

BANATICA

30-I

2020

MUZEUL BANATULUI MONTAN REȘIȚA

BANATICA

30



I ARHEOLOGIE

Editura MEGA | Cluj-Napoca | 2020

FONDATOR

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Banatica is indexed in the EBSCO database (Historical Abstracts with Full Text).

Banatica este indexată în baza de date CEEOL (Central and Eastern European Online Library)/
Banatica is indexed in the CEEOL database (Central and Eastern European Online Library)

Articole din această revistă sunt indexate în „Regesta Imperii” /
Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted in „Regesta Imperii”.

Toate materialele trimise spre publicare trec prin procesul de peer-review /
All papers submitted for publication go through the peer-review process.

ISSN 1222-0612

BANATICA

Orice corespondență se va adresa / Any mail will be sent to the following address:

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Editura MEGA | www.edituramega.ro
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ROMAN ENGAGEMENT RING FROM VIMINACIUM

*Snežana Nikolić, Milica Marjanović**

Keywords: Viminacium, legionary fort, engagement rings, *dextrarum iunctio*, Ομόνοια

Cuvinte cheie: Viminacium, castru de legiune, inel de logodnă, *dextrarum iunctio*, Ομόνοια

Ancient Viminacium is located in Eastern Serbia, near Stari Kostolac, at the former confluence of the Mlava and the Danube (Map 1). Its strategically favourable position was the cause for the placement of Roman troops in this area in the initial stages of the consolidation of the Moesian Limes, and shortly after that, the establishment of a permanent military camp of the legion *VII Claudia* in the last decades of the I century. The founding of the fort was accompanied by the development of the city, which in the II century received the status of a *municipium*, and in the III century rose to the rank of a colony. Life in Viminacium also went on during late antiquity, until the middle of the V century, when it was destroyed in raids by barbarian tribes. Viminacium itself was never rebuilt after this, but life in its immediate surroundings continued in the early Byzantine period¹.

The first archaeological excavations of Viminacium began in the end of the XIX century, and lasted, with breaks, throughout the XX century². From the beginning of the XXI century, a new campaign of multidisciplinary research began at Viminacium, during which some parts of the legionary fort have been explored³. During 2016, research was conducted on the northwest corner of the fort⁴. On that occasion, a corner tower with parts of the western and northern ramparts was discovered, as well as a segment of the defensive ditch, which was bridged by a massive wall, with a canal running through it. The engagement

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¹ Popović, 1987, 1–37; Korać, Golubović, Mrđić, 2018, 42, 44–45.

² For the history of the research see: Mrđić, 2009, 9–16.

³ Korać, Golubović, Mrđić, 2018, 54–55.

⁴ The results of the research were published in: Nikolić *et alii* 2018, 69–78.

ring, which is the subject of this paper, was found in the lower segment of the ditch, northeast of the mentioned canal (Fig. 1)⁵.

The ring consists of a circular hoop and a cassette in which a cameo made of a two-coloured stone is inserted (Fig. 2 and 3). The outer diameter of the ring is 2.2 cm, the inner 1.8 cm, while the width of the hoop is 0.2 cm. The dimensions of the ring head are 1.2 × 1.1 cm, and the cameo itself measures 0.8 × 0.7 cm. The weight of the ring is 3.19 grams. The hoop is segmented, resembling a beaded wire, with non-accentuated shoulders; at the junction of the hoop and the head, there are two granules on each side. The head of the ring is secluded above the line of the hoop, and consists of an ellipsoidal cassette for the stone, closed at the bottom, with a frame decorated with small vertical incisions. An ellipsoid cameo made of two-layered, black-and-white stone (chalcedony⁶) is inserted into the cassette. The background is black, while the representation and the inscription are embossed in a white layer. The iconographic scene consists of two clasped hands – *dextrarum iunctio* motif, below which there is an inscription in the ancient Greek “OMONI(A)”, and there is an unclear representation above the hands.

Although a clear line between the size of male and female rings cannot be drawn, it has been determined that the inner diameter of the female ring is usually 1.7 cm⁷. The dimensions suggest that this ring belonged to a woman.

