pairs of rosettes.

The dating based on epigraphic data corresponds to that based on the iconography.\*\*

To judge by surviving fragments, the stele with a vessel should be assigned to the last chronological type and may thus be dated to the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. In terms of the iconography, it corresponds – it is a variant – of the type of stele with wreath and acanthus leaves.

There is another regularity that seems to be related to the status of the deceased. The proportions of the deco-

rated field at the top to the field with the inscription undergo a consistent change. Overall, the ratio is close to 1:2. In the case of persons of lower status – freedmen and a simple soldier from *Novae* – the decorated field is much smaller, the proportions being more like 1:3. The fragmentary nature of the stele with bird and vessel can provide only indirect information regarding the proportions, but the proportion of the fields to one another appears to be 1:2. The proportions of the fields in the case of the other stele with birds is close to 1:1. Thus, the difference in proportions seems to have been not just the outcome of a social or religious custom, but also the wealth of those commissioning the tombstones. Hence, poorer individuals were likely to order less richly carved steles, while more affluent persons or those enjoying familial piety were apt to have more sumptuous ones.

Despite the presence of birds in the decoration on both steles, the iconological program of the two stones appears to have been different.

Let us first consider the grapevine motif itself. In Lower Moesia it appears also on steles depicting scenes of funerary banquets. The variants are many, but the scene is always represented in the top part of the stele. While tombstones of this kind have yet to be found at *Novae*, what is of importance to us at this point are the shared elements of the composition. The scrolling grapevine – which is always shown growing from a vessel depicted on the lower frame of the stele – occasionally runs around both the epigraphic field and the banquet scene, e.g. the stele from *Capidava*<sup>18</sup>. In another variant, the banquet scene is part of the composition of a building façade, as on steles from *Tomis*<sup>19</sup>.

A variant of this type of representation, which is known from Pannonia (from Budapest), is a tombstone where the image of a married couple (e.g. stele of a man called *Fecundus*) or of the deceased alone is depicted inside the building façade carved on the stone. The same artistic/iconological operation was involved in the case of the inscribed field<sup>20</sup>. The stele from *Ljaskovec* in Bulgaria may be a variant of this: The inscribed field is

<sup>14</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 78: 114–115, no. 84: 120–121.

<sup>15</sup> Alexandrescu Vianu (note 6) 62; 75; 77.

<sup>16</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 80: no. 83: 119–120, no. 99: 132–133.

<sup>17</sup> Kolendo/Božilova (note 2) no. 82: 118–119, no. 112: 145–146.

<sup>18</sup> M. Alexandrescu Vianu, *Le banquet funéraire sur les stèles de Mésie Inférieure, schémas et modèles*. *Dacia* 21, 1977, 152 fig. 8,3.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandrescu Vianu (note 18) 154 fig. 9

<sup>20</sup> S. Ferri, *Arte romana sul Danubio*. Biblioteca della Rivista *Historia del Popolo d'Italia* 3, Milano 1933, 225, figs. 262; 263.

\*\* I am deeply indebted to Prof. J. Kolendo for his important epigraphical remarks and for sharing with me his suggestions for the dating of the steles on epigraphical grounds.

<sup>21</sup> S. Conrad, *Die Grabdenkmäler aus dem Territorium von Nicopolis ad Istrum*. In: L. Slokovska, R. Ivanov, V. Dinčev (ed.), *The Roman and Late Roman*

surrounded by a scrolling grapevine and above it there is a horseman depicted inside the façade of a building, which is marked by two pilasters and crowned with a cornice<sup>21</sup>.

Finally, the scrolling branches can encircle not just the inscribed field and the banquet scene, but also separate crowning elements consisting of a wreath with central rosette and two pairs of rosettes at the sides, as on the stele from the *Tropeum Traiani*<sup>22</sup>. All of the above mentioned tombstones are broadly dated to the 2nd century AD, but what is more important, each one contains motifs that appear on the stele with birds: facade, wreath, rosettes, scrolling grapevine etc. Interestingly, the proportions of the carved field to the inscribed one remain close to 1:1. The status of the deceased, to whom these steles were dedicated, was higher than average to judge by the inscriptions. In one case, we know that the family concerned was one of Romanized Thracians<sup>23</sup>, who wished presumably to emphasize their new status. Hence, the suggestion linking stele proportions with status appears to find confirmation here.

