

A Marble Sarcophagus Lid Fragment with Gorgoneion: *Viminacium* Spoil in Nimnik Monastery¹

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Abstract: A fragment of a Roman marble monument with a relief of the head of Medusa was incorporated as *spolia* into the church of St. Nicholas in the monastery of Nimnik. In paper indicates the possibility that the spoil was part of the lid of a sarcophagus. The characteristics of this presumed sarcophagus are reviewed, as well as analogies, the workshops in which it might have created, and its importance in relation to other marble sarcophagi from *Viminacium*, preserved today.

Key words: spoil, sarcophagus, marble, Nimnik, *Viminacium*.

INTRODUCTION

A marble *spolium* with a relief of the head of Medusa (*gorgoneion*) on a triangular field is built into the lower part of the south wall of the church of St. Nicholas in the monastery of Nimnik (**fig. 1**). The church in Nimnik monastery was renovated in 1825, during the reign of Prince Miloš Obrenović (Вујић 1901, 64-65; Спасић 1998, 316-317). It is not known whether the spoil had been built into the church before renovation or was incorporated for the first time during the renovation. It is presumed that the *spolium* was brought from a locality that belonged to *Viminacium*, located 10 km west of Nimnik (Спасић 1998, 318).

The spoil consists of a triangular field surrounded by a profiled frame, in the centre of which there is a relief of Medusa's head. Today the lower right corner of the triangular field and part of the relief of Medusa's head are missing. Medusa is depicted in the usual iconography, with long wavy hair, from which small wings and the heads of two snakes peek out, while beneath her chin two snakes are entwined.

This paper examines the possibility that the spoil was part of the lid of a sarcophagus. The characteristics of this presumed sarcophagus are studied, as well as analogies, the workshops in which it might have created, and its importance in relation to other marble sarcophagi from *Viminacium*, preserved today.

NIMNIK SPOIL – SARCOPHAGUS LID FRAGMENT

In previous scientific literature it was considered that the spoil formed part of the tympanum of a funerary stele (Спасић 1998, 315-325, fig. 3; Milovanović 2009, 99-107; Спасић-Ђурић 2002, 35, fig. 17; Milovanović / Anđelković-Grašar 2017, 176-177, fig. 20; Pilipović / Milanović 2020, 300; 2021, 269-270, fig. 7).

This paper proposes a new interpretation of the type of funerary monument to which the fragment from Nimnik belonged. The triangular field is believed to have been situated on the lateral side of a sarcophagus lid (**fig. 2**). Such an interpretation is primarily indicated by the extremely large dimensions of the fragment, as well as the treatment of the stone and the relief itself.

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Fig. 1. Spoil built into the south wall of the Church of St. Nicholas, Nimnik Monastery (photo: Lj. Milanović)



Fig. 2. Reconstruction proposal for the end panel of the lid of the marble sarcophagus (drawing: S. Pilipović)

The dimensions of the preserved fragment are: width 78 cm; height 55 cm. Based on calculations, the dimensions of the entire triangular field would have been: width 150 cm, height 65 cm. The dimensions of the funerary steles from *Viminacium* are considerably smaller compared to those of the Nimnik fragment. The width of funerary steles made of South Carpathian marble range from 70 cm to 90 cm, while those one made from Eastern-Alpine marble are somewhat larger and their width can extend to 132 cm. The triangular field of the Nimnik fragment is incomparably wider, as the relief of the Medusa head itself (42 cm x 38 cm), than preserved funerary steles from *Viminacium*. Its dimensions are much closer to the width of a sarcophagus lid than to the width of a funerary stele.

The method of carving the stone on the Nimnik fragment is different from that on funerary steles. The triangular field is surrounded by an exceptionally sharp and precisely profiled frame, and the large dimensions of the relief enabled the stonemason to express his skill and pay special attention to details. This can especially be seen in the treatment of the eyes, in which the pupils are emphasized, the treatment of strands of lush, thick hair, from which small wings and the heads of two snakes emerge, and the two snakes tied in a knot under Medusa's chin.



Fig. 3. End panel of a Roman lead sarcophagus. Syria (?) (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Collection Greek and Roman Art)

As far as can be seen, the Nimnik fragment once formed part of a sarcophagus lid, and for that reason represents an exceptional testimony of the existence of one *Viminacium* marble sarcophagus. Sarcophagus chests and lids were often made separately, and it was possible that one of them was custom-made afterwards (Bizjak 2019, 44). Unfortunately, today there is no data to indicate, nor can it be assumed, what the chest, with which the lid formed a whole, looked like.

