

VTERE FELIX BELT SETS ON THE TERRITORY OF VIMINACIUM

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Abstract: The belt sets of the VTERE FELIX type that were characteristic of the letter-shaped fittings of the mentioned message were in use during the second half of the II and first half of III century. Soldiers, who are considered to be the primary group that wore such belts, believed that such a message would bring them luck and protect them from the many perils of their profession. The numerous finds of fittings of this not so common type of belt sets that were excavated on the Viminacium site, contribute to the already existing theory that their territory of origin is the area of the Danubian provinces.

Key words: Belt sets, type VTERE FELIX, soldiers, Viminacium.

During the II century AD, sets with letter-shaped fittings with the message VTERE FELIX (Use with luck!) came into use and they were applied to the leather belt by means of rivets. The purpose for such a message, undoubtedly, was that it brought luck to its user. That such a message was not only applied onto belt sets can be witnessed on fibulas, lead mirrors, rings, pottery ware, spoons etc. VTERE FELIX is not the only message that could be represented on the belt. S. Hoss has published a belt whose fittings are Greek letters that form the message MNHMΩN (Remember).¹ The same author has published two letters from Linz and Richmond and letter S from Oberstim, which clearly do not belong to the VTERE FELIX type sets.²

In professional literature, this type of belt set is also known as the Lyon type. This name was chosen because of the first recorded find of this kind that was unearthed in Lyon in 1950. In addition to the belt set, a sword with a scabbard and a balteus was found together with a knee fibula and 13 coins, of which the most recent one was minted in 194. P. Wuilleumier linked this soldier's grave to the battle near Lyon fought between Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus in 197. At the same time, this author concluded that it was the formula VTERE FELIX, but he misinterpreted the letter V as the ligature AE.³ Later, G. Ulbert rotated

1 Hoss 2006, 237-246.

2 Hoss 2006, Abb.2, 239.

3 Wuilleumier 1950, 146-148.

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the above-mentioned ligature AE for 180° degrees and interpreted it as the ligature VT. Furthermore, he determined that the metal fittings were applied to the *cingulum* and not to the *balteus* as it was believed until then.⁴ The second important find of his type originates from the Bulgarian village Ljuben. A silver belt set was deposited in one of the two graves that were discovered during the research of the enclosed tumulus. Together with the belt set, medical instruments were found, which professionally qualifies the user as a military physician. A part of the grave inventory were also 9 coins of which the most recent one was in the honor of Diadumenian, which led D. Ovčarov to date the archaeological find to the period between 218 and 225.⁵ Having published certain pieces of the VTERE FELIX sets from the Dacia area, and having had in mind the earlier publications of finds, L. Petculescu dates this type of belt to the period between the last quarter of the II and first half of the III century, and even to the period when the Romans abandoned Dacia. Also, this author notices a concentration of finds of this type on the territory of the Danubian limes.⁶ The belt set found in the Varazdinske Toplice (*Aquae Iasae*) has been roughly dated by M. Galic and I. Radman-Livaja to the period between the last quarter of the II and the mid- III century, and the very context of the finds, with some necessary reserve, is interpreted as a votive gift to the thermal baths that were, at the same time, regarded as a shrine. Analogies for such an assumption can be found in the shrine Sulis Minerve (Great Britain), built adjacent to the thermal spring, where numerous votive gifts were found of different character.⁷ In Sisak, two more fittings of this type were excavated, as well as two fragments of two-piece belt strap-ends that are very similar by their shape to the items found in Varazdinske Toplice.⁸ Apart from these almost complete sets (except for the Lyon type, each of the sets mentioned above is missing some piece), individual fittings that were originally part of the belt set of this type were found on several locations, mainly in the Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire. S.Hoss made a retrospective of this type of find by publishing the above-mentioned sets from Lyon and Ljuben, as well as the individual finds of fittings of which should be mentioned: 4 from Germany (of which three were found in Eining), one from Croatia, 19 from Austria (12 from Carnuntum), 17 from Romania, one from Slovenia, 7 from Slovakia (all from the museum in Komárno), one from Hungary and one from Syria.⁹ In the map presented below, the locations of the Danubian provinces are given, where parts of the VTERE FELIX belt sets were found.¹⁰

On the territory of Viminacium, in total 26 pieces of belt sets have been found so far. Of the number of finds that are presented below, only 3 items originate from layer, while the rest were found inside some of the 8 grave ensembles.

