

INSCRIPTIONS OF “GOOD LUCK” ON ROMAN OBJECTS FROM VIMINACIUM¹

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Abstract: *Recent finding of a small lead tablet (or a vessel, tray?) with an incised inscription utere was the opportunity to review other objects with this inscription or its Greek equivalent found at Viminacium. So far, the inscription utere/utere felix or its abbreviations have been found on a lead tablet, fingerrings, mirror/frame and belt sets at Viminacium. This inscription made objects used in everyday life apotropaic, or some of the objects were intentionally made in the shape of the letters of this formula, with purpose to bring good luck to its owner.*

Keywords: *Viminacium, jewelry, mirror-frames, fibulae, inscriptions, utere felix, apotropaic purpose*

Introduction

Roman city of Viminacium in today's Serbia (village Kostolac) was the capital city of the Upper Moesia province. Regular army consisted of the VII Claudia Legion which had been there from the 60s in the I century until the Hun invasion in the middle of the V century. On the crossroads between the East and the West, Viminacium had an important geostrategic position, and the greatest economic development was recorded during the reign of the Severan dynasty (end of II and the first half of the III century). Decade long salvage and systematic archaeological excavations of the site have provided us with rich findings about the inhabitants of Roman Viminacium, which is still being researched.⁴ Over 14000 graves have been excavated at Viminacium so far, as well as many public and private objects (thermae, parts of the legionary camp, amphitheatre, aquaeduct, villas and insulas).⁵

Objects with inscriptions of “good luck“

During the salvage archaeological excavations in 2016, at the Rit site,⁶ a lead tablet was found (a miniature vessel: a tray or a plate; dimensions 67 × 37 × 4 mm) with an incised inscrip-

¹ This article resulted from the project: IRS – Viminacium, Roman city and military legionary camp – research of the material and non-material culture of inhabitants by using the modern technologies of remote detection, geophysics, GIS, digitalisation and 3D visualisation (no. 47018), funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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⁴ KORAĆ/GOLUBOVIĆ 2009; MIRKOVIĆ 1968; MIRKOVIĆ 1986; ЗОТОВИЋ/ЈОРДОВИЋ 1990.

⁵ BOGDANOVIĆ/NIKOLIĆ 2012; JOVIČIĆ/REDŽIĆ 2014, 55–59; KORAĆ/STOJANOVIĆ/MREĐIĆ 2006, 37–46; МИЛОВАНОВИЋ 2008, 51–54; REDŽIĆ/JOVIČIĆ/DANKOVIĆ 2014, 67–69.

⁶ The Rit site is located north-east from the inner city centre and it was endangered by the expansion of the strip coal mine. So far, parts of the necropolis spreading north-east from the city and following the road which lead from *Viminacium* to *Lederata*, and went further to the Black Sea, were excavated at this site, as well as four villas.

tion *utere* (Fig. 1a, b, 2; T. I, 1a, b). This object has been found in a pit near the necropolis, and the material found there comes probably from the graves that have been disturbed. The pit is irregular in shape (dimensions: 4.80 × 3.00 m), and only pottery sherds and fragments of glass vessels, as well as animal bones have been found in it. Among other chronologically sensitive objects, a bronze coin (II century), a bronze fibula and a ceramic beaker made of white clay have been found.

The object itself is almost rectangular in shape, it is shallow, with small horizontal handles. On one side, the handle has three parts, and on the other, there are two semi-circular widenings. The fact that the handles are made differently, and the obvious negligence, suggest that point that this object might have been used to bring its owner good fortune.