In form and style, the production of sarcophagus lids followed the development of sarcophagus chests themselves (Koch / Sichtermann 1982; Awan 2000). The most common form of a Roman sarcophagus was a rectangular chest with a flat lid. A lid could be banquet bed-shaped, *kline* (κλίβη), with recumbent full-size figures of the deceased, which most likely originated from Etruscan sarcophagi. *Lenos*, tub-shaped sarcophagus, had a simple lid whose decoration was a track that actually comprised the thickness of the lid itself. The lids of Attic or Asia-Minor sarcophagi, as well as those created in regional or local workshops under their influence, usually had the form of a gable roof and could have had decorative acroteria. The lid of the sarcophagus whose fragment is built into the Nimnik church was a gable roof type, judging by its triangular field, and had probably been decorated with accentuated *tegulae* and *imbrices*, and with angled acroteria.

It is known that the production of a sarcophagus lid had two phases. It is assumed that in the first phase, the decoration was created on the triangular field and the acroteria (Djurić 2001, 49). Accordingly, it can be assumed that the decoration of the triangular field of the Nimnik fragment expresses the characteristics of the quarry and workshop where the utilised marble was extracted. It cannot be confirmed that the Nimnik fragment was made of Alpine or some other known Mediterranean marble². It was most likely from a so-far unknown regional or local quarry. Only analysis of the stone would be able to provide a precise answer to that question.

The large dimensions of the sarcophagus from Nimnik cannot indicate a specific workshop. Sarcophagi of large dimensions were made in different workshops. An example of this is the Upper Pannonian sarcophagus (width 147 cm) from Veliki Bastaji (*Aquae Balissae*) made of Pohorje marble (Migotti 2017, 507-509, #5, fig. 10-12; Migotti et al. 2018, 117-119, cat. (AB[t] II.1), fig. 235-238; *Lupa* 3811) or the sarcophagus of Proconnesian marble (width 170 cm) with mourning Erotes in the acroteria from Solin (*Salona*) in Dalmatia (Bizjak 2019, 14).

MARBLE SARCOPHAGUS LIDS WITH GORGONEION

The motif of the decoration of the Nimnik fragment is one of the most common motifs used in the decoration of Roman sarcophagi, regarding both the chest and the lid. The head of Medusa on the triangular field of the sarcophagus lid is actually reminiscent of the tympana of archaic temples. In this way the connection between the facade of the temple and the side of the sarcophagus is highlighted, as well as the apotropaic role of Medusa's head on both of them (McCann 1978, 142; Karoglou 2018, 21). This is clearly confirmed by the relief on a lead sarcophagus from Syria, kept in the Metropolitan museum today (**fig. 3**), which dates from the late 2nd to the mid 3rd century (McCann 1978, 142, 147-148, fig. 184-187; Picón 2007, 367, 488-89; Karoglou 2018, 21, fig. 28).

² I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Bojan Đurić for the indicated suggestions.



Fig. 4. Proconnesian sarcophagus, Archar (*Ratiaria*) (photo: National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia)



Fig. 5. End panel of the lid of Proconnesian sarcophagus of *Titus Vettius*. *Concordia Sagittaria (Julia Concordia)* (photo: Concordia Sagittaria – Museo Civico)

The motif of Medusa's head on the triangular field of the lateral side of the lid was particularly common on sarcophagi made of East Mediterranean marble, which were distributed on both Italian soil and on the Balkan Peninsula. At the same time, this motif was accepted in local workshops in these areas. The closest territorial analogies can be seen on two Upper Moesian sarcophagi from Archar (*Ratiaria*), made of marble from the island of Marmara (*Proconnesus*) in the Sea of Marmara, which date from the 2nd century. One sarcophagus is in the National Institute of Archaeology and Museum in Sofia (**fig. 4**), while the other, with simple decoration and an undecorated back, is in the lapidarium of the Regional Museum of History – Vidin (Dimitrov 2019, 114-120, fig. 1-19).

East Mediterranean sarcophagi were widely distributed on the Adriatic and Black Sea coasts. They began to be imported to the North Italian region around the middle of the 2nd century (Koch / Sichtermann 1982, 169; Canciani 1987, 402; Pensabene 1987, 365, 391, 393-394). This was due to the fact that it was easier to transport these marbles by sea to North Adriatic ports than to transport Italian marbles by road. Medusa's head was used to decorate the imported lids of Eastern Mediterranean marble, and also those made in local



Fig. 6. Proconnesian sarcophagus of *P. Vettius Sabinus et Cornelia*. Modena (*Mutina*) (photo: Modena, Archivio Fotografico delle Gallerie Estensi – Foto Carlo Vannini)

workshops. We will only mention three Proconnesian examples: the *Titus Vettius* sarcophagus (**fig. 5**) from Concordia Sagittaria (*Iulia Concordia*) in the *Venetia et Histria* region (*Lupa* 29257); *P. Vettius Sabinus et Cornelia Maximina* sarcophagus (**fig. 6**) and *Flavius Vitalis et Bruttia Aurelia* sarcophagus (**fig. 7**) from the *Aemilia* region (Modena, Museo Lapidario Estense, inv. 7085 and 7164).