1. a-h. Belt-fittings, as well as two fragmented belt strap-ends, all made of silver. Found on the site „Više Grobalja“ in the grave G1-1570 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase I.
2. a-d. Belt-fittings, fragmented belt buckle and fragmented belt strap-end made of a copper alloy. Found on the site of „Više Grobalja“ in grave G1-1622 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II together with Marcus Aurelius' coin.
3. a-b. Belt-fittings made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Pećine“ in grave G1-291 of the type of Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.
4. Fragmented belt buckle made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Više Grobalja“ in the damaged grave G1-716 together with a pottery dish dating from the II century (see footnote 33).
5. a-c. Belt-fittings made of a copper alloy. Found on site „Više Grobalja“ in the damaged grave G1-695 together with coin featuring Commodus as Caesar, minted in 179 (see footnote 33).
6. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Found on location „Pećine“ in the sonda layer 38 at the the depth of 0,8m.
7. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Pećine“ in the sonda layer 113 at the depth of 0,7m.
8. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Found on site „Pećine“ in a damaged grave G1-622 together with two coins, which due to significant damage can be only roughly dated to the II century.
9. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Kod Koraba“ in grave G1-64 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.
10. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Pećine“ in grave G1-900 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase I.

4 Ulbert 1974, 211-21

5 Ovčarov 1979, 33-46.

6 Petculescu 1991, 393-394.

7 Galic, Radman-Livaja 2006, 173; At 15th ROMEC Congress in Budapest in 2005, I. Radman-Livaja presented 8 fittings of the VTERE FELIX belt sets from Novi Banovci. During the protective archaeological research in the period from November 2007 to July 2008, another set of this type was found in grave 86, on the territory of the northern necropolis in the town Emona.

8 Radman-Livaja 2004, 95, cat. 286-289.

9 Hoss 2006, Abb.3-4, 246-249.

10 The only finds known to me that have not been presented on the map are the previously mentioned Lyon set and a single fitting from Dura Europos.