Next to be discussed separately is the bird motif. It is relatively common on funerary steles and its iconological sense is on the whole quite clear. Different species of birds appear to have been more or less popular in the various parts of the Danubian limes. In *Raetia* and *Noricum*, for example, the cock or hen was often depicted<sup>24</sup>. The cock was rarer in *Germania*, where it was univocally associated with *Asclepios*<sup>25</sup>. In *Raetia* and *Noricum* the repertory of bird images is richer. Originating from Augsburg is a stele fragment with a starling shown pecking at a bunch of grapes. Another stele, from Kempton, depicts a pelican<sup>26</sup>. The peacock, a symbol of Iuno and of immortality<sup>27</sup> appears most often in the area of Lower Pannonia. Sometimes one or two of these

birds appear independently at the top of a stele, sometimes sitting in the garlands, as on the stele of Sopron or the altar of Diana from Győr<sup>28</sup>. In turn, the same bird is shown among the rosettes, holding a bunch of grapes in its beak, as depicted on a stele from Bonn in *Germania Inferior*, dated to the Flavian period<sup>29</sup>. In another variant peacocks are shown among the scrolling grapevines, as on the frame of the stele from Maiz, dated to AD 213-217 and dedicated to Iulia Domna as *Dea Caelestis*<sup>30</sup>, or the acanthus leaves<sup>31</sup>. An interesting representation we can see on stele from Iža-Leányvár<sup>32</sup>. Two peacocks stand to kantharos. This stone was dated to 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century. By F. Hartl and B. Lőrincz it is symbolic representation of life-water and life itself<sup>33</sup>. The-second find is dated to the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

Images of doves in a scrolling grapevine are definitely much rarer. Examples are known from Upper Pannonia - Zollfeld-Virunum and Lendorf. In the latter case the bird is shown standing on a kantharos<sup>34</sup>.

The birds on a slab from Teurnia are depicted standing at the base of a voluted crater with scrolling vines descending from it, as well as among the leaves. The birds include quail, a pelican or heron, starlings, a golden oriole (?) and a parrot (?)<sup>35</sup>. From Eholting comes a representation of a starling among grapes<sup>36</sup>. Similar in spirit, but richer in execution are the representations known from *Germania Inferior*, from the site of Bonn. On a pilaster from the first half of the second century AD Dionysus is shown between two *Putae*, emerging from acanthus leaves and holding a scrolling grapevine. Among the bunches of grapes one can see a he-goat and a mouse, for example, but foremost birds: a dove, swallow, owl and some singing bird<sup>37</sup>.

Steles with single images of birds are also encountered in the territory of Dacia. Peacocks predominate

City (Sofia 2002) 107–108 Abb. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandrescu Vianu (note 18) 155 fig. 10,2.

<sup>23</sup> Alexandrescu Vianu (note 18) 155.

<sup>24</sup> F. Wagner, CSIR I 1 Raetia, Noricum (1973) Taf. 126, 151.

<sup>25</sup> H. Frenz, CSIR Deutschland II 4 (1992) 152–153 Taf. 126.

<sup>26</sup> Wagner (note 24) 39–40; 60 Taf. 34; 58.

<sup>27</sup> F. Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (Oxford 1973) 93–122.

<sup>28</sup> Z. Farkas/D. Gabler, CSIR II Ungarn (1994) Taf. 15, 24; 27,29.

<sup>29</sup> G. Bauchhenß, CSIR III 2 Germania Inferior (1979) 21–22 Taf. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Frenz (note 25) 126–127 Taf. 93 kat. nos. 33; 34; 178.

<sup>31</sup> W. Boppert, CSIR Deutschland II 5 (1992) 166–168 Taf. 50.

<sup>32</sup> J. Tóth Kurucz, *A leányvári ásatások folytatása 1907–ben*. A Komáromvármegyei és Városi Múzeum-egyesület Étesítője 13, 1907, 63–64.

<sup>33</sup> F. Hartl/B. Lőrincz, *Sprievodca rímskym lapidáriom v bašte VI. V Komárne* (Komárno, Wien 2002) 34.

<sup>34</sup> G. Piccottini, CSIR Österreich II (1994) Taf. 19, 454, 456.

<sup>35</sup> F. Glaser, CSIR Österreich II 6 (1997) Taf. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Glaser (note 35) Taf. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Bauchhenß (note 29) 49–50 Taf. 31.

<sup>38</sup> L. Bianchi, *Le stèle funéraire della Dacia. Un espressioni di arte romana periferica*. Archeologia 45, 1985, figs 12; 20; 33; 71; 72; 104; 124;125.

here<sup>38</sup>, represented in the same convention as in the western part of the Empire<sup>39</sup>.

An interesting analogy, although dating from Late Antiquity, is constituted by the paintings on the ceiling of a tomb discovered in the region of Sveštari and dated recently to the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>40</sup> They confirm the long-enduring custom of employing bird motifs in sepulchral contexts. Presented in separate panels among plant life are peacocks, doves, a swallow, partridge and duck. Pagan religious connotations are obviously out of the question with regard to these depictions. The birds are shown either as symbols connected with the life of the deceased or as ornaments referring to nature – merely decorative motifs. Neither should we forget in this context the representations of birds shown on the discs of African lamps from Late Antiquity, where the most popular species were cocks and doves. In this case the birds bear unequivocal Christian connotations<sup>41</sup>.