On the Dalmatian coast, the same intertwining of Eastern Mediterranean and local influences is found as on the Northern Adriatic coast of Italy. A Proconnesian sarcophagus from Solin (*Salona*), whose triangular field of characteristic mixed roof shape of lid is decorated with the head of Medusa, is well-known (Bizjak 2019, 11-15, fig. 6, fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Proconnesian sarcophagus of *Flavius Vitalis et Bruttia Aureliana*. Modena (*Mutina*) (photo: Modena, Archivio Fotografico delle Gallerie Estensi – Foto Carlo Vannini)

The provinces of Noricum and the western part of Pannonia were, like the north Italian region, under Eastern Mediterranean artistic influences that came via Aquileia, and were slightly less under influences from Rome (Pochmarski 2010; Djurić 2019, 21). Due to this artistic connection, fragmentarily preserved lids of Norico-Pannonian sarcophagi were often reconstructed on the basis of analogies with preserved sarcophagi of North Italy (Djurić 2001, 49). The characteristics of local workshops can be seen on the iconographic level, as on the sarcophagus lid with Medusa relief from Šid (**fig. 8**) made from Pohorje



Fig. 8. Sarcophagus of an officer made of Pohorje marble. Šid (photo: Aleksandar Jovanović)

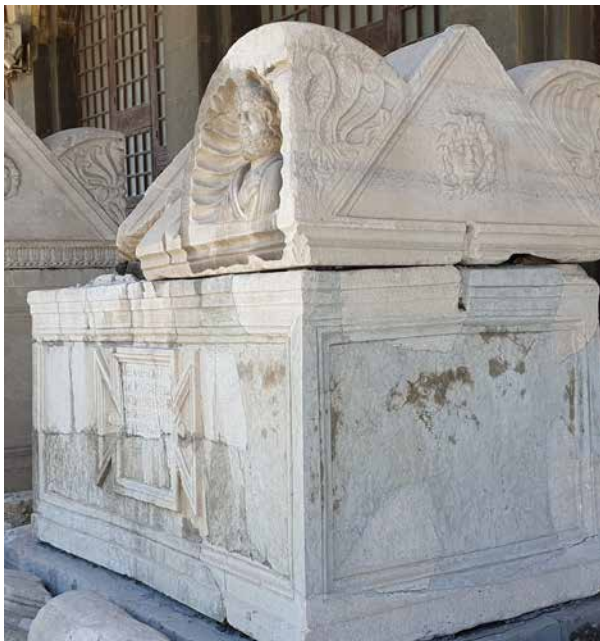


Fig. 9. Marble sarcophagus. Constanța (*Tomis*) (photo: Constanța History and Archaeology Museum)

marble in the then important workshops of *Poetovio*, today Ptuj (Pop-Lazić 2008, 165-170, fig. 4-8).

The Pannonian Basin was enclosed within the Alps, the Carpathians, and the Dinarides. This specific isolation determined the sarcophagi production. With the preference for waterways, sea and rivers, for transport, Mediterranean marbles could only reach Pannonia across the Black Sea and up the Danube, a route that led through the treacherous gorges of the Iron Gates (Djurić et al. 2018, 469). This meant that Mediterranean marbles were only exceptionally used in Pannonia. Consequently local and regional resources were very important.



Fig. 10. Marble sarcophagus. Constanța (*Tomis*) (photo: Constanța History and Archaeology Museum)

The motif of Medusa's head can also often be seen on the lids of sarcophagi made east of *Viminacium*, especially in the Lower Danube region, in coastal Dobruje on the Black Sea (Alexandrescu-Vianu 1970, 269-318). The use of marble was dominant on the Black Sea coast, unlike the rest of the province of Moesia Inferior, where limestone was mainly used (Conrad 2004, 99). On the territory of Dobruje, the Medusa's head motif appears on Eastern Mediterranean marble lids, that is, on Proconnesian sarcophagi, and on those made of limestone in local workshops. We will mention only some examples. There are three remarkable Proconnesian sarcophagi from Constanța (*Tomis*) (fig. 9-10) (*Lupa* 15365 and 15366; Alexandrescu-Vianu 1970, 280-383, cat. 1-2, 284-286, cat. 7). One damaged fragment of treated stone from Cernavodă (*Axiopolis*) (Alexandrescu-Vianu 1970, 298, cat. 32) made of limestone is an excellent example of a local product (fig. 11). Local workshops in this area sometimes completely followed Eastern Mediterranean models. This can best be seen in one integrally preserved limestone sarcophagus from Ostrov, near Constanța (Știrbulescu 2009, 283-306).