Vessels made of lead are very rare and they are usually an imitation of identical objects made of other metals (gold, silver, bronze). These objects were used in everyday life, but their miniature versions could have been used in cults or maybe even as toys. Beside the above mentioned vessel from Viminacium, there is also a miniature plate (*angularis* – a tray) from Singidunum (Belgrade). On the inner part of the bottom, there is a representation of three fish in a shallow relief.⁷ Miniature dimensions of these objects, as well as representations of fish, or the inscription *utere*, suggest that they didn't have any practical use, so the opinion that these are connected with cult or votive vessels is more probable. In a grave of a child from Smyrna (Museum in Munich) three miniature bowls (plates) with a similar motif were found.⁸

Judging by their form, but not their size, vessels from Viminacium and Singidunum can be compared with similar examples made of ceramics from the same sites, Margum (Dubravica Village), Guberevac, Diana (Karataš) and other sites from Roman provinces of Dacia and Lower Moesia. The bottoms of these dishes are usually decorated with motifs which suggest cult use (animals in a run, vegetable symbols from Dionysus cult, erotic scenes, mythological scenes – Amor and Venus).⁹

The inscription of good luck is found also on a mirror frame from Čair Site (Viminacium; T. I, 2). This frame has decoration organized in four zones.¹⁰ Around the opening for glass there is a narrow circle with radial lines, followed by crossed lines, while the basic motif of the third zone consists of semicircles cutting one another and filled with granules. In the upper part of the fourth zone an inscription *VTERE FELIX* and crossed 'X' lines are found.

From the territory of Upper Moesia two mirror-frames of rectangular shapes with the same inscription were found. One is from Stojnik and the other one from Diana (Karataš).¹¹

The frames from Moylanda and German Natural History Museum are of similar content. Usually inscriptions on mirror-frames are love or erotic messages which could confirm magical and apotropaic character of these objects.¹² On mirror frames from Pannonia there are inscriptions in Greek or Latin dedicated to Venus, Selena, Isis, nymphs and women in general.¹³ Sometimes there is even a name of the craftsman, and the name of the dedicant is usually left out.¹⁴

The rings with the message *utere felix* (Wear it with luck!) should definitely be noted in this paper as jewelry of apotropeic character. This formula was particularly popular in II and III

⁷ ВУЈОВИЋ 2006, 311–319, сл. 1; T. I/1.

⁸ BAUER 1936, 19, with the note 94.

⁹ IVANIŠEVIĆ/NIKOLIĆ-ĐORĐEVIĆ, 1997, 104–109, сл. 40, 1, 2; NIKOLIĆ-ĐORĐEVIĆ 2000, 110–111; ВУЈОВИЋ 2006, 311–319.

¹⁰ СПАСИЋ 1995–1996, 56–57, кат. 44; Тип XIV/1.

¹¹ КОСАНОВИЋ 2015, 219–229; ВЕЛИЧКОВИЋ 1959, 58–60, кат. 1, сл. 1.

¹² ВЕЛИЧКОВИЋ 1959, 59, note no. 4.

¹³ BARRATA 2009, 67–74; BARRATA 2009a, 432–454; NÉMETH/SZABÓ 2010, 101–113; SOBIN 2000, 175.

¹⁴ SOBIN 2000, 178; TUDOR 1959, 429.

century, and is found on the rings, common ones, and key-rings.¹⁵ There are two silver examples from Viminacium mentioned in this paper. One has only the word *utere* carved in two lines (VTE/RE; T. I, 3),¹⁶ while on the other ring the abbreviated version of the formula VTF is carved (T. I, 4).¹⁷ Both rings have widened shoulders with angular profilation and elliptical head with the carved symbols. The rings are found in the graves of freely buried deceased. One individual is a child, aged between 6 and 8, while we could say it is an adult individual of unknown sex. In the child’s grave, besides the ring, a fragmented lamp and the bronze coins of Constantius II (middle of the IV century) were found.¹⁸ There were no other objects found in the second grave. Identical ring with the inscription VTF is in the National museum in Belgrade, and it is unknown where it came from.¹⁹ Two more examples were found on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. One has the word *felix* written in the form of a monogram, and this one find dates back to the III–IV century, whereas on the head of the second one there is VTE carved, and it is not newer than III century.²⁰ In the examples from Slovakia only VTF is carved, as well as *utere felix in deo vintio*, while the golden ring from Bulgaria (Goznitsa, Lovech region) contains the inscription VTR/FEL in two lines.²¹