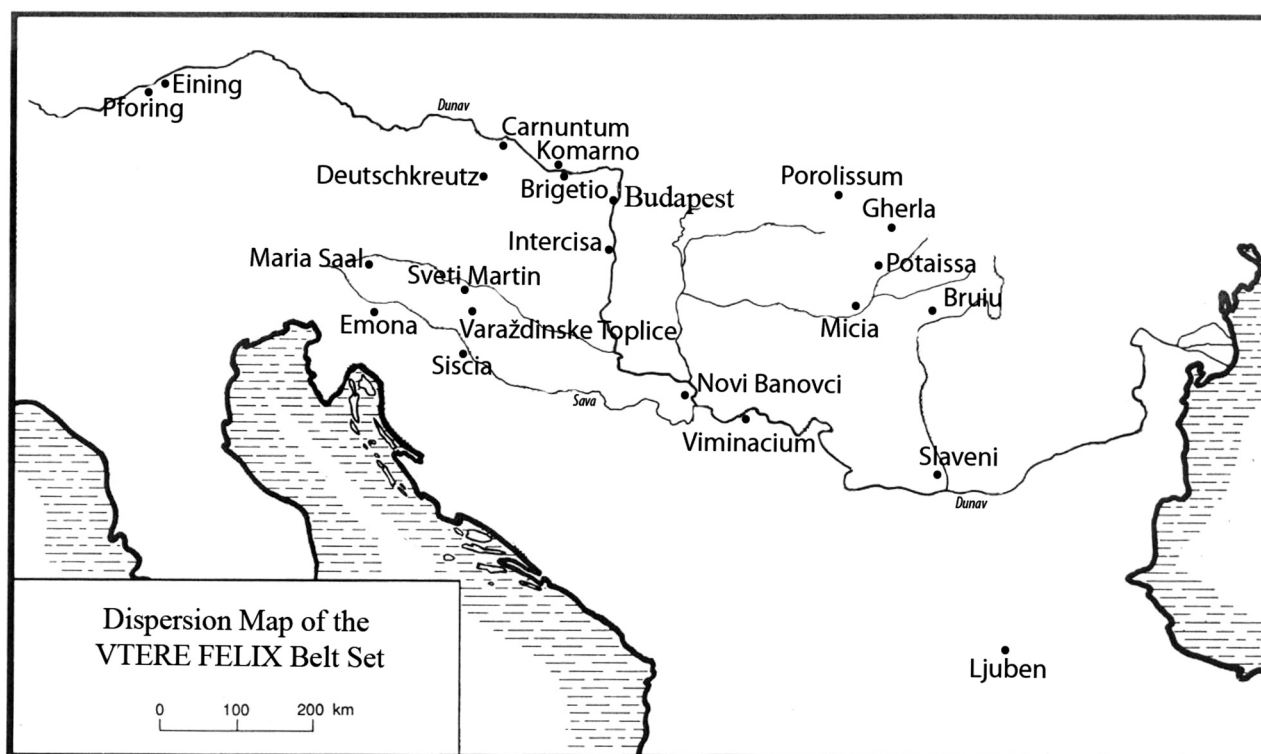


Fig. 1. Dispersion map of the VTERE FELIX Belt Set

Сл. 1. Карта распрострањености појасне гарнитуре VTERE FELIX

11. Belt-fitting made of a copper alloy. Surface find from the site „Amphitheater“.
12. a-b. Fragmented belt-fitting as well as a belt strap-end made of a copper alloy. Found on the site „Pećine“ in grave G1-490 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.

The mentioned set pieces from Viminacium have certain similarities regarding ornamentation to the fittings found throughout the Roman Empire. A fitting in the shape of the letter V (No. 1a, 2b and 6) is positioned opposite the belt buckle. The mentioned letter on the left side has a vertically profiled plate to which it was joined by two horizontal bars. There are several cases where there is a third bar in the middle section.¹¹ Our item No. 1b is very similar to the fitting from Carnuntum,¹² while for fitting No. 6 analogies can be found in the item from Hungary.¹³ The missing letter T in the Lyon set, as well as the ornament that is the finishing of the right leg of the letter V was later found,¹⁴ led to the fact that the fitting was determined as the ligature VT. The letter T was later found several times (as a piece of the set or as individual items). M.Galić and I. Radman-Livaja are of the opinion that there was a letter T originally in the Lyon set, but later

it was lost, which led them to the conclusion that ligatures were not used in the VTERE FELIX type belt sets at all.¹⁵ This opinion was refuted by the finding of the ligature of letters TE (No. 1b) in Viminacium and with which there are, to my knowledge, no analogies. This fitting (together with items 1a-h it is an ensemble) is unique for its shape as well as for its only known evident use of ligature so far. Fittings in the shape of the letter R (No. 1c and 11 have the usual shape, apart from the curve on the oblique leg of item 1c. This detail has partial analogies with the fitting from Sisak¹⁶ (in other elements these two fittings differ significantly). In our collection there are nine fittings in the shape of letter E¹⁷ (No.1d, 1f, 2c, 3b, 5c, 7, 8, 9 and 12b) (if we exempt the ligature TE), which is understandable, judging by the fact that it is present three times in the formula VTERE FELIX. Fitting 2c, which in the base

11 Hoss 2006, 241, Abb.3, 26, 37, 38, 43, 51, 52; 242, Abb.4, 72, 80.

12 Hoss 2006, 241, Abb.3, 48.

13 Bullinger 1972, 280, Abb.2f.

14 Bishop, Coulston 2006, 160, fig.101.

15 Galić, Radman-Livaja 2006, 170.

16 Radman-Livaja 2004, 95, cat. 287.

17 item No. 12b due to the degree of damage can only, with reserve, be interpreted as the letter E, because it can also be the letter F.