Marble sarcophagi predominate in Thracia, the only exception being in the north western part of the province (Firatli 1964, 11; Asgari 1977, 331-332; Koch / Sichtermann 1982, 343, 345; Slawisch 2007, 49; Ivanov, in print)³. In the interior of the province, sarcophagi of limestone and syenite are more common, but Proconnesian and Attic sarcophagi have also been confirmed (Koch / Sichtermann 1982, 344; Mateev 1982; Иванов 2002, 263-264). Individual sarco-

³ I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Mario Ivanov for unselfishly giving me the text of his manuscript (Ivanov, in print) and for guiding me through the theme of marble sarcophagus production on the territory of today's Bulgaria.

Fig. 11. Limestone sarcophagus lid. Cernavodă (*Axiopolis*) (photo: Constanța History and Archaeology Museum)



Fig. 12. Limestone sarcophagus, Lovech (*Melita*) (photo: National Archaeological Institute with Museum Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia)

phagi created in local workshops, such as a sarcophagus from Lovech (*Melita*) today in the National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, completely followed Eastern Mediterranean models (fig. 12).

VIMINACIUM MARBLE SARCOPHAGI

The fragment from Nimnik is exceptional confirmation of the existence of one more marble sarcophagus in *Viminacium*. Today, only three marble sarcophagi have been preserved from *Viminacium*, of which two are only fragmentary. One classical type of sarcophagus with garlands (fig. 13), made of Proconnesian marble, has been preserved in its entirety (National Museum of Požarevac, inv. 02/2657; Томовић 1991, 69-81;



Fig. 13. Proconnesian sarcophagus, Kostolac (*Viminacium*) (photo: National Museum of Požarevac)

Lupa 5396). The lid of this sarcophagus is in the form of a kline; the upper part of the banquet bed has a high back on which the mattress straps are highlighted. On the bed there is the relief of a clothed woman in a reclining position, and by her feet there is a small sleeping Eros. The lids of the other two sarcophagi have not been preserved today. The sarcophagus of the wife of *Aurelius Felicianus* (**fig. 14**), preserved as a fragment, was made of Eastern Alpine marble (National Museum Požarevac, inv. 02/2669; *IMS* II, 99; Ђорђевић 1989-1990, cat. 13; *Lupa* 5435). In terms of shape and construction it belongs to the Norico-Pannonian type of sarcophagus, with a three-part division of the front panel. On the lateral sides there are fragmentary scenes of the meeting between Iphigenia and Orestes and Iphigenia's escape. Most probably the lid was in the form of a gable roof. In addition to these, the front side of one sarcophagus with an inscription on the profiled field has been preserved (**fig. 15**), but not published before now (National Museum Požarevac, inv. 02/2683).

PROVENIENCE OF THE NIMNIK SARCOFAGUS

Marble sarcophagi, like funerary steles, were imported to *Viminacium* as sketched or semi-finished products from the then prestigious quarries/workshops. The largest number of marble funerary steles were made of Eastern Alpine marble, most likely from Gummern, while a smaller group were created of South Carpathian marble from Dacia, Bucova (Pilipović 2022).

As far as can be seen, the marble used for sarcophagi and funerary steles was actually regarded as imported stone, although there is the possibility that some sources of white marble were also exploited on local soil. Numerous deposits are situated in the regions of Požega, Arandelovac, Stratevica, Batočina, Studenica, Rodočelo mountain and Sijarinska Banja near Leskovac, and there is the possibility that some of these were utilized in the Antique period (Tomović 1993, 16). Nevertheless, bearing in mind that, so far, there has been no confirmation of these marbles being used for the production of Roman funerary monuments, we tend to assume that marble for Nimnik sarcophagus lid was imported.