According to the typology of Ivana Popović, this ring can be categorized as a variant of type IV⁸, and according to the Annamária Facsády's classification as a type IV/a⁹. This form is widespread and appears throughout almost the entire period of the Roman Empire – from the I to the IV century¹⁰.

This specimen can be categorized as an engagement ring, based on the motif and the inscription.

In the Roman period, marriage was usually preceded by an “engagement”-*sponsalia* (*spondere* – to promise). Mutual consent and the utterance of an oral formula were enough to make the engagement legally binding. The engagement was sometimes marked by a gift of the engagement ring (*annulus pronubus*); the

⁵ Nikolić *et alii* 2018, 78, sl. 12.

⁶ After preliminary microscopic examination of the cameo, it could only be concluded that it was a variant of chalcedony. A more precise determination of the type of stone is currently impossible, because the cameo is in the cassette and any subsequent analysis procedure might damage it.

⁷ The results were obtained on the basis of an analysis of over 1000 specimens of Roman rings found in graves and a comparison of their diameter with the age and sex of the person who wore them. This study found that the inner diameter of the rings of adult women varies between 1.6 and 2.0 cm, while the largest number has an inner diameter of 1.7 cm: Swift, 2017, 165.

⁸ Поповић, 1992, 11, 13.

⁹ Facsády, 2009, 37–38.

¹⁰ Facsády, 2009, 38; Поповић, 1992, 11.

future bridegroom would present it to his fiancée as a token of love and affection¹¹. Engagement rings were first mentioned as the sign of love in Roman literature in the II century B.C.¹², and repeatedly occur in the same context throughout the entire Roman period. The gift of an engagement ring was mentioned in one of Juvenal's satires¹³. Justinian's Law Code states that the future bridegroom should give his fiancée an engagement ring that did not belong to him, and that he should give her his personal ring after the wedding¹⁴. In late antiquity, an engagement involved giving a ring to the bride, which was considered an indispensable part of the ceremony¹⁵. Historical sources inform us that the ring was usually worn on the ring finger of the left hand, due to the belief that the vein on this finger is connected directly to the heart¹⁶. However, the analysis of sculptures and frescoes from the Roman period shows that the rings were most often worn on the middle and ring finger, below the knuckle¹⁷.

There are data that until the end of the I century, engagement rings were made of iron and without decoration, while in later periods of the Empire they were made of precious metals, with decoration made on a precious stone, or directly on the head of the ring¹⁸. According to written sources and some modern researchers, an integral part of the marriage ceremony in the Roman period was the shaking of the spouse's right hand – *dextrarum iunctio*¹⁹. It was considered as a symbolic way to end to this ritual, so the motif was suitable for engagement rings²⁰. In Roman society, the presentation of a legitimate marriage was of great importance and emphasized that the wedding was performed in accordance with the valid legal norms²¹.

The handshake motif was widespread in art of antiquity. This representation dates back to the Assyrian period. It was taken over from the Assyrian iconography to the Etruscan and Greco-Roman art²². In Greek (*dexiosis*) and Etruscan

¹¹ Hersch, 2010, 39; Ogden, 1990, 142.

¹² Plaut. Mil. 4. 1.

¹³ Juv. 6. 25.

¹⁴ Dig. 24. 1. 36.

¹⁵ Tert. Apol. VI- 4.

¹⁶ Gel. 10.10; Macrobian Sat. 7.13.

¹⁷ Swift, 2017, 159.

¹⁸ Kuzmanović Novović 2017, 124; Ruseva-Slokoska, 1991, kat. 186.

¹⁹ Although written sources mention the importance of shaking hands during a marriage ceremony, it should be emphasized that the term *dextrarum iunctio* itself was not used in antiquity. This term was coined by modern researchers, who used it to describe the iconographical motif of a right hand handshake: Baillargeon, 2013, 1; Hamat, Băcucet-Crișan, 2019, 157.

²⁰ Hersch, 2010, 49, 190.

²¹ Hamat, 2014, 881; Hersch, 2010, 200–201.