has a loop for fastening, should be singled out from the mentioned items. The analogies for such an appendage can be found among the items from camp Micia,¹⁸ in the museum in Komárno,¹⁹ the item from Brigetio,²⁰ as well as in the sets from Varazdinske Toplice.²¹ Fragmented item 5c may have had an identical appendage. Fittings in the shape of the letter F (No. 1e, 3a and 5a) have in their base another third somewhat shorter leg with an upward curve, and they have analogies only in the sets from Varazdinske Toplice.²² Both belt buckles that were found in Viminacium (No.2a and 4) are greatly damaged. On the left side of the belt buckle 4 the letter X was modeled, which was joined with the mentioned buckle by the ends of its legs, as well as by a horizontal bar in the middle section, which was not a mandatory detail in the ornamentation of this piece of the VTERE FELIX type of belt sets. Similar belt buckles to this one have been found on the locations of Einzing and Carnuntum.²³ As for the ending of the leather strap of these belt sets, the general opinion is, that at the top it was cut open lengthwise, by means of which two single straps were formed. The tops of these straps were ornamented with one belt strap-end each. On the site of Viminacium, 4 two-piece joint belt strap-ends (No.1g, 1h, 2d and 12a) were found in 3 graves together with the previously mentioned fittings. In all the cases, it is a question of two identical parts that are joined by a hinge. Items 2d and 12a are ornamented with horn-like motifs and are almost identical to the items from Varazdinske Toplice²⁴ and Sisak.²⁵ Fragmented tongues 1g and 1h are characterized by fan-like widened ends that are similar to the items found in Dura Europos,²⁶ Regensburg and Carnuntum.²⁷

Based on the grave in Lyon, in which the VTERE FELIX type belt set was found together with weapons, this type of find was attributed to being a part of military equipment, more precisely a military belt *cingulum*. The above-mentioned find of the belt set in the soldier's grave in Ljuben, L. Petculescu considers as proof that the deceased was a medical physician by profession.²⁸ In relation to this opinion, we remember the fact that a tip of a spear²⁹ was found in the grave as well, which further supports this theory. The potential doubt that it was a soldier's belt, which could arise from the fact that it was discovered in Varazdinske Toplice (*Aquae Iasae*), can be averted by the discovery of several votive inscriptions devoted by soldiers from the legion XIII *Gemina* and XIV *Gemina*. For the above-mentioned reasons, L. Petculescu's opinion that VTERE FELIX belt sets were worn primarily by soldiers from the Danubian provinces in the Empire,

should be supported.³⁰ Therefore, the finds discovered outside of these areas, and those are as far as I know from the available literature the Lyon set and the fitting in the shape of the letter V from Dura Europos,³¹ should be interpreted as vexillations of military units stationed in the area of the Danubian limes.

As far as dating the VTERE FELIX belt sets, one should remember the two above-mentioned finds that originate from enclosed ensembles: the Lyon set that dates from the end of the II and beginning of III century, and the find from Ljuben that dates from the end of the first quarter of III century. The chronology of use for this kind of object, which is accepted by most researchers, ranges from the period of the mid-II to the mid-III century. Here, one should remember the above-mentioned opinion of L. Petculescu, who places this set type in the period of the last quarter of II to the mid-III century, and even as far as the 70s of the III century.³² In relation to the finds of this kind that originate from Viminacium, it should be said that all apart from No. 6, 7 and 11 originate from the graves. What immediately stands out is the fact that these are exclusively graves of cremated soldiers. Cremation as a form of burial in Viminacium was generally abandoned by the mid-III century, which indirectly refutes L. Petculescu's belief that these sets were worn even after this period. This is further supported by the findings of coins in the grave together with set pieces (No 2a-d), and because of the damage they can be roughly dated to the period of Marcus Aurelius' rule. The fittings (5a-c) found in the grave together with the coins minted in 179 in the honor of Commodus as Caesar are dated similarly.³³ Buckle No. 4 was found in the