Armed with this comparative knowledge, let us now return to an analysis of the steles from *Novae*. Deciphering the motif on the stele with vessel and bird poses little complication. Although the ultimate form and decoration of the vessel, which had been completed in stucco, is lost, the characteristic elements carved in the stone, including the separation of the two parts of the vessel, indicate that we are dealing with one of two types of craters or kantharoi. Vessels of this kind were depicted in mithrea, e.g. the crater recognized as Neo-Attic in style, known from Ostia, from the Sacello delle tre navate<sup>42</sup> originating from the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The forms of vessels were often simplified, as in the mitreo di felicissimo or the mitreo delle sette porte. Analogies from other mithrea in Ostia indicate that the scrolling grapevine was also used as an iconographic motif in mithrea, e.g. mitreo delle sette porte<sup>43</sup>.

Of undoubtedly Mithraic origin is a bird which has been positively identified as a raven<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. Numerous analogies confirm this suggestion. They also prove that steles with ravens depicted on them were fairly common all over the Empire. We should not forget that representations of owls, eagles and cocks also bear mithraic connotations, best exemplified by the mitreo degli animali from Ostii<sup>44</sup> or the mithraeum uncovered by Polish archaeologists in Hawarte in Syria.

The stela under discussion fits well into the religious situation in *Novae*. Among the inscriptions here discovered there are many testifying to the presence of a cult of Mithra at *Novae*<sup>45</sup>. A small mithraeum discovered in 1984 in the vicinity of *Novae* constitutes further proof<sup>46</sup>. Hence, the stele with vessel and birds had belonged in all likelihood to a Mithra believer.

The motifs on the stele with birds are more complex. The realistic representation of whole plants in the temple opening, including a characteristic scaly stem and tiny flowers, clearly points to the houseleek (*Sempervirens tectorum* L.), belonging to the *Crassulaceae* family, originally occurring in the mountains of Central, Western and Southern Europe. Single leaves of the houseleek also fill the space between the roof and the top edge of the stele. Considering the shape of the flowers and leaves of this plant and the manner of their presentation, we should revise some of our attitudes towards the iconography of steles, for it seems that at least some of the flowers described as rosettes and some of the leaves referred to as acanthus were in reality representations of the houseleek. This changes the iconological analysis of such depictions.

The first group of birds<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> sitting in a wreath represents two species. The bird on the left is undoubtedly a woodpecker. The second is most likely a nuthatch, although other possibilities of interpretation exist as well<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Ferri (note 20) 225; 230; 310; 314.

<sup>40</sup> D. P. Dimitrov/M. Čičikova, *Kāsnoantična grobnica pri Sveštari* (Sofia 1986).

<sup>41</sup> S. Coscarella, *Lucerne Fittili Tardo-antiche*. Felix Ravenna 119–120, 1980, 58–69.

<sup>42</sup> G. Becatti, *Scavi di Ostia II. I Mitrei* (Roma 1954) 69 tav. XIV,2.

<sup>43</sup> Becatti (note 42) 99 tav. IXI; XX,3.

<sup>44</sup> Becatti (note 42) tav. XVIII.

<sup>45</sup> M. Tačeva–Hitova, *Istoria na iztočnite kultove v Dolna Mizia i Trakia v V v. pr.n.e. – IV v. ot n.e.* (Sofia 1982) 438. – J. Kolendo, *Balcanica Posnaniensia* V, 1989, 266. – J. Kolendo, *Mitra – Invictus Deus v Novae*. *Historia* 27, 1992, 99–103.

<sup>46</sup> V. Najdenova, *Mithraic Studies in Bulgaria*. *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, I, 1976, 99–101. – V. Najdenova, *Le cult de Mithra à Novae (Mésie Inférieure)*. In: G. Von Bülow/A. Dimitrova–Milčeva (Hrs.), *Der Limes an der Unteren Donau von Diokletian bis Heraklios* (Sofia 1999) 117–120.

<sup>47</sup> K. Dobrowolski/K. Piasecki, *Identifying het Species of Birds Depicted on a Funerary Stela from Novae (Bulgaria)*. *Novensia* 14, 2003, 59–66.

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<sup>48</sup> A.M. Taisne, *La thême du triomphe sous les flaviens*. *Latomus* 32/3, 1973, 485 fig 8.