Fig. 14. Fragment of a sarcophagus of the wife of *Aurelianus Felicianus*, made of East Alpine marble, Kostolac (*Viminacium*) (photo: National Museum of Požarevac)



Fig. 15. Fragment of a marble sarcophagus, made of East Alpine marble. Kostolac (*Viminacium*) (photo: National Museum of Požarevac)

The fragment from Nimnik is not made of Eastern Alpine or any known Mediterranean marble, but this is a case of it being made of marble from a hitherto unknown origin. Beside these, Eastern Alpine or Eastern Mediterranean quarries from which marble was extracted for the production of funerary monuments in Upper Moesia, it is confirmed that one regional marble had a prominent role in the Late Antique period on this region. In the Montana hinterland (*civitas Montanensium*), and around Berkovitsa in North West Bulgaria, white/beige and coloured marble was extracted that was used for architectonic elements (Djurić et al. 2023) and for *opus sectile* floor slabs (Djurić / Prochaska 2021) in the Late Roman Palace commissioned by the Emperor *Galerius Maximianus* in Gamzigrad (*Felix Romuliana*). Besides the Eastern Mediterranean workshops of Proconnesus, Pentelikon, and Thasos, it was precisely the workshops from these quarries/workshops that had a significant role in the construction of architectonic decorations in Galerius' palace.

Whenever possible, stone was transported by water, since that type of transport was significantly cheaper (Russell 2013, 95, 141). Although it is possible that semi-finished marble products for the Galerius' palace were transported from Proconnesus and Thasos, or even Pentelikon, directly from the workshops, up the Danube to the confluence of the Timok river, and then to the immediate vicinity of the palace, it seems more logical that the cargo was transported by land from today's Archar (*Ratiaria*) on the Danube. Workshops from Berkovitsa were geographically much closer than all main centres, and marble could have been transported overland, via Montana, then from

Ratiaria by the same route as Eastern Mediterranean marbles (Lemke 2016; Djurić et al. 2023, 228).

Unfortunately, there are no data that could confirm the importance of the Berkovitsa quarry in sarcophagi production. Although local marble played an important role in the production of funerary monuments on the territory of today's Bulgaria, according to scarce archaeological and petrographic data, it is known that the sarcophagi created from local marble were confirmed only in the central part, in *Philippopolis*, *Augusta Traiana*, the village of Vinarovo in the Chirpan district, and the village of Banya in Pazardzhik district (Tsontchev 1960, 347, pl. XVI, fig. 8; Дякович 1924, 171, обр. 33; *IGBulg* III.2, 1609; Georgiev 1997; Ivanov, in print). Petrological analysis confirmed that the example from Banya was made of marble from the "Lepenitsa" quarry, near Velingrad (Andreeva 1997, 499). Most probably, local marble was also used for the "ostotheke" sarcophagus from Prodanovtsi, a district of Samokov (Mitova-Džonova 1981, 152-159, fig. 9-14).

Considering the excellent geographical position of *Viminacium*, precisely because of the proximity of the Danube via which sketched or semi-finished sarcophagi and funerary steles were transported from the most important quarries of that time, whether Eastern Alpine, South Carpathian, or marble from Proconnesus, it is absolutely possible that in the case of the Nimnik sarcophagus this water route was used. It is possible that the origin of the marble used for the sarcophagus should be sought downstream of the Danube, east of *Viminacium*, perhaps even on the territory of today's Bulgaria, from where marble had already been supplied for the architectonic decoration of Galerius' palace.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The fragment of a triangular field with a relief of the head of Medusa, built into the church in Nimnik monastery, belonged to the lid of a marble sarcophagus that most likely came from *Viminacium*. The fragment is not made of Eastern Alpine or any recognized Mediterranean marble, but relates to marble whose origin is currently unknown. Sketched or semi-finished marble products for *Viminacium* funerary steles were delivered from Eastern Alpine or South Carpathian quarries/workshops. Likewise, in *Viminacium* sarcophagi of Eastern Alpine marble and one made of marble from Proconnesus have been confirmed. Until now, the use of marble from local quarries for the production of funerary monuments in *Viminacium* has not been confirmed, so most probably imported marble was used here. Bearing in mind the exceptional position of *Viminacium* and its proximity to the Danube, it is possible that marble was delivered directly via river transport from some regional quarries. It is possible that the marble used for this sarcophagus lid should be sought downstream from *Viminacium*, perhaps even on the territory of today's Bulgaria, from where marble had already been delivered for the architectonic decoration of the Galerius' palace. Unfortunately, there are no analogies that might indicate the workshop from which the Nimnik fragment had been created, that is, the sarcophagus lid. Most probably, it was made in a regional workshop working under Eastern Mediterranean artistic influences. Undoubtedly additional interdisciplinary research following the source and distribution of marble used for funerary monuments would certainly provide a more precise answer.

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Фрагмент от капак на мраморен саркофаг с изображение на Горгона Медуза: преизползван от Виминациум в манастира Нимник

Саня ПИЛИПОВИЧ

(резюме)

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