18 Petculescu 1991, 392, fig.74.1,2.

19 Bullinger 1972, 281,fig.3a.

20 Tóth 1981, 147; Abb.2.

21 Galić, Radman-Livaja 2006, 166-169.

22 Galić, Radman-Livaja 2006, 166-167, Illustrations 1 and 2.

23 Hoss 2006, 241, Abb.3, 22, 42.

24 Galić, Radman-Livaja 2006, 166-167, Illustrations 1 and 2.

25 Radman-Livaja 2004, 95, cat. 288-289.

26 James 2004, 83-85, Fig.39, 135-138.

27 Fischer 1988, 180, Abb.7, 2; 186, Abb.10, 14-15.

28 Petculescu 1991, 393.

29 Ovčarov 1979, 37-37.

30 Petculescu 1991, 393.

31 James 2004, 79, Fig.38, 78.

32 Petculescu 1991, 393-394.

33 It concerns a damaged grave number G1-695 which was discovered in the sonda 101 of site „Više Grobalja“. In the same part of the mentioned sonda, another damaged grave G1-716 was found in which there was a fragmented buckle No. 15. Due to the damage to both graves and their proximity to each other, as well as for the fact that the unearthed finds can be attributed to the same type of rare belt set, it is my belief that in this case it is a grave that was damaged by more recent burials and misinterpreted as two separate graves, and that finds No 4 and 5a-c are actually pieces of one set.

grave together with a pottery dish that can be dated to the II century. Fitting No. 8 was found in the grave with two coins that were so damaged they could only roughly be dated to the II century. Based on the dating of the materials from Viminacium, and having in mind the other above-mentioned finds of this type, it is my belief that VTERE FELIX belt sets should be attributed to the period of the mid-II to the mid-III century.

If we notice the period when the VTERE FELIX belt sets stopped being in use, what stands out is the fact that this slogan very soon started appearing on another type of finds. In relation to this, the work of E. Tóth should be mentioned, who published 4 cross-like fibulas on whose arches the sentence VTERE FELIX was inscribed, of which the author attributes three items to type I that is dated to the period from 290 to 320 according to E. Keller's typology.³⁴ This piece of data testifies about the continuity in the use of this slogan, as well as to its importance for the Romans.

The finds of belt sets of this type that were discovered in the necropolises of Viminacium have further supported the opinion of earlier researchers regarding the dating of these sets, and they have reinforced the theory that their area of origin should be regarded as the area of the Danubian provinces. Here, we should look back at the ligature of the letters TE (No. 1b) that restores the belief of their use in the VTERE FELIX belt sets, which has been discarded by some authors.

CATALOGUE

1. a-h. Belt-fittings modeled in the shape of letters V, TE (ligature), R, E, F, E, as well as two fragmented silver belt strap-ends.
Site of excavation: „Više grobalja“; in 1985, C-10750, C-10751.
The length of the letters is between 22-27 mm, the length of belt strap-ends is 52, i.e., 47 mm.
Unpublished.
Found in grave G1-1570 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase I.
2. a-d. Belt-fittings modeled in the shape of the letter V, E (with a loop), as well as a fragmented belt buckle and fragmented belt strap-end made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Više Grobalja“; in 1985, C-11167.
The length of the letters is from 23, i.e., 36 mm; the width of the belt buckle is 33 mm; The length of the belt strap-end is 33mm.
Unpublished.

Found in the grave G1-1622 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II together with the Marcus Aurelius' coin.

3. a-b. Belt-fittings modeled in the shape of the letters F and E (fragmented) made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1981, C-3612; C-3786.
Length of letters from 26, i.e., 30 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in the grave G1-291 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.
4. Fragmented belt buckle with the fitting modeled in the shape of the letter X and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Više Grobalja“; in 1984, C-5607.
Width of buckle is 25 mm.
Unpublished.
Found in a damaged grave G1-716 together with a pottery dish that dates from II century (see footnote 33).
5. a-c. Belt-fittings modeled in the shape of the letters F, T and E (with a fragmented loop) made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Više Grobalja“; in 1984, C-5505.
Length of the letters between 27 and 29 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in a damaged grave G1-695 together with the coin with Commodus as Caesar minted in 179 (see footnote 33).
6. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter V and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1978, C-476;
Length 26 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in sonda layer 38 at the depth of 0.8 m.
7. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter E and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1979, C-1166;
Length 30 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in the sonda layer 113 at the depth of 0.7 m.
8. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter E and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1978, C-7366;

³⁴ Tóth 1980, 140-144.