²² Kuzmanović Novović, 2017, 115.

art, the handshake motif is usually associated with the funerary context in which it symbolized parting due to death, and unification in the afterlife²³. It less frequently symbolized the act of marriage itself, either on stellae or as one scene from a sequence on biographic reliefs²⁴.

The handshake motif appears on numerous Roman artisan objects – sculptures, tombstones, coins, jewelry, which clearly shows the wide range of meanings that it had depending on the context²⁵. *Dextrarum iunctio* appeared on tombstones during the late Republic (I century BC) and appeared in a funerary context until late antiquity. This motif was used in that context, above all as a symbol of a wedding, legitimate marriage and marriage vow²⁶. On Roman coins it symbolized mutual trust between the emperor and the army, often when concluding a contract. This motif has become extremely popular as a sign of marital concord, with the imperial propaganda of marital harmony, from the II century onward. It appears almost exclusively associated with this symbolism, although other meanings are not completely ruled out²⁷. Sometimes a female figure is shown alongside standing figures of a married couple, while the whole scene is accompanied by the inscriptions *Concordia, Felix, Aeterna*, etc.²⁸.

The depiction of the handshake appears on the rings as early as the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD²⁹, in the form of clasped hands or standing figures shaking hands³⁰. Although some authors believe that rings with these representations can be classified as military³¹, most researchers consider them engagement rings³². The representation of clasped hands is often accompanied by other symbols (ear of grain, poppy, cornucopia, star, caduceus, etc.), as well as inscriptions, mostly in Greek, such as *OMONOIA* or *HOMONO* (same meaning as *concordia*), which most often represent marital unity, harmony and fidelity³³. The motif is most often on intaglios, while it appears much less frequently on cameos and directly in gold. The representations on the intaglios are mostly schematic, while they are somewhat more detailed on the cameos, so the difference in the size of the hands is noticeable (in order to

²³ Davies, 1985, 630.

²⁴ Davies, 1985, 632.

²⁵ Kuzmanović Novović, 2017, 115; Nováková, Pagáčová, 2016, 218.

²⁶ Davies, 1985, 633; Nováková, Pagáčová, 2016, 218.

²⁷ Davies, 1985, 640.

²⁸ Davies, 1985, 638; Nováková, Pagáčová, 2016, 219.

²⁹ Кузмановић-Нововић, 2005, 286; Ogden, 1990, 143.

³⁰ Спасић-Ђурић, 2002, 93–94, сл. 75.

³¹ Hamat, Băcșueț-Crișan, 2019, 158.

³² Hersch, 2010, 41.

³³ Ruseva-Slokoska, 1991, 175; Kuzmanović Novović, 2017, 124; Hamat, Băcșueț-Crișan, 2019, 157, note 24.

indicate whether they are male or female hands). A ring or bracelet on a female hand is emphasized occasionally as well³⁴. The motif of clasped hands on the rings disappears in the end of the IV century, but the inscription ΟΜΟΝΟΙΑ still endures. In the early Byzantine period, this inscription appeared on various objects, with iconographic representations related to engagement and wedding³⁵. The inscription ΟΜΟΝΟΙΑ is often accompanied by phrases and symbols on the rings of this period, mostly related to Christianity³⁶.

The engagement rings from Viminacium are represented by several specimens, which are mostly made of gold. These rings originate from graves dated to the period from the II to the IV century³⁷, and various representations or inscriptions appear on them. Only two rings had intaglios with an engraved handshake motif, one of which originates from a cremation tomb and dates to the second half of the II century, while the other is from the tomb of an inhumed deceased and is dated to the first half of the IV century³⁸.

The silver ring with a cameo and the inscription is a unique specimen in the group of engagement rings with the *dextrarum iunctio* motif from Viminacium. It has already been mentioned that judging by its size, it is a woman's ring, and the motif on the cameo also points to it³⁹.

Several similar specimens of engagement rings with the representation of *dextrarum iunctio* were found in the Central Balkans.

The closest analogy can be found on a massive ring with a cameo, discovered in the grave of a girl – in a Roman settlement near Podujevo, Kosovo and Metohija region, which dates back to the IV century. On it, the inscription ΟΜΟΝΟΙΑ is under the clasped hands, which are slightly differently stylized⁴⁰. Similar motifs and inscriptions appear on the rings from the territory of today's Bulgaria. A ring with a cameo was found at the Lesichevo site (Pazardzhik

³⁴ Ogden, 1990, 143.

³⁵ Vikan, 1990, 145–163.

³⁶ Kantorowicz, 1960, 27a, b, 28; Ogden, 1990, 144. Vikan, 1990, 150–151, Fig. 12–13.

³⁷ Спасић-Ђурић, 2002, 94, sl. 75; Danković, Milovanović, Marjanović, 2018, 321, cat. No.36; there are several unpublished specimens in the Viminacium Documentation Center, originating from the latest excavations.

³⁸ Danković *et alii* 2018, 321, cat. No.36; Milovanović, 2018, 135, Fig. 45.

³⁹ The above-mentioned research (see note 7) also included iconographic analysis of the rings. It was determined that the handshake motif does not appear on a rings that are larger than 2 cm in diameter, which may suggest that this motif was considered unsuitable for adult men's jewelry. This motif on the rings of smaller diameter suggests the custom of early betrothal in Roman times, which is also noted in the sources. The most numerous rings with *dextrarum iunctio* motif have an inner diameter of 1.8 cm, which matches the ring size worn by a mature woman for an engagement or wedding: Swift, 2017, 183.

⁴⁰ Čerškov, 1969., sl. 14; Jovanović, 1978, 19–20, kat. br. 27; Kuzmanović-Novović, 2017, Fig. 13.

region) with the inscription HOMONO above the clasped hands. The ring originates from a tomb dated to the III century⁴¹. Two engagement rings from Bulgaria, dated to the II-III century, have relief representations and inscriptions made directly in gold. The ring found at the Roman baths (Germana – Sapareva Banya) displays the handshake motif, while the ring from Kallatis (Mangalia) displays the inscription HOMONO above the standing figures of a man and a woman⁴².

The engagement ring with a cameo and the inscription from Viminacium has an unusual context of the find. It was already mentioned that it was found in the lower segment of the defensive ditch, and the way in which the ring got in the ditch remains in the domain of imagination. A small amount of material originates from this horizon, dating from the middle of the II to the middle of the III century, while there are much more numerous finds, mostly ceramic and numismatic, which indicate that the lowest level of the trench was filled during the second half of the III century. This dating was also confirmed in the part of the ditch explored along the western rampart of the fort. That is why we assume that the ring ended up in the trench during this period. The granules at the junction of the hoop and the ring head also point to this dating. Namely, the use of granulation as a decoration technique was revived in the Roman period, after a long break, in the III century⁴³. It is necessary to mention that the dating of the ring based on the context of the find (the second half of the III century) cannot be taken as absolutely reliable. Bearing in mind that the sides of the ditch were sloping and intersected by numerous pits, as well as the fact that the ring was found near the wastewater, the ground could have been washed away and the material could have been intermixed.

Although they cannot be brought into direct connection with the cameo ring, it should not be overlooked that five more bronze rings were found near it, stuck together as a result of burning. They were also discovered in the lower segment of the ditch filling. Four had a cassette on the ring head, three circular and one elliptical in shape, but unfortunately no stone was preserved on any of them. The fifth ring had an engraved representation of a rabbit on its circular head. According to the classification of I. Popović, these rings also belongs to type IV, which occurs in different variants, and whose development stretches from the I to the IV century⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Ruseva–Slokoska, 1991, 72–73, Cat. No 217.

⁴² Ruseva–Slokoska, 1991, 72, 77, Cat. Nos 187, 188.

⁴³ Поповић, 1992, 11.

⁴⁴ Facsády, 2009, 38; Поповић, 1992, 11.

Jewelry with precious stones was popular throughout antiquity⁴⁵ and although in the first decades of the Roman Empire it was intended only for the ruling class, in the II century, it already became accessible to a wider population and was made in many provincial workshops⁴⁶.

During the present-day excavations, no glyptic or jewelry workshops have been discovered at Viminacium. Despite that, numerous findings of this sort from Viminacium, as well as the fact that it was a developed production center, suggest their existence. The ring that is the subject of this paper is a unique example among the engagement rings from Viminacium. The ring itself and the characteristics of the depiction and the inscription on the cameo, do not indicate a specific workshop, but judging by the way they were crafted, it was a work of a skilled provincial craftsman. The craftsman most probably did not speak Greek, since the inscription Ομονι(α) on this specimen lacks the letter “O” (correctly reads Ομονοια).

Our opinion is that the ring was most likely made in the III century, despite certain doubts about dating based on the context of the find.

Although the ring was found in the area of the fort, in a military context, relatively speaking, it should not be tied to the army. The fact that the northwest corner of the camp was located directly next to the city should be kept in mind, because it could mean the presence of women. We believe that it is an engagement ring and that it was in the possession of a woman, which is confirmed by the motif on the cameo and the size of the ring.

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⁴⁵ The artistic processing of precious stones has been known since the IV millennium BC, while in antiquity became popular in the Hellenistic period, after Alexander's expeditions to India: Поповић, 1989, 5.

⁴⁶ Поповић, 1989, 13.

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INELUL DE LOGODNĂ DE LA VIMINACIUM

Rezumat

În timpul săpăturilor de salvare efectuate în zona de nord-vest a fortului legiunii la Viminacium, a fost descoperit un inel de argint cu camee. Este vorba despre un inel de logodnă, cu o camee inserată, având o reprezentare a motivului cunoscut ca *dextrarum iunctio* și inscripția *OMONI(A)*. Este un inel special datorită atât a motivului reprezentat și a inscripției cât și contextului în care a fost descoperit. Mai exact, a fost descoperit în șanțul de apărare a fortului legiunii *VII Claudia*. Inelul se datează în a doua jumătate a secolului al III-lea, luând în calcul monedele și ceramica din același orizont.



Map 1. Map of the province Moesia Superior with marked location of Viminacium (map edited by M. Marjanović). / Harta provinciei Moesia Superior, cu marcarea amplasamentului sitului Viminacium (hartă realizată de M. Marjanović).



Fig. 1. Northwestern corner of the fort with the findspot of the ring (photo – Documentation center Viminacium). / Colțul nord-vestic al fortului, cu locul unde a fost descoperit inelul (foto: Centrul documentar Viminacium).

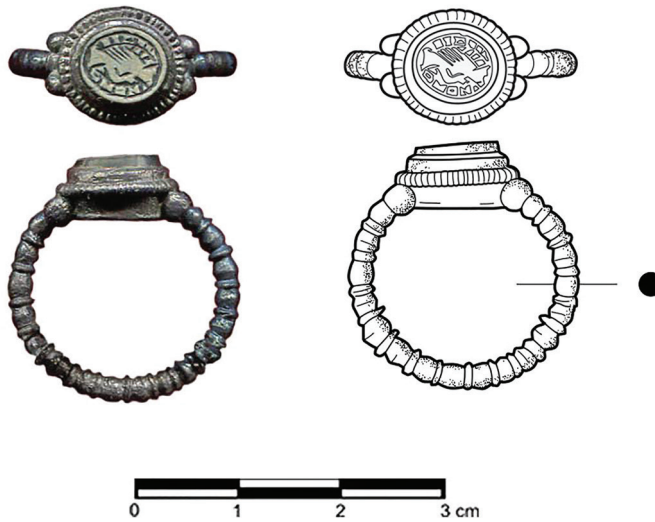


Fig. 2. Engagement ring from Viminacium (photo and drawing by A. Subotić, Documentation center Viminacium). / Inelul de logodnă de la Viminacium (foto și desen de A. Subotić, Centrul documentar Viminacium).



Fig. 3. Engagement ring from Viminacium (photo by G. Stojić). / Inelul de logodnă de la Viminacium (foto: G. Stojić).