Objects with the Greek inscription *EYTYXI*, could also be viewed together with these findings, considering their meaning is similar to *utere felix*. Greek adverb *εὐτυχῶς* is equivalent to the latin *feliciter*, while *εὐτύχι* is in fact the imperative of the verb *εὐτυχῶ*, and is found more often in the inscriptions than the grammatically correct form *εὐτύχει*. During Roman and late Roman period, this acclamation is found also as a part of a longer text, though mostly alone, and in the form of adverbs or imperatives. All these forms are actually sending the same message: Good luck! It should be noted that these inscriptions are found on various objects, such as glass and ceramic vessels, seals, metal objects (small bells, gems and intaglios, rings), but they are usually found on the jewelry. These inscriptions are especially characteristic for the III century. A name would usually stand next to the adverb or imperative, or, the universal – ὁ φορῶν (*wearer*). *There could be found the names originating from this verb – Εὐτύχης, Εὐτύχιος. It is also common to see the combination with χρῶ (χράομαι), which would be equivalent of the latin utere feliciter.*²²

On the jewelry with Greek inscription found in Serbia the following forms can be found: *EYTYXI* (form Transdierna),²³ *EYTYX / ZHCAIC* (Live happily!) (from Viminacium),²⁴ and *EYTYXI / ΠΡΟΚΟΠΤΕ / Ο ΦΟΡΩΗ* (Good luck and may you, the wearer, prosper!) (from Remesiana),²⁵ and *EYTYXI / ΜΟΥΧΙ* (from an unknown site).²⁶ The inscription *EYTYXI / ΠΡΟΚΟΠΤΕ / Ο ΦΟΡΩΗ* with no given name of the owner but the universal – the wearer, probably suggests that these objects were not ordered to be made, so those less fortunate could afford them too. However, the popularity of the inscriptions made for the universal wearer was growing in time, and they can be found also on a more luxurious objects.²⁷ *Ο ΦΟΡΩΗ* is found

¹⁵ SPIER 2012, 42.

¹⁶ KOSANOVIĆ 2014, cat. 12, T. III, sl. 12.

¹⁷ The data were taken from the documentation of the Belgrade Institute of Archaeology, The journal for Pećine site from 1984, pg. 2786, inv. No. 10983.

¹⁸ VOJVODA/MRĐIĆ 2015, 252, Cat. 1701.

¹⁹ ПОПОВИЋ 1992, 46, кат 92;

²⁰ MILETIĆ 1963, 29, cat. 68; KOŠČEVIĆ 1988, 200, cat. 5590, T. XXXIII, 550.

²¹ DÁŇOVÁ/STOJÁK 2012, 190; RUSEVA-SLOKOSKA 1991, 165, Cat. No. 182.

²² YANGAKI 2009, 249–250, 257.

²³ ПОПОВИЋ 1992, 42, кат. 79.

²⁴ ПОПОВИЋ 1989, 44, кат. 70; ПОПОВИЋ 1992, 29, кат. 34.

²⁵ JOVANOVIĆ 1978, 20, kat. 23.

²⁶ БОЈОВИЋ 1987, 148, кат. 30.

²⁷ VAN DEN HOEK/FEISSEL/HERRMANN 1994, 43.

in different combinations, mostly in inscriptions representing the want for happiness, advancement, protection, etc. It is interesting that *O ΦΟΡΩΗ* could be found independently on some objects, which could suggest that the word itself had gained some magical connotation. So, it is possible that the anonymity of the wearer is in some way connected to the protective purpose of the object and that the object should bring luck to anyone it belonged to.²⁸

Belt sets, whose fitting was made in the shape of the letters of the formula *utere felix*, are present during the II century AD. This fitting was secured with rivets to the leather belt, and the message itself served to bring luck to the owner of the belt and to protect them. This type of belt sets is also called the *Lyon* type. The name comes from the place the first such belt was found – in Lyon in 1950. Found letter-shaped fittings were interpreted as parts of the formula *utere felix*. The first belt of this type was found in a grave, next to the skeleton of the deceased, where there were also a sword, with the parts of the scabbard and a balteus, a fibula and 13 coins, two of them being Commodus and one Septimius Severus.²⁹ 26 pieces of belt sets of this type have been found in Viminacium so far (T. II, 1–12b).³⁰