- Length 30 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in a damaged grave G1-622 together with two coins that were severely damaged and could only be roughly dated to the II century.
9. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter E and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Kod Koraba“; in 2005, C-197;
Length 30 mm;
Unpublished.
Found in the grave G1-64 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.
10. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter L and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1983, C-9844;
Length 27 mm;
Unpublished.
- Found in the grave G1-900 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase I.
11. Belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter R and made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Amphitheater“; in 2008, C-1131;
Length 31 mm;
Unpublished.
Surface find.
12. a-b. Fragmented belt-fitting modeled in the shape of the letter E, and the belt strap-end made of a copper alloy.
Site of excavation: „Pećine“; in 1982, C-5607.
Length of fitting 26 mm; length of belt strap-end 70 mm.
Unpublished.
Found in the grave G1-490 of the type Mala Kopašnica-Sase II.

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Резиме

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**ПОЈАСНЕ ГАРНИТУРЕ VTERE FELIX СА ТЕРИТОРИЈЕ
ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА****Кључне речи:** Појасне гарнитуре, тип VTERE FELIX, војници, *Viminacium*.

Током другог века нове ере у употребу улазе гарнитуре чији је оков, моделован у облику слова поруке VTERE FELIX, био нитнама аплициран на кожни појас. Сврха такве поруке на појасу била је, без сумње, да свом носиоцу донесе срећу. У стручној литератури оваква врста појасних гарнитура позната је још и као тип *лион*. Назив је одабран на основу првог забележеног налаза те врсте, откривеног у Лиону 1950. године. У гробу је поред делова појасне гарнитуре, војне опреме и фибуле нађено више комада новца, од којих се најмлађи датује у 194. годину. Гроб војника је доведен у везу са битком код Лиона 197. године, између Септимија Севера и Клодија Албина, а нађени окови у облику слова протумачени су као делови формуле VTERE FELIX.

Други значајан налаз овог типа потиче из бугарског села Љубен. На основу налаза новца, тумул ограђен зидом датован је у период између 218. и 225. године, а у једном од два откривена гроба била је похрањена сребрна појасна гарнитура. Заједно са појасном гарнитуром откривен је и медицински прибор, што њеног носиоца професионално опредељује као лекара. Појасна гарнитура нађена у Вараждинским Топлицама (*Aquae Iasae*) оквирно је датована у период од последње четвртине другог до средине трећег века, а сам контекст налаза, са присутном резервом, протумачен је као вотивни дар термалном купалишту које је уједно имало и карактер светилишта. Поред ових скоро у потпуности очуваних гарнитура, на више локалитета, углавном из подунавских провинција римског царства,

нађени су појединачни окови, који су првобито били део појаса овог типа. Што се тиче орнаментике, бројни налази делова VTERE FELIX гарнитура, нађени на локалитету Виминацијум, имају одређених сличности са појединим горе поменутих оковима. Изузетак представља уникатни налаз лигатуре ТЕ (бр.2b), који према мојим сазнањима нема аналогија и који негира мишљење неких аутора да лигатуре нису коришћене у формирању поруке VTERE FELIX на појасним гарнитурама. Поред копчи и окова у облику слова, нађена су и четири дводелна зглобна појасна језичка (бр.1g, 1h, 2d и 12a). У виминацијумским гробовима, који су као прилог имали појасне гарнитуре овог типа, није нађено оружје нити друга војна опрема, тако да мишљење да су оне коришћене од стране војника нема директну потврду. Индиректни доказ да се ипак ради о војној опреми представља бројност налаза ове врсте откривених у непосредној близини легијског логора. На основу датовања горе поменутих налаза из Лиона и Љубена, којима треба додати виминацијумске примерке откривене у гробовима датованим новцем Марка Аурелија и Комода, сматрам да хронолошко опредељивање VTERE FELIX појасних гарнитура у период који обухвата другу половину II и прву половину III века не треба доводити у питање.

Налази појасних гарнитура овог типа откривени на некрополама Виминацијума додатно су подржали мишљење ранијих истраживача везано за њихово датовање, а такође су оснажили тезу да као њихово матично подручје треба посматрати управо простор подунавских провинција.