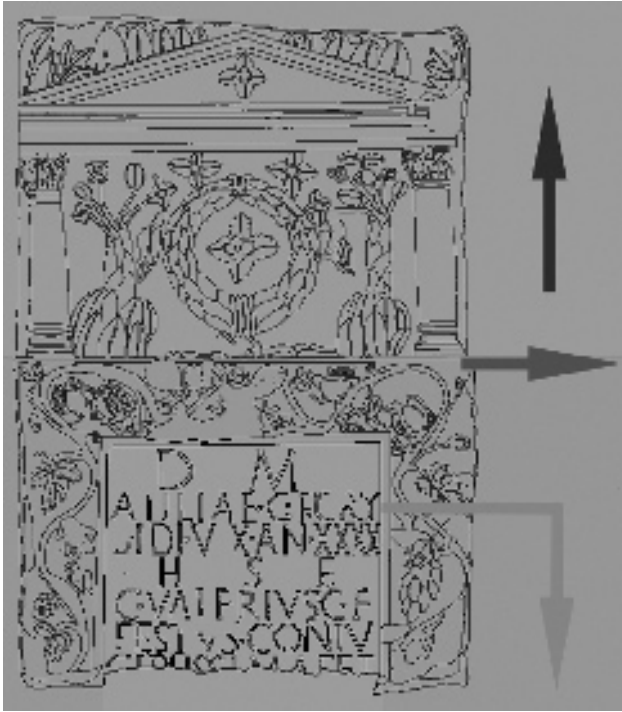


FIG. 4 DIVISION OF “MEANING” OF “STELA WITH THE BIRDS” (ELABORATED P. DYCZEK).

Four pairs of birds in the scrolling vines represent different species. It is important to note that not all of them are shown naturally pecking at the bunches of grapes. This suggests that they need not have been shown in a natural environment, but were placed among the branches for an entirely different reason.

The first antithetical pair seen at the base of the vine is the cock and hen (*Gallus domesticus* L.). The next pair is a starling (*Sturnus vulgaris* L.) and a sparrow (*Passer* sp.). The next two birds are a pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus* L.) and a dove. The last two is the “little singing bird” from the *Passeriformes* family and a kind of falcon.

Interestingly, not all the birds represented on this stele were depicted in Roman art. This would mean that the selection here was made for a purpose. Secondly, all the species mentioned here live in the territory of the Lower Danube, hence they are part of an environment known since Antiquity. The birds themselves, as well as their habits were surely quite well known to the owners of the stele and to the artists executing the decoration.

Let us now consider the iconological program of the two steles from *Novae*, taking into account both the types of representations mentioned above and the proportions.

The regularity is quite evident that steles with the scrolling grapevine motif consist of three parts: the engraved field, the encircling branches and the top. The epigraphic formula, including the *Dis Manibus* formula, suggests that the bottom part with the inscription refers to the past of the deceased, already dedicated to the Manes deities, absent from this world. The top refers to life after death, to conceptions of this life or to the symbolism of the belief in continuation in another form of life. The third part – the encircling vine – is a symbol of life itself, of the life of the dead person, combining the two worlds: that of the underworld and that of the divine (fig. 4).

If we look at the stele with vessel from this point of view, we will easily discern the various parts: the bottom part, which is lost, the upper part and traces of the third, restored part. In this specific case, the upper section is furthermore a kind of declaration of faith on the part of the deceased, referring directly to Mithraic imagery.

In the stele with birds the top part is more elaborate, but the symbolism is quite clear. The two birds, especially the woodpecker, are connected with death symbolism.

The third part – the grapevine with birds in it – is of greatest interest. The principle of division into three sections is quite clear, because the grapevine “grows” from the “underworld” part of the slab, the inscribed field. The symbol of earthly life has been clearly distinguished. It may be said that the persons commissioning the slab wished to commemorate in a very special way the memory/life of the dead woman. They wanted to emphasize their love of her, but also certain character traits or perhaps symbols of sudden events.

So, while some of the birds could be analyzed as symbols of deities, this does not seem justified in this case. Rather one should search among the various character traits attributed to birds by the Romans.

How then did her earthly life pass from birth (cock and hen at the base of the vine) or, more likely, from the moment of marriage? It was industrious – the starling – and it was peaceful and filled with deep attachment – the sparrow. It was full of love – the dove – and devotion – the pelican – and joy – the singing bird. And then it was brutally interrupted – the falcon. It is noteworthy that the sequence of the birds in the representation is entirely chronological, from birth until death, as if it was growing out of the grapevine.

We should not forget the religious aspect of the two finds. It is quite obvious with regard to the stele with vessel and raven, as shown above. In the case of the stele with birds, links with the cult of Dionysus are possible.

The triumph of Dionysus shown on the well-known mosaic from Sousse includes in the composition grapevines growing from vessels and birds among the scrolling branches: a raven, duck and goose.<sup>48</sup>

There is yet another important element – changes in the iconography could have been connected with the process of Romanization, as suggested by S. Conrad.

Thus, to my mind, the two finds from *Novae* are imbued with a double meaning as elements supplementing the typological changes in the sepulchral art of Moesia in the 2nd and early 3rd century AD and, most importantly, they provide the grounds for a better understanding of the hidden meaning of the motifs used in their decoration.

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