Another significant find of this type comes from the Bulgarian village Ljuben. The tumulus enclosed with a wall where the set was uncovered, based on the coins found there, dates back to the years between 218 and 225. Silver belt set, with only the letter L missing, was found in one of the two graves of cremated deceased. Together with the belt set, medical instruments were found, so it is assumed that the wearer was a physician. Ovcarov believes that the grave belonged to the local aristocracy.³¹ Yet another find of these belt sets was found in Varazdinske Toplice (*Aquae Iasae*) and it is dated to the period between the last quarter of the II and the mid- III century. The context of the find was interpreted, with some reserve, as a votive gift to the thermal baths that were also regarded as a shrine. After the first publication of the finds from Varazdinske Toplice, the reading *TEOFILEAE* was suggested. Almost an entire set was found, apart from two fittings.³²

Mentioned finds are almost completely preserved, while the individual fittings can be found on several sites, mostly in Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire.

This type of finds from Viminacium have certain similarities regarding ornamentation. However, an exception is one unique find of the ligature TE, which, for now, does not have uncovered analogies. There were no weapons or military equipment in the graves from Viminacium where the mentioned fittings were found, so this might negate the opinion that these belts were exclusively used by soldiers. However, as an indirect proof that supports this claim could be the number of these finds excavated near the legion camp. Chronologically, these finds belong to the period of the second half of II century and the first half of the III century. The set findings of this type on the Viminacium territory suggest the hypothesis that the place of origin of this type of sets are precisely Danubian provinces – might be true.³³

There is another set of this type found on the territory of Serbia. The fittings of a belt set were found in Novi Banovci (*Burgenae*) and is kept in Archaeological museum in Zagreb.³⁴

Other than on the rings, mirror-frames and belt sets, the inscription *utere felix* is found on fibulae in Serbia. In this case, also, the inscription points to the apotropeic function of the object, that is the fibula.³⁵ However, none of these fibulas have been found at Viminacium so far.

²⁸ VAN DEN HOEK/FEISSEL/HERRMANN 1994, 51–52.

²⁹ GALIĆ/RADMAN-LIVAJA 2006, 167; REDŽIĆ 2008, 155.

³⁰ REDŽIĆ 2008, 156.

³¹ ОБЧАРОБ 1979, 37–38, 40.

³² GALIĆ/RADMAN-LIVAJA 2006, 165–166.

³³ REDŽIĆ 2008, 157–159.

³⁴ RADMAN-LIVAJA 2008, 298.

³⁵ BEHRENS 1950, 13, cat. 9.

There are two examples of fibulae with this inscription in Serbia. One is in the National museum in Belgrade, and the other from the Belgrade City museum, both coming from unknown sites.³⁶

One of the fibulae belongs to the arched T-fibulae type, which have a wrist mechanism in cylinder head, often having profiled ends and button-like thickenings at the end of the axle. The foot is rectangular, has an arched needle holder and is often decorated by faceting and parallel cuts. Different motifs in *niello* technique are also found on this type of fibulae, in this case the inscription *utere felix*. These fibulae are scattered along the border territory of Lower Pannonia and Upper Moesia, mostly in military context, that is in forts or smaller fortifications on the limes. The majority is found in the necropolises of Viminacium and Diana, so it is assumed they might have been produced there locally. They were equally worn by both men and women. They are dated to the III–IV century. They represent the prototype of cross-shaped fibulae. It is possible that they were made of different materials, because they signified the rank in municipal or state administration or maybe in the army.³⁷

Inscriptions of good luck have been found on many different objects so far. The examples from Viminacium as well as the examples found elsewhere show the importance of words and their magical potential. Any object could be turned into apotropaic one just by incising the words of good luck, or some of them were intentionally made this way, like the belt sets which are shaped like the letters of the formula *utere felix*. It can also be noted that these inscriptions are usually found on personal objects, that people could carry with them or wear them at all times.

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³⁶ BOJOVIĆ 1983, 155–156, kat. 400; ПЕТРОВИЋ 1997, 156, kat. 255; ПОПОВИЋ 1994, kat. 244.

³⁷ ПЕТКОВИЋ 2010, 241–243, kat. 1250, 1381.

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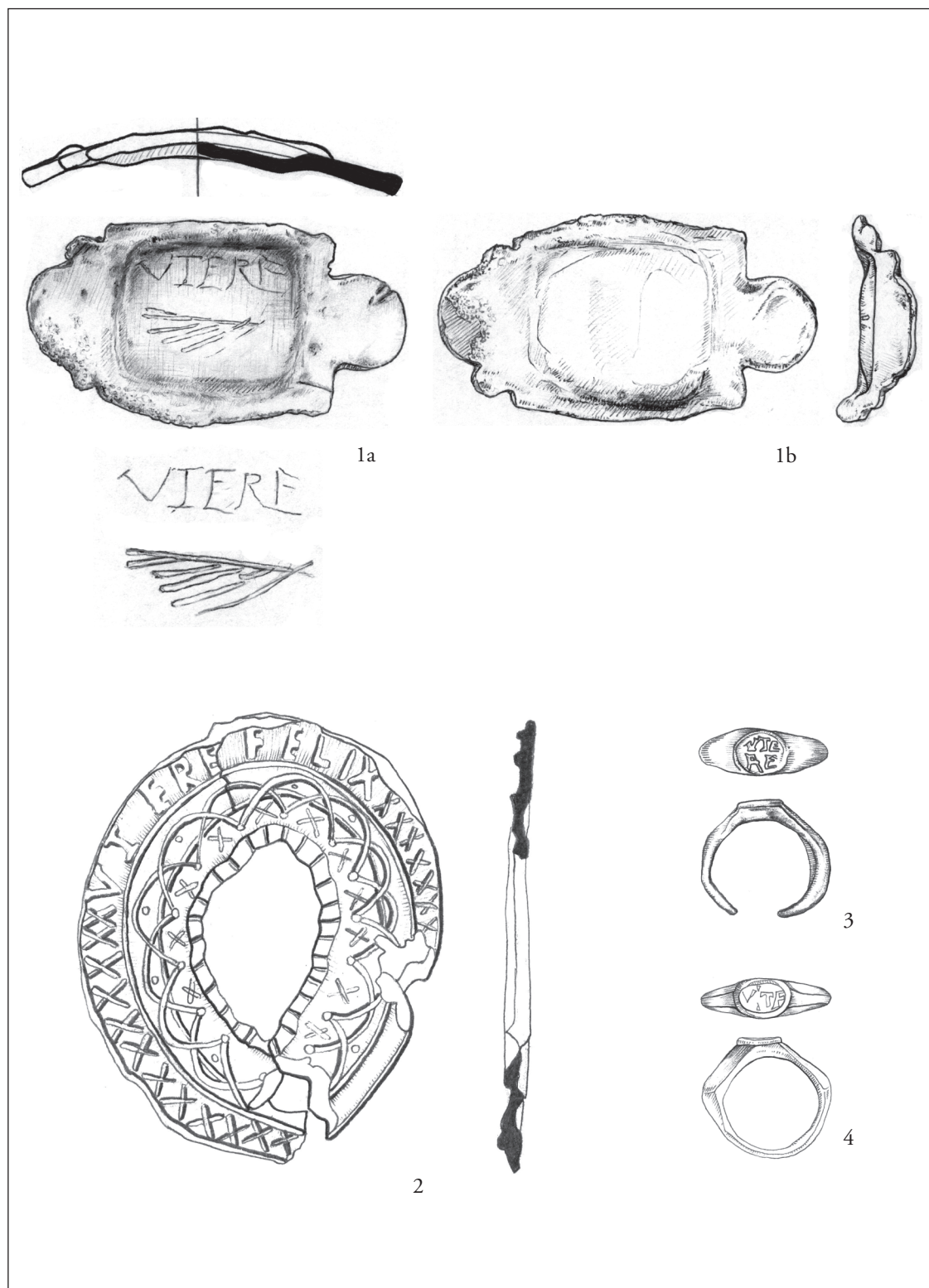
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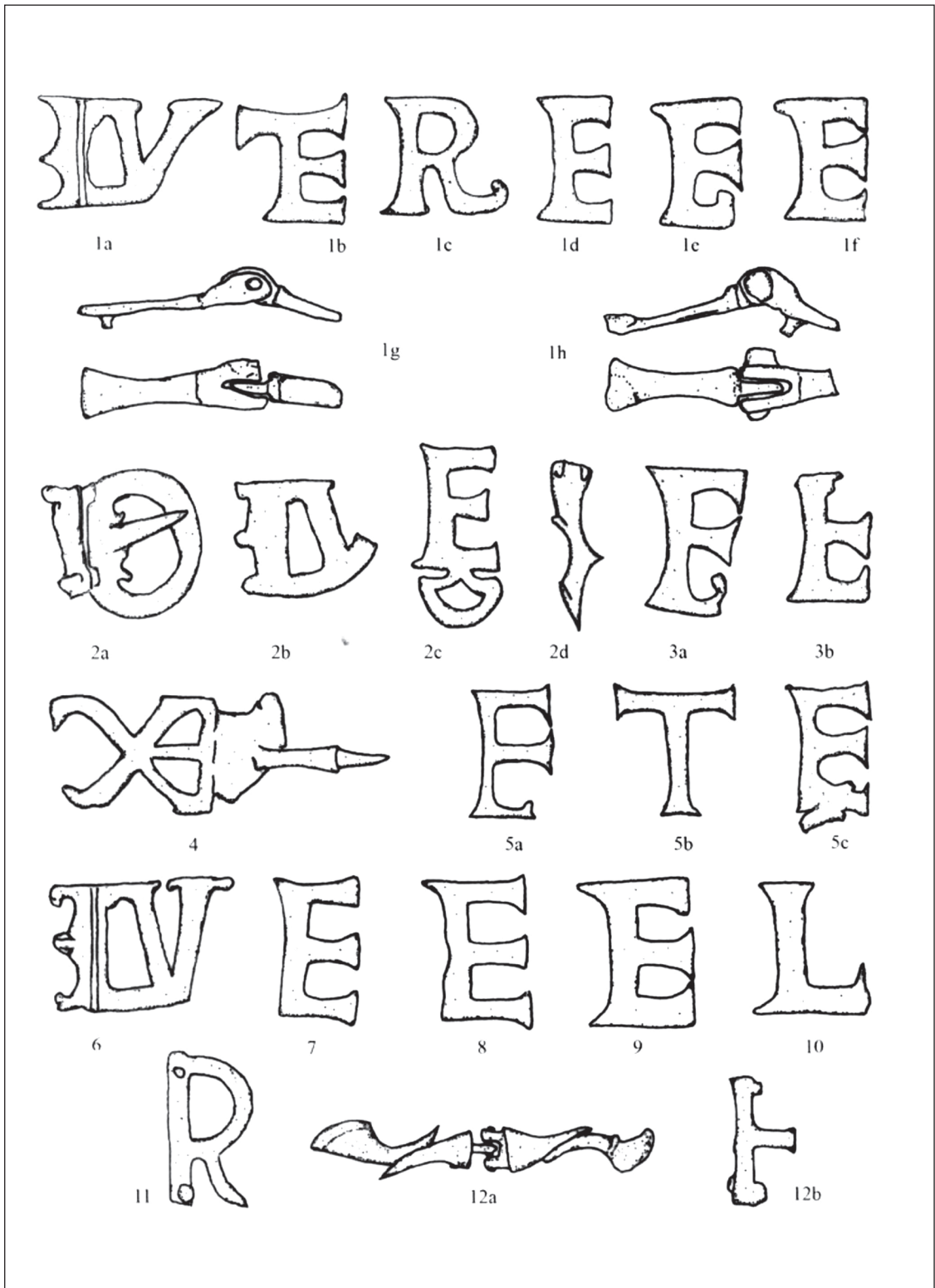
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Љ. ЗОТОВИЋ, Ч. ЈОРДОВИЋ Viminacium 1, некропола Више гробаља, Београд 1990.





T. I – Viminacium: 1a, b. Lead tablet; 2. Lead mirror; 3. Silver ring (site Više grobalja, Inv. 4241); 4. Silver ring (site Pecine, Inv. 10983).



T. II – Viminacium: 1-12b. Vtere Felix belt sets.