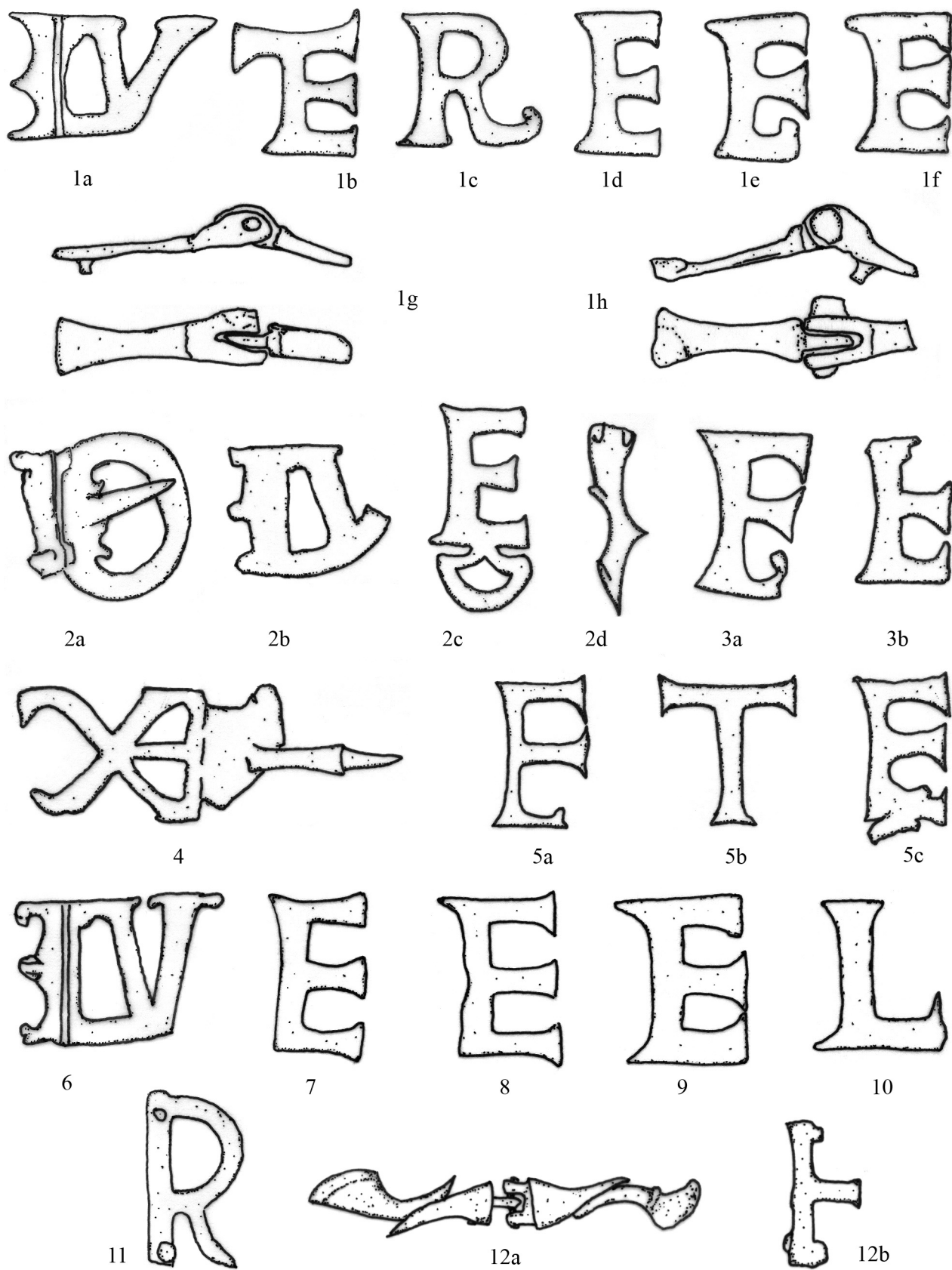


Plate 1 - pieces of the VTERE FELIX 1a-12b belt sets in the ratio 1:1
 Табла 1 - делови појасне тарнишуре VTERE FELIX 1a-12b у размери